

PRINCE & PRINCESS

INTO THE SHADOWS

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CHAPTER I

LOSSES & LOST



“I believe this will be a good clearing right here,” Bandor says, leading a woman to the edge of a meadow.

Bandor smiles and steps into the bright morning sun, heaving an ax on his shoulder. He nods to the woman, who continues to hug the shadows of the forest. The woman, Bandor’s wife, wears a white cotton dress and brown burlap apron. Her sandy locks rise and fall in the gentle breeze as she cautiously slips out of the dense shrubbery. Bandor raises his axe high above his head and drops the blade onto fallen logs that he had collected in the clearing.

Thump, thump, thump.

He smiles wider with each thud.

"What do ya think, Maggie?"

His wife remains silent, eyeing the meadow with skepticism.

The wedded couple are honest and happy wanderers, free to roam and dwell where they please. Bandor finds dignity in being a vagabond, proudly scoffing at peasants that find security in the service of a king.

Although Bandor hates to admit it, his wandering days are over. He fears that another harsh winter in a drafty cave along the coast would be the end of his beloved wife and daughter. Pushed continually by the wailing fears of his wife, the faint whimpers of his daughter, and the memory of the burning fever that nearly claimed her during the winter, the noble father realizes that it is either shelter in the woods or death in the caves.

“With all this timber, I will make me family a nice cottage,” he bellows, but what he is really thinking is that his family will survive, even though his traveling days will not. He glances over at Maggie for approval. Happiness beams in his green eyes, but worry clouds hers.

"I know you leveled the ground a fortnight ago, but had you considered that there is no safety in this vast opening?"

“Ahh,” Bandor groans, waving off his worried wife. He spits in his hands and wipes the muddy matter on his patched trousers.

"I think we would be safer along the edge of the woods," Maggie continues.

"Maggie, you know the edge of the forest is no safer than this field."

"Then why build here? Can't we move away from the terrors of the forest and closer to the Kingdom of Forth?"

"You would have me subject to a year of service in the king's guard, bound by tax, and chained by the routines of man?"

"Kingdoms are safer than cottages."

"Tyrants are worse than the terrors."

Maggie sighs in defeat. "Have it your way, Bandor, but we do not dwell here at night until that cottage is completely finished!"

"We will be back in the caves before the sun sets," Bandor grunts.

Distracted by a frenzied buzzing, Maggie brushes a wisp of hazelnut hair out of her face. Her blue eyes search the sky while she waves her hands around her head, dismissing legions of mosquitoes.

"Is it safe for our little one?" she inquires.

Bandor raises his eyebrows.

"I am *not* a fear monger!" Maggie preemptively refutes, wringing her hands.

Bandor chuckles. He had affectionately nicknamed his wife "Fuss-Bucket Maggie" for her tendency to blurt out the worst scenario possible, verbalizing her nagging worries to the world.

"Can't build a home on fear," Bandor reminds her between booming strikes.

"Will the cabin even offer protection at night?"

"Relax, 'tis a beautiful day, love. This solid oak will protect us just as well as the caves." Bandor inhales deeply, drawing in the musky scent of the forest.

"The caves were not very safe to begin with," Maggie fires back, shaking her head before turning to the forest. "Come, child. All is well," she calls out to a patch of ferns.

Her daughter Princess hesitantly peeks around the base of a thick tree trunk and leans into the clearing. "I'm scared," the child squeaks before retracting into hiding again.

Her mother sighs, takes a seat on a mossy log, and pats the spongy spot next to her. "Come sit by Ma; Da will protect us."

Reluctantly, the child steps out of the dreary forest and into the warm rays. Gaining confidence, Princess skips toward her mother but abruptly trips over a root and pummels face-first into the soft soil.

Her doting mother jumps to action. "You must be more careful, darling. Beasts from above and below are not the only dangers that threaten us," Maggie counsels, helping her clumsy child to her feet.

Princess snivels and wipes her eyes, smearing the soft soot on her wet cheeks.

"Oh Princess, you surely are the most helpless creature in the forest. Come to mommy." Maggie tenderly wipes dirt stains from Princess' pretty face. Tears continue to well in Princess' striking blue eyes.

"Oh, there, there, child, you are restored to whole, now shed not one more tear of remorse," Maggie comforts, pressing her daughter to her chest.

Princess snuffles. "*Tinksel*, Ma." The child wraps her arms around her mother's tiny waist.

"There's enough wood here to build a kingdom!" Bandor roars as he leaps from one fallen log to another.

Princess looks up and observes her father. Inspired, she hops to her feet and begins jumping from one exposed root to another.

“Look Ma,” she giggles. “Am I like father?”

Maggie absent-mindedly nods and looks up at the forest. A gentle breeze sways the leafy oaks and alders. Rustling leaves scratch against each other, mimicking the sound of a rushing stream.

“He never listens to me,” Maggie sighs. She walks over and takes her daughter in her arms.

“Mommy, how’d you get the sky in your eyes?” Princess asks, pinching a strand of hair and twirling it around her finger. Scattered spots of yellow light dance across her mother’s face.

Maggie cups her daughter’s cheeks with both hands. “That’s what you and I have in common, daughter: our eyes, our hearts, and our wits.”

Always curious, always interested in everything going on around her, Princess is the type to ask questions, not the type to stare into another’s eyes for long. Distractions like floating butterflies, dragonflies, buzzing bumble bees, and long-stem daises attract her attention.

“Daughter, do you understand what I’m saying?” Maggie asks gently. Her daughter’s attention snaps back to her.

Princess nods. “What have I in common with Father?”

Maggie looks up at Bandor, who works without a care in the world. “At times, courage,” she winks at her daughter. “When you’re not hiding in the shadows like a scared little rabbit, that is.” She wrinkles her nose and pretends to sniff like a bunny.

“Mommy, you’re *ridic ... eewwwrrous!*”

"Come rest on Ma's lap. We'll watch Da build us a home."

Princess nestles into her mother's lap and watches her father work. Slowly, the girl nods off to sleep. Maggie yawns and her eyes droop.

Sweat stains begin to pool around Bandor’s neck and armpits. *I shall name this place Bandor’s Dwelling*, he thinks. *No ... Bandor’s Way*. Unsatisfied, he tries again: *Princess’ Knoll*. A warm smile crosses his face.

es. He confidently grins and raises the axe high above his head, lost in his labor.



Maggie slowly opens her eyes. She feels Princess' warm face and rapid breath against her chest. She moves slowly, not wanting to disturb her daughter. For the last few weeks, Princess had not slept well, disturbed by frequent night terrors. As Maggie carefully sets Princess on the ground, she feels a cool breeze on her face. She looks up and sees that the shadows are lengthening and the light is receding.

"BANDOR!" Maggie yells, standing to her feet, "You let us rest too long!"

Bandor keeps working, stacking one log on top of the other.

"I'm almost finished putting up the wall."

"Tis growing dark fast!" Maggie panics.

Bandor looks up with a start and glances around at the dwindling daylight. His hands begin to imperceptibly shake when he realizes that the sun is fading fast. He swallows and reassures his wife, "We'll get back just fine -"

An enormous brown flash smashes down on Bandor's muscular frame, cutting him off midsentence. Like a twig under a foot, Bandor's body snaps. A clenching tremor courses up his abdomen and offsets his equilibrium. Nausea washes over him and his arms flail uncontrollably.

The sudden impact whites out Bandor's vision and knocks the wind out of his lungs. A sharp, intense pain radiates down his legs. He tries to move his feet, but his legs won't respond. Nothing makes sense. He vividly remembers stacking wood, then abruptly feels cool grass press against his face. He smells the strong earthy scent against his scruff. Pain jerks him back to reality. Finally, he realizes he's been attacked.

Maggie shrieks, "*Bandor!*"

Princess jolts awake. Her eyes widen and her bottom lip pokes out. She wails and runs to her screaming mother. She buries her face in her mother's skirt.

Maggie's ear-piercing cry echoes in the forest and attracts the attention of the monstrous griffin, whose white eagle head hovers over Bandor. The bird's burning red eyes flash as its beak opens.

The massive beast pushes its curved, black talons deeper into Bandor's abdomen. With its hefty beak, it clamps down on the meaty portion of his shoulder.

"Auurgh..." Bandor gurgles. With his good arm, Bandor tries to block the incessant biting. He feels sharp pains in the center of his back, weakening him further. His despondent struggle is no match for the massive griffin that presses its full weight down on his frame.

Terrified, Princess peers past her mother's skirt and finds the creature looming over her father. Its long lion's tail twitches, moving back and forth behind hindquarters covered in golden fur. When the beast shifts its weight, its gigantic muscles bulge. Further up its torso, chestnut-colored feathers protrude around its neck. The griffin's enormous wings rise, presenting its fierce wrath. Its giant eagle head raises above its outstretched wings and cocks to the side. Princess catches a gruesome glimpse of a bloodstained beak. She clings to her mother's leg and shuts her eyes.

"Nooo..." Maggie moans. The griffin looks at her and blinks a leathery lid. It turns and gulps down a severed arm. She stands awestruck and terrified as the eagle's gullet bulges.

Trapped between terror and distress, Maggie watches the vile creature dismember her husband..

This isn't happening! This isn't real! her thoughts scream.

Feverishly, she steps back, ushering her petrified daughter toward the forest. She turns to Princess: "Refuge, child! We must find refuge!" Her eyes dart around the dimly-lit forest. A single beam of sunlight rests on a hollowed-out log, its narrow opening partially covered by moss.

Maggie scurries over to the shelter, pulling her daughter by the arm.

Behind her, Bandor's tortured screams abruptly stop.

Maggie hurries to tuck away her precious daughter so that she can rush to her dear husband's rescue. She hurriedly sweeps debris away from the entry and thrusts Princess into the dark, scratchy hole. Princess slides into the shelter, just small enough to fit snugly.

Feeling her mother's warm hand releasing her, Princess grasps her mother's fingers. "Don't leave, Ma! There's room for you!" she pleads.

Maggie shakes her head in protest. "No, your father—I can't leave your—"

Time abruptly stops for Princess and proceeds in slow-motion. Though she doesn't blink, she sees a series of frozen images. Maggie's hands go limp. Then her face goes white. Princess sees the infinite source of her mother's love - her blue eyes - widen and then dim. As their eyes lock, Princess witnesses her mother's mortal windows glaze over. Maggie's bottom lip quivers and, Princess isn't sure, but she thinks she hears her mother laugh.

All at once, Maggie is ripped from Princess' outstretched fingers.

Princess hides her face in her hands. Hearing the fluttering of large wings, she senses that her mother's end is certain.

The griffin snips violently with its razor-sharp beak. Maggie doesn't scream or cry out; she simply dies, inches from her daughter's touch.

Inside the log, Princess begins to cry as the last images of her mother burn into her memory. The sound of cracking bones causes the girl to cover her ears with her hands.

"Mommy will be okay--" she reassures herself, "She's not crying!" She shuffles backwards into the dark cavity, terrified of the monster outside her shelter.

From outside Princess' hiding place, the terrifying griffin raises its head and swallows the last remains of Princess' parents in a few swift gulps.

Looking down from high in the treetops, no one would know that two people even stood in the woods a few moments ago, had it not been for the blood seeping into the soil.

Inside the tight space, Princess peeks through her tightly pressed lids only to discover a large red eye filling the circumference of the hollow log. The probing pupil narrows when it spots Princess in the dark.

"Aauughh!" the child screams. With no time to mourn, Princess scampers back, shoving herself yet deeper into the damp refuge. Horrified, she realizes that it is her turn to die.

Her sudden movements attract the griffin's predatory instincts. It pecks at the timber, tearing away small pieces. The griffin strategically tests the log, using the point of its hooked beak to search for weak points. Frustrated that its prey eludes its grasp, it flaps its mammoth wings and stomps, crushing larger chunks of the bark. The ravenous monster then sifts through the dense wood with its beak, hoping to find its prey.

The jostling impacts overwhelm Princess and she screams. Pressing her palms into the wood, she wedges herself into the narrowest part of the fallen tree until she can retreat no farther.

The griffin releases a thunderous lion's roar that trails off into an eagle screech. From behind the small child, the griffin's talon punches through the thick wall of oak and penetrates the bottom of Princess' foot. Princess yelps and realizes that her tight shelter is no longer safe.

Preparing to meet a terrible end, Princess screams until it burns her lungs and strains her throat. The death cry sends the griffin into a frenzied attack. It seizes the log with both talons. At breakneck speed, it spreads its gigantic wings and lifts the log off the ground and above the trees.

The hollow entry whooshes with rushing wind that presses against Princess' face. Lodged in the tight place, the little girl covers her face and hyperventilates in terror.

The mighty griffin releases the log.

The sudden freefall instantly lifts Princess' stomach into her throat. She wants to scream, but instead gags and coughs. Her timber haven falls through the air, crashing against flimsy pine branches that slow her imminent doom. Smashing against each tree jostles her with an earth-quaking force, rattling her body against the log.

With a bang, the torn log hits the ground and begins rolling down a grassy knoll, folding the green blades and kicking up clods of dirt. Princess is tossed and banged around, but the narrow cavity holds her. She tastes earthy grit grinding against her teeth. Through the entry of her hiding place, spinning images of green and blue circle so fast that her mind cannot separate the sky from the ground. A mesh of blue sky and green forest converges into one spinning, chaotic image. Her head thrashes as she spins uncontrollably.

Further down the hill, the earth begins to change from thick vegetation to loose stony ground. The log grinds against the stone earth, gaining momentum until it launches off a steep

cliff. Smashing against a jagged rock wall, the shelter breaks in two. The two halves freefall into a dark canyon.

Soaring through the air, the griffin dives down on the plummeting log pieces. It snatches at one of the halves and misses. The creature narrows its wings and dives ever faster, closing the slight gap. It successfully seizes its target with gripping claws and screeches in victory. It turns out of its dive and soars upward, leaving massive brown feathers floating down in its wake.

The shorter section of wood continues to fall and narrowly passes between jagged cliffs. The log slips through a shoreline mountain crevice, plunging into chilling water below. Sucked in by the tide, the log floats into a dimly-lit cavern. Water droplets fall from the rocky ceiling.

Drip, drip.

High in the fading sky, the fierce griffin clutches its prize, ripping it apart splinter by splinter. In vain, the beast frantically searches the falling brown pieces for its prey. When it discovers its loss, it utters a deafening screech of defeat. The massive monster flaps its powerful wings and searches for the other half of the log, but cannot locate it. Its efforts frustrated, the griffin flies away.

Inside the dark cave, Princess slowly regains her equilibrium. She faintly realizes that the log is no longer falling, but can process nothing more. She takes big gulps of air, her eyes wide and her pupils dilated. Her stomach reels from the fall. "Oooohhhh," she moans, threatening to throw up in her protective space. She grabs her stomach, closing her eyes in pain.

"Ma...?" she calls. The echo of her voice rebounds off the cavern walls, scaring the girl further.

"Da!" she yelps from inside the bobbing log.

Isolation swirls around her. Princess starts to hyperventilate. Her body tingles from fright and her muscles tremble. Everything seems to go numb, except an overpowering nausea in her aching belly.

Finally, the full realization of what has happened crashes down on Princess. She screams again and again - heart-wrenching screams that tear up her diaphragm and through her throat without control. When her throat goes raw, she breaks down and sobs, shaking in the floating log.

When Princess stops sobbing, her instincts kick in. She shakily crawls forward, curious to see her surroundings. Her movements upset the balance of the log, and it begins to turn in the water. Princess yelps and frantically claws at the splintery log sides to stabilize it. She gulps and moves forward more carefully. When she reaches the edge of the log, she peers out into a dark cavern filled with water. The girl rubs her petrified eyes and sobs.

"I'm all alone," she whimpers. She pulls the collar of her dress over her nose and begins to hyperventilate again. Her hot breath traps a bit of warmth while her shelter rocks back and forth with each panting breath.

"What will become of me now?" she sobs.

"We will be back in the caves before the sun sets," Bandor grunts.



CHAPTER II

FOUND & FINDING



Princess realizes that her fingers and toes are going numb and looks down to discover water in the log. Though her wooden shelter floats, it is covered in a layer of freezing water. Princess tries to shuffle backwards and hits her injured foot against the side of the log.

“Ouch!” she cries. Warm blood pumps down her leg and leaks out where the griffin impaled her foot. The girl tries to survey the wound but is inhibited by the narrowness of the log and the darkness in the cavern. She reaches back and uses her finger to feel along her heel. When she presses on the base of it, she yelps and pulls back from the pain. She begins to cry, her chest heaving with each breath.

The coldness in her hands begins creeping up her arms, turning her skin blotchy.

The empty cavern that conceals her from the griffin now introduces a far more menacing foe: the emerging threat of hypothermia. At first, the apparition presents itself to the wailing girl with patient silence, then the physical presence of a chill distilling upon her. She responds to the unwelcome guest with clattering teeth that rattle her jaw. A deadly dance ensues with a predator that has no fang, no claw, and no appetite, only fatal patience.

Princess tries to lift her arms out of the water and wrap them around her stomach for warmth, but loses her balance and pitches face-first into the layer of water in the log. The girl moans and puts her frigid hands back into the water to support herself.

The tide takes the log into a dark tunnel. Princess’ damp dress and distressed eyes fade into the darkness with each tug of the swelling tide. Her pale face looms in the shadows until the current pulls her into the deep unknown.

As she is sucked into the tunnel, Princess’ lips begin to turn blue. Dark circles form under her eyes and she shakes uncontrollably from the cold.

“Be still,” she whimpers. “Be so very still.”

Though Princess' mind is immature like a budding seed, her instincts kick in, subconsciously gleaned facts that will improve her self-preservation. In her current predicament, the mind signals the body to safeguard itself by unraveling a mortal truth: death is never very far from life.

“Our eyes, our hearts, and our wits.” Princess recites her mother’s last lesson. “That’s what we have in common, Ma.”

The cold lulls Princess into a deadly comatose state. Princess dismisses her last flickering moments of mortality and prepares to be reunited with her mother in the unknown beyond.

The dance with hypothermia progresses, the cadence now determined by the dull thud of waves.

The vessel smashes against the cave wall. “Ahh!” Princess screams. Her nerves pull tight, snapping her back into the fight for survival.

“Our eyes, our hearts, and our wits,” she repeats, as she shifts her weight, trying to stabilize the log.

A cool howling breeze blows through the cavern and nips at her cheeks. She feels herself going faster and faster, the wind and the darkness brushing against her face.

“Our eyes, our hea—ahhhh!” she screams as the rushing current speeds her along the dark depth. “Wits!” she screams in terror. “Our wits, that’s what we have Ma, our wits!”

The rushing water suddenly shoots the child into the open ocean. Drifting a short distance off the coast, the bobbing log defies the gray ocean the satisfaction of filling Princess’ little lungs.

Princess keeps her eyes shut in dread and expects to see the glowing white spirit of her mother at any moment.

“You’re wrong Ma. I’ve no wits or courage. I’m a little *coward!*”

A seagull’s cawing emboldens Princess and she tentatively opens her eyes.

Through the log opening, Princess glimpses a vast body of water and spies a distant coastline rising up from the rippling gray horizon. The sun has nearly disappeared behind faraway jagged peaks. She sniffs and rubs a red, blotchy cheek with her numb hand.

On the distant horizon, two dragon silhouettes emerge into the descending darkness. One by one, tiny stars pop out of the dusky heavens. Their numbers increase with the darkness and offer a sliver of hope.

Trapped between the two infinite planes of water and sky, Princess gazes helplessly at the darkening shoreline.

Slowly, a full moon rises and illuminates the distant coastline as she drifts through the water.

Beneath the child, a pair of large, glowing eyes circles her makeshift craft.

Unaware of what lurks in the water, the child rests her chin on her right palm, raises two fingers, and waves a weak goodbye to the fading land. Her fingers are now so numb that she can barely move them with any degree of control.

The grumbling ache of hunger reminds Princess that her body needs sustenance.

“Oh...,” she moans and slides a hand to her tummy. “I’m so hungry.”

A hard thump at the base of the log lifts the shelter out of the water.

Startled, Princess instinctively reacts by putting her hands on either side of the log to maintain her balance. She cautiously crawls forward to the edge of the log and peers out into the dark water. A pair of glowing eyes surface in front of the log. Terrified, the little girl yelps. Flashes of blue energy pulsate over the creature’s body, revealing a pug nose, two large manta ray wings, and a long, narrow tail. Startled, Princess ducks back into her safe hollow. Seconds later, her curiosity piques and she lifts her head back up. She sees a ball of the crackling energy gather at the manta ray’s tail and discharge into

the water behind it. The blue sphere of energy continues to sparkle as it sinks into the dark ocean. The manta ray continues to discharge energy, creating a pearly string of lights that disappear into the depths.

Princess watches the beautiful display and feels a wave of enchantment, but continues to cling to her refuge.

The giant manta ray presses its soft snout against the log and flaps its powerful wings, propelling Princess backwards. Bulbs of energy with hints of red, green, and yellow trail behind the giant manta.

“Stop that!” Princess exclaims through chattering teeth. Suddenly, the log jerks to a halt. Princess looks over her shoulder to see what she has run into. She discovers a pale hand resting against the back of the log and feels a thrill of joy rush over her.

“Ma?” she whispers. The hand disappears and Princess scrambles to turn around in the narrow space. The log begins to rotate, forcing Princess to stop and stabilize her vessel. Shaking with anticipation, she tries to look under her arms and legs to the opening behind her. Disappointment sets in when she finds nothing there. She looks up in frustration and finds a woman’s face staring at her through the log’s front opening.

The girl yelps and scoots backwards. “You’re not Ma!” she squeaks.

A slender, wet arm slides into the opening, glistening in the moonlight. Princess’ eyes bulge as the woman comes into view, her pale torso partially covered in sparkling silver scales. Wet, golden hair spills into the log opening.

Hesitantly, Princess stares into the stranger’s alluring face.

“Found or finding?” the lovely woman asks.

A strange tone like a wind chime tickles Princess’ ears. “Uhm ... I’m Princess,” the child responds.

“I am Setchra of Esseria.”

“Is your voice made of music?”

The strange woman laughs and tilts her head to the side. The harp-like sound of her voice soothes Princess and subdues her fears.

“The manta summoned me to you,” Setchra continues, waving to the large ray and clicking her tongue.

The manta’s wings break the surface and rise into the air. The aquamarine fish pauses, then slaps its wings against the ocean’s surface and disappears back into the depths of the ocean.

Princess tries to peer over the edge of the log, but misses the manta ray disappearing. The woman puts her hand on the child’s blue hands.

“Would you like to go back to shore?” the woman asks soothingly. Her white teeth gleam in the starlight.

Princess nods and averts her eyes. Even in dire circumstances, she cannot restrain her bashfulness.

“How did you get out here?” the child asks, suddenly wondering how the lady can stand the freezing water.

“With this, my dear,” the woman laughs, lifting a silver mermaid’s tail out of the water.

“Are you a fish?” the girl asks in confusion.

The mermaid laughs. “Only in part. Now, would you like to get out of that cold log?”

The girl nods.

"Very well, then." The mermaid grabs the log's opening and flips her tail in the water, pulling the shelter forward.

Swimming against a strong current, Setchra pulls Princess toward a wide, shallow bay. The little girl watches the mermaid swim like a dolphin, submerging and then surfacing. The little girl scoots forward, hoping to catch another glimpse of the mermaid's tail. She moves too close to the log's edge, tilting the shelter forward and falling into the water. The mermaid hurriedly turns and grabs the flailing Princess. She flips over onto her back and fins her way to shore, cradling the child on her scaly lap. Princess' little face tilts down but her sad puppy eyes look up. She shivers uncontrollably.

"Are you going to eat me?" Princess asks somberly, nestling into the mermaid's arms.

The mermaid taps the child's nose. "You? Never," she promises in an angelic voice.

The mermaid jettisons the child to the shore with celerity, walls of water parting around her slender shoulders. A thrusting wave beaches her on the rocky shore where a number of round stones litter the coast. The mermaid gently sets Princess down, the seawater lapping at the child's bare ankles.

Princess gasps when a foamy wave recedes, revealing the woman's lower torso. Shimmering silver scales cover the woman's waist and travel down her magnificent tail. Strange, ribbon-like flesh hangs from both sides of the tail.

Princess yearns to touch the shimmering tail, as she does all things intriguing. She breathlessly reaches out to make contact. The flipper slaps against the wet ground as if to say, *Don't touch*.

Princess pulls her hand back. Unsure of what to do, she bows.

"*Tinksel*, Ma'am," the girl sheepishly murmurs.

"*Tinksel*?" The mermaid raises an eyebrow.

"Ma says to say *tinks*."

The mermaid smiles, realizing the little girl is saying thanks. She bows her head in reply.

Princess turns to look at the shore and wobbles on some loose rocks. The mermaid grabs the child's arm and stabilizes her.

"Careful," the mermaid counsels. She looks at Princess curiously. "How is it you are out here with no protectors?"

Princess face crumbles. "I fell," she whimpers.

"You fell? From whence?"

"From the forest."

Setchra gives the girl a perplexed look but continues. "Where are your guardians?"

"They - " Princess stops and clears her throat. The rising horror of the day's events crash down on her. The girl slips into a panic.

"They - they *dieded!*" Princess' sobs. Her body goes limp and she begins to teeter.

The half-woman, half-fish wraps her arms around the little girl and pulls her onto her lap, protectively warding off danger.

Princess succumbs to her emotions and crumbles into an exhausted heap in the mermaid's lap. Seeing nothing, hearing nothing, she becomes lulled by the mermaids' rocking arms.

"There, there, child," the mermaid soothes, running her cool hand over Princess' frazzled hair. "You are safe with me." The mermaid rubs her hand in circles on Princess' back. "I am Setchra. All will be well."

The overwrought girl drifts off to sleep, leaving Setchra to formulate a plan. Through her silver irises, the mermaid searches her surroundings. Her metallic vision pierces every shadow and reveals only contrasting shades of silver, as that is the only color that mermaids normally see.

Time passes, unbeknownst to Princess. Finally, she cracks open her eyes and finds a world that appears to be a shimmering, glowing gold. With the mermaid leaning over her, Princess is veiled in golden hair. The moonlight shimmers through the strands, lighting up the space around Princess in a golden hue. Princess smiles and instinctively reaches up, tempted by a single strand of pearls growing from the mermaid's scalp and braided into her locks.

Without restraint or forethought, she grabs the pearls, unintentionally tinkering with the gateway to a mermaid's heart. Little did Princess know that touching a mermaid's pearl forms intense, eternal relationships, pledging the mermaid to the individual who dared to touch.

Gasping, Setchra feels fiery warmth ignite inside her veins, instantly bonding her to Princess. Emotions flood in, creating a connection even more potent than a human mother's. Had Princess been a mermaid, she would have been able to reciprocate the intense emotional connections.

When Princess bonded to Setchra, a fire as strong as the rising sun overtook the mermaid and cascaded down every scale, causing her tail to flutter in gentle flaps. These symbiotic bonds are experienced only by merpeople and unite bond to bonded in a circle of fire that literally warms their core for an eternity.

That physical warmth felt by Setchra is a manifestation of love shared through the connection of pearls. As the epitome of beauty, every merperson has one grand purpose: to fall in love, build love, enhance love, and progress in love. They thrive on those powerful emotions, using them to form pods and build underwater empires.

Setchra closes her eyes and takes in the emotions that wash over her. A warmth flows into her heart, causing Setchra's pale face to glow. Her perfect, pointed nose tickles against Princess' cool cheek, causing Princess to giggle.

Setchra's silver vision begins to transform. As the bond's final transition takes effect, Setchra is able to see the person she has bonded to in full color, rather than the usual shades of silver. The crown of Princess' head changes from shimmering silver strands to rich walnut brown. The shifting color cascades down the child's long hair. Her pale cheeks flush with fleshy tones and glow with a round hint of rose. Princess' dark silver lips slowly turn pink. Setchra watches the little girl's silver irises turn bright blue. The mermaid smiles at the beauty she can now observe in Princess. "If I had a daughter," Setchra sighs, "I would want her to look exactly like you."

The mermaid glances out to the silvery horizon and then back at Princess. She can now see the girl in full color, but for everything else, her vision remains silver.

“Are you going to leave me here?” Princess interrupts Setchra’s glorious emotional surge.

Setchra shakes her head, tossing her radiant blonde locks around her face. She smiles warmly and her pupils catch the pale moonlight, eerily holding a luminous halo in the center of her silver irises.

“You have pretty eyes,” Princess giggles, putting her hand on Setchra’s cheek, which magnifies the inferno inside the mermaid.

“I will ensure your safety,” Setchra whispers softly, gently tapping Princess on the nose.

Unexpectedly, Setchra flips over, arches her back, and cracks her tail against the hard rocks with a violent rigor. Water droplets explode off her iridescent scales and fly through the air as perfect spheres. The droplets then separate into beads and splash on the rocks. With several swift pops of her tail, Setchra’s scales seem to peel back.

Princess flinches with each cracking jolt. “You said you wouldn’t eat me!” she whimpers.

Scales begin to dislodge and fall off.



CHAPTER III

CHANGES & CHANGING



Setchra smiles. “You will fear me less,” she snaps her transforming tail, “When I walk on two legs like you.”

A pile of translucent scales slide off the mermaid’s part-fleshy, part-scaly legs and clatter onto the rocks beneath her. Orange crabs scamper over the rocky shore, cantankerously pinching each other as they duel for the mermaid’s savory scales.

Setchra grabs a kelp vine and wraps the lengthy wet leaves around her waist, fashioning a dark, glistening skirt. With a few more powerful flips, the fin bones of Setchra’s tail abruptly separate into two feet, completing her conversion.

Princess’ eyes widen. She pulls her head in like a turtle’s and flinches at the popping sound of the scales.

“Does it hurt?”

“A little,” Setchra calmly responds.

Setchra stands, putting one wobbly foot forward on the beach stones.

“Ohhwe—” she cries, falling to the stony beach.

Princess giggles.

“Must I crawl before I walk?” Setchra laments. She reaches for Princess, who provides a small shoulder. Setchra stands and takes one small step forward, then another, until she recovers the balance required for walking.

“Oh my, it *has* been a while.” She pats her human-like hipbones, shifting from one leg to the other, feeling the sharp angles beneath her fingertips. Setchra takes wobbly steps towards a mound of seaweed on the shore. She falls to her knees and rakes her delicate fingers over a clump of seaweed.

“What are you searching for?” Princess asks, keeping a safe distance from the water.

“A bulb,” Setchra replies, tossing handfuls of seaweed to her left and right.

“There we are,” she proclaims, triumphantly raising a slimy cord of kelp with a round bulb as big as her fist. Rising up, she returns to Princess. “We shall be on our way soon.”

Setchra bites down on the vine holding the bulb in place. Sand fleas leap off the algae and tickle her face.

“Where are we going?” Princess asks.

“Tep-meneble” Setchra replies through a mouthful of seaweed.

Princess gives her a stern look and points her finger authoritatively. “You are not supposed to speak with your mouth full!”

Setchra smiles and spits out pieces of the slimy green bulb, then picks her teeth.

“Truffle Nufflele,” she says with her finger in her mouth.

Princess wrinkles her brow in confusion. “Where?”

The lovely mermaid tilts her head to the side and pulls the slender finger from her mouth. “I’m taking you to Tremble Nembre,” Setchra repeats clearly. “But first, I have to find a blue ring octopus.” The duo moves toward a trickling stream that runs down from shadowy mountains and empties into the ocean.

At the bank, Princess curiously watches while the mermaid flips over flat, round rocks, carefully standing back from the water.

“What happens if your feet get wet?”

Setchra holds her hands up around her mouth like gills and sucks her lips into a fish shape. “I turn back into a fish.”

Princess giggles, “I like you!”

Setchra smiles warmly. She tenderly brushes the child underneath her chin. “I like you, too.”

Faded driftwood litters the shore, looking more like scattered bones than bleached wood. Bordering the coast, a dark forest of pines, maples, and oaks rises up. Princess glances at the eerie tree line and prays she will not have to enter. Her stomach grumbles. “I’m hungry,” the girl says, grasping her empty belly.

Setchra wraps seaweed around her swirling wrist, and hands it to Princess. “Eat this, it will satisfy your hunger.”

Princess sticks out her tongue. “That smells gross.”

“It is very good for you,” the mermaid coaxes.

The girl takes a bite and makes a face. “Yuck!”

Setchra laughs. “Tis not all that bad. You will grow used to the taste. Just take another bite.”

The girl looks at the seaweed and then down at her grumbling tummy. She sighs and takes another bite. She makes another face but feels better as she swallows.

The mermaid looks back at the fading tide. The moon is completely covered by clouds but provides enough light for her to see clearly. She sees metallic depths without shadow that reflect the radiant moonlight. She turns a rock over, examining microscopic silver urchin needles, invisible to the human eye, but visible to her mer-vision.

On a rock’s surface, she detects a pair of staggered crab tracks. She follows the trail until two glowing crab eyes pop over a rock. She looks past the crab and discovers perfect, flashing neon blue rings. “Where there’s crab, there’s prey,” she murmurs.

Following the flashing blue rings, she closes in on a tiny fleeing octopus. Miniature, stretchy arms bend and cycle through the water as an inky cloud disperses, temporarily concealing the invertebrate. The octopus darts here and there, hoping to escape to deeper waters before the mermaid can snatch it. It manages to tuck itself into a rocky crevice before the mermaid corners it. Cautiously, she pinches the palm-sized octopus by the top of its head. Instantly, the octopus’ slimy skin flashes gray as the creature wiggles and writhes.

“Why are you doing that?” Princess asks.

Setchra thrusts the octopus into the green kelp bulb and presses a small spiral seashell into the hole, sealing the opening. She smiles triumphantly, holding up her handcrafted nautical lantern.

“Why are you doing that?” Princess repeats, unable to subdue her curiosity.

“For light,” Setchra instructs, tapping her prisoner’s bulbous cage.

Princess squints, searching for any sign of light. The girl sees only faint rings of blue pulsing within the bulb. “Tis not very bright,” she says.

“While you see only dim circles, my vision perceives powerful beams of light,” Setchra clarifies.

Princess wrinkles her nose, trying to process the explanation. She shrugs and reaches for the bulb.

The wise mermaid pulls the lantern back. “This tiny creature has enough venom to kill a dolphin,” she sternly warns.

Princess pulls her arms back, yet she cannot resist leaning in for another look at the frightened octopus.

Setchra strokes Princess’ hair. “Don’t tempt fate,” the mermaid smiles. “We have the upper hand, but only as long as the creature is inside this shell.” She taps on the thick kelp bulb. The tiny octopus shrinks back from the deafening thuds.

Setchra holds the bulb up to her face, admiring the cascading lights.

“Through my eyes, I can see its beautiful splendor. It shines bright silver, like a twinkling star, except circling instead of pulsing.” Setchra inhales and gazes into the light. Her eyes trail up to the dark heavens, which hold thousands of stars perfectly in place. Princess looks at the faint blue ring, glowing and circling. “But it’s blue, not silver,” she says, again reaching for the bulb.

Setchra chuckles and clicks her tongue. “You may hold it, but only if you are careful not to squeeze the bulb.”

Prince nods and excitedly takes the lantern, examining the octopus inside.

From inside the bulb, the octopus sees Princess’ nose expand and distort through the kelp wall. Huge blue eyes swell and swivel into position as the girl brings the bulb up to her face. The octopus pulls itself back as far as it can, its neon circles glowing brighter with fear.

“Come child, we must go.”

Setchra reaches for the girl’s hand. Princess grasps her fingers and follows. Setchra holds up the luminous bulb and walks straight into the dark forest, stomping down thick thorny bushes so that Princess can follow her path more easily.

Princess steps on a pointy twig with her wounded foot. “Oweeee,” she cries out.

Setchra feels a flash of icy energy avalanche inside her. The shifting emotions cause her heart to flutter in panic. For a brief moment, she feels as though she can’t breathe. Setchra whips around, and scoops Princess up, clicking her tongue.

“Careful, child, we must hurry.”

“Why?”

“When the sun rises, I can no longer see.”

“What’s wrong with your eyes?”

“Nothing is wrong with my eyes. They are just different than yours.”

* * *

Back down on the beach, the wind catches Setchra's shimmering scales and scatter them down the coast. Crabs continue to compete for the fishy feast. Down the coastline, flying streaks of glittering gold spontaneously zip in and out of the forest. Like a firework's sparkling trail, the glittering gold haze is followed by pink, green, purple, and red fairy trails that explode out of the dark woods and blast down the rocky beach.

"I told you I could smell a mermaid," the gold fairy shouts over her shoulder.

The fairies zip and zoom towards Setchra's scales, leaving a wake of spectacular, shimmering dust. A beautiful blonde fairy with shoulder-length hair and beautiful brown eyes creates a shimmering gold dust trail. Clothed in a yellow skirt of lily petals, the sprite greedily snatches up an armload of scales and presses them against her chest.

"Tillie, that's not fair!" shouts her sister, Nillie. "My wings are worn and torn. It's time for a new set and a new shine! The beach is full of wings. Full! Full! Full! Get your own!" Nillie latches onto the scales and tugs.

Tillie pops up and swiftly kicks Nillie in the stomach. She sticks out her tongue and flies away in an explosive burst of golden glitter. Nillie doubles over. She looks up, grits her teeth, and growls. In a burst, she chases after her sister, leaving a pink cloud of glitter beside her sister's gold one.

* * *

Deep in the forest, owls hoot and crickets chirp.

Princess continually strains to peer at the glowing octopus.

Setchra watches the girl's small face light up from the luminous orb. Princess announces, "We should name it!"

Setchra laughs and shakes her head at the resilient child.

As the two continue to travel through the forest, Princess' head begins to nod from exhaustion.

"How much farther?" Princess asks, her shoulders slumping.

"Traveling isn't without difficulty, child. But be patient, we are near."

"Are we there yet?" Princess yawns.

"Almost."

"Yeah, but are we there *yet*?"

"Almost," Setchra responds in the same moderated tone.

"But when will we be there?" the child persists.

"After."

"After what?"

"After after."

Princess scrunches her brows together and presses her lips to the side of her face.

"After after what?"

"After—oh look, we're here," Setchra says, spotting sparkling water through breaks in the trees. She sets Princess down and pushes branches back, creating an opening in the thick foliage for the child. Princess tiredly stumbles through the break, rubbing her eyes as she hobbles along on her injured heel. She steps onto a riverbank and looks in awe at a wide river with strong swirling currents.

Stars fade as sunlight peeks over the distant hills.

"I must be in the water before dawn," Setchra says, examining the horizon with trepidation.

“Why?”

“I cannot see in sunlight. I can get along fine in the water, but I’m not very steady on land even when I can see.” The mermaid looks around, deep in thought. She looks over at the child. “T’would be best if you remained here and covered your ears.” She turns and leaves Princess on the riverbank, re-entering the forest.

Princess watches Setchra briskly tie the kelp bulb to her seaweed skirt before disappearing into the foliage. “What could she *possibwe* be doing?” Princess mumbles. Curiously, she walks to the forest’s edge and pokes through the foliage. She peers around, trying to locate the merwoman.

A ray of rising sunlight breaks through an opening in the trees. Setchra throws up her hands to shield her eyes. She peeks over her shoulder at the bright, reflective light coming out of the breaks in the vegetation. The blinding reflection is so intense that she is forced to look away. *Only a few more moments*, she thinks, hurrying forward.

Setchra stops and cups both hands around her mouth. She braces herself and releases a high-pitched sonar blast from her sinus cavity.

Images immediately begin to surface in Setchra’s mind. White sound waves, traveling out like ripples in a pond, give her a full view of her surroundings. She sees a densely populated forest with long-standing elms, bushy oaks, and maple trees packed together in tight formations. Finally she sees Princess running from the forest back to the bank, covering her ears. Setchra smiles. *I warned her*, she thinks. The river unfolds beyond the girl, running through the forest until it reaches the kingdom.

Armed with at least a cursory overview of the landscape around her, the mermaid walks over to a tree and wraps her slender arms around its trunk to measure the width. *That’ll do*, she decides.

She raises her right hand and flicks her wrist. In an instant, long black claws erupt from her nail bed. With a violent swipe of her hand, she sinks her claws into the thick fibers of the pine, tearing out the tree’s core. The unmistakable sound of splitting timber echoes through the forest. Leaves fall from the devastating blow.

Setchra puts one hand on the towering timber and gives it a small push. The creaking tree sways gently, then begins to fall. It crackles and snaps as it splinters apart. The trunk hits the ground with an earth-shaking thud, sending critters scampering in all directions. Setchra strides to the narrow end of the fallen tree, clicking her tongue as she goes. The clicking ripples off Setchra’s surroundings, creating short-range images in her mind.

The mermaid sinks her fingernails into the wooden core and starts to drag the two-ton trunk to the riverbank. She heaves the hefty log through the woods, moving through the brush until she meets Princess on the shore. The astonished little girl stands with her mouth open before running up to a flimsy branch and tugging on it.

“I’m strong too!” she chimes.

Setchra drags the log into the water, docking it on the shore as the sun breaches the mountain peaks. As she goes blind, the mermaid eagerly slides into the murky brown river.

Steam billows off the water’s surface. Setchra unties the kelp skirt, which now encircles her magnificent silver tail. The kelp bulb, still holding the octopus prisoner, drifts away with the current. The creature presses its tentacles against the translucent bulb as if to say, *Release me, I played my part*.

The mermaid swims in a circle, rejoicing in the moisture that replenishes her scales. She bobs to the water's surface, gasping and blowing bubbles. Her hair floats around her shoulders in golden sheens.

Princess claps her hands in delight. "You're a fishy again!"

Setchra nods and grows somber. "The water has brought fins, but the sun has brought blindness."

Princess pinches and tugs on her eyelids. "How?"

"My eyes see in the night," the merwoman replies, motioning for Princess to jump onto the log.

Princess tiptoes to the water's edge then hops backwards.

"Ahhh, I would rather stay on land," Princess resists.

Setchra laughs and holds out her hand. "I will help you."

Princess hesitates. "What if your singing cuts me in half, like the tree?"

Humored, Setchra grins. "My singing didn't cut the tree in half," she smirks, "It was my claws." Setchra holds up her right hand and stretches her fingers, displaying her long nails.

"Oh..." Princess gulps.

The mermaid pats on the log's rough surface. "Come now, we must go. We aren't there yet but we soon will be."

Princess bravely puffs up her chest. "I would much rather walk, *tinksel*. Hiding on a log is hardly *courageous*."

Setchra sighs. "You will not be hiding on the log, you will sit upon it."

Princess hesitates, "Must I?"

"Unless you would rather live in the ocean with me."

Princess thinks for a moment. "How would I breathe?"

"You wouldn't."

"But I have to breathe."

Setchra nods.

"Ok, I'll get on the log."

Princess takes Setchra's helping hand and scampers up the tree. When she gets over the water, the girl drops to her hands and knees, edging towards the center of the trunk. Careful not to fall in the water, the girl sits down, straddling the coarse bark with her legs. She adjusts her dress while her dangling toes skim the water. She lies back on the trunk, lifting her arms behind her head and locking her fingers.

Princess yawns, "I'm sleepy."

Setchra buries both sets of claws into the log and drags it into the swirling brown water, successfully driving against the current. Startled by the sudden movement, Princess turns over on her tummy and hugs the prickly bark with both arms.

Using her tail as a rudder, the blind merwoman uses the current to orient the tip of the pine so that it points downstream. The slow current floats the duo away.

"It won't be long 'til we arrive."

Princess doesn't answer. Her shallow breathing indicates that she is fast asleep.

"Rest child," Setchra whispers, reaching up with a claw to tuck Princess' brown hair behind her ear.

Setchra faces the log and, with a powerful thrust of her wide tail, lifts her body further out of the water. She folds her arms on the buoyant timber and rests her chin on them.

What will become of this child? she ponders. *I know I should let her go, yet, perhaps I could keep her as my own?* She wracks her mind, considering the options.

Oh dear, this is complicated, she sighs. Gently, the mermaid flicks her tail, feeling the current to guide the log.

“I think 'tis best you be with your own,” she lovingly whispers to the child.

Birds sing morning praises and welcome the day. The flowing river makes a relaxing trickling sound. Setchra sighs as she guides the makeshift raft down the river.

The two peacefully journey until late afternoon when Setchra hears the sound of shuffling grass. She turns towards the riverbank, but cannot see the white-bearded man fishing for his supper. The man sits on a tree stump without a shirt, curly white hair cascading down his wrinkled chest. Upon spotting the odd pair floating down the river, he leaps from his stump.

“You there! Ya be well?” he bellows.

Setchra tenses at the sound of his voice, unable to see what manner of creature hails her from the shore. She begins clicking her tongue and waits for a report, but is only able to see a blurry image. She debates using her more powerful sonar blast in order to determine the size and location of the threat.

“May I be of assistance, mum?” he yells.

Detecting the genuine concern in his voice, she decides not to use the blast, but remains guarded.

“Afternoon,” she replies, blindly looking past him. She clutches the log, staying close to Princess and ready to pounce into action to ensure the little girl’s safety.

The old man leans forward eagerly. “Looks like ya caught a bit more than I,” he chuckles, putting a wood pipe in his mouth.

Setchra and Princess slowly drift past him.

“I’d offer you aid, but I’ve no rope long enough to reach ya.”

Although wary, Setchra decides to inquire directions of the stranger. She arches her back, pushes out her chest, and flicks her powerful tail, holding the massive tree stationary in the middle of the strong current. Swelling swirls spin around the log and spill over Setchra’s slender shoulders.

“Not that you’d be needin’ a towline to drag ya in,” the man says in astonishment, noting her strength.

“How far to Tremble Nemble?”

The old man lifts a stick from a smoldering fire and lights his pipe. Smoke clouds billow out of his mouth. “Oh, closer than ya might think.” He points downriver with a wrinkled hand. “Tis just around that bend.”

“Thank you,” Setchra says, waving goodbye.

When she raises her arm out of the water, the man catches a glimpse of her silver top. He stares and puffs rapidly. “By Poseidon’s beard! Was that lady a mermaid?”

He watches the log drift around the bend and looks down at his pipe. “What manner of herbs burn in me pipe?” he mutters. He turns his pipe over, knocking the red embers out. “Tis me ‘magination,” he assures himself, shaking his head.

Setchra feels the current take her around a bend and clicks her tongue. She catches a faint image of a wooden dock with two small fishing vessels tied to it. Carefully, the mermaid moves closer, clicking her tongue continually to keep her bearings. She maneuvers the log until it pushes onto the shore next to the pier. Once it's settled along the bank, she gently pats Princess on the arm. "Wake up, child. We've arrived."

Princess smacks her lips sleepily, pushes herself up, and moans, "Ma?"

The mermaid helps her sit up.

"I had terrible dreams, Ma," the girl mumbles, leaning forward against Setchra's chest.

The mermaid sighs and tenderly rubs Princess' back. Bark imprints on Princess' face turn pink as the blood flows back into her cheeks. "There, there, child," Setchra soothes.

Instinctively, the little girl wraps her arms around Setchra's neck and breathes deeply. The mermaid leans back and rests against the soft muddy embankment. She cradles the little girl in her arms and lets her rest a little longer.

Time slips by and a family of swans enters the small cove. Setchra hears the mother enter the pool first, then her chirping chicks. Then the enormous father leaps into the river. He spreads his wings and flaps before he shakes his beak, body, and tail.

Princess' closed eyelids rapidly shift back and forth. She moans once and her leg jerks.

Inside her dream, her mother eerily whispers, "Courage," before she is again torn from Princess' outstretched hand. Still asleep, Princess feels her mother's fingers slip through hers.

She gasps sharply and wakes herself. "Ma!" she wails.

Setchra presses the child's head against her chest and rocks her. "Ssshhh, it will be alright, child." With soothing words, Setchra eventually calms Princess.

The crisp air changes, welcoming the cool evening. She continues comforting the distraught child and reluctantly sets Princess on the dry, dusty pier. Setchra props herself against the side of the pier. Scales around her waist reveal her true form. She feels the child's warmth leave her arms. The intense and sudden withdrawal sends immediate stabbing pangs to her heart. *Am I doing what's best?* she wonders, as warmth is replaced by frosty emptiness. The mermaid fights back an ocean of tears and reminds herself that the child cannot come with her to sea.

Princess stands alone on the dock, her dress rumpled and dark circles beneath her young eyes. She stares blankly and toys with Setchra's hair.

"Follow the path beyond the dock," the mermaid directs. "It will take you to the kingdom of Tremble Nemble. The people will be kind to you."

Setchra longs to reach for the child and reignite the blaze, but manages to refrain.

"Be *sure* to stay on the path," she repeats.

"Will the people be kind like you?" Princess asks.

Setchra nods, trying to hold back tears.

"Even better than I," she replies, blindly looking past the child. Setchra bites her lip, longing for nothing more than to see the child one last time.

Princess leans over the water's edge and hugs Setchra for the last time. The mermaid feels a surge of warmth overwhelm her and knows that if she doesn't leave now, she never will.

"Will I ever see you again?" Princess asks.

Setchra nods.

"But I don't want you to go," Princess protests, her bottom lip trembling.

"I don't want to go either," Setchra responds, lowering herself into the water.

"How will I find you?"

Setchra reaches up and pinches a pearl in her hair. She twists it back and forth. Princess hears a noise like breaking glass and watches Setchra wince in pain. A little blood seeps down a perfect blonde lock. The mermaid dips her pearl in the water, rinsing it clean before she pulls herself up with one hand.

"When you want me, bring this to the shore," she explains, placing the rare jewel in Princess' palm. "Cast it into the ocean, but remember that I can see it best on a full moon."

Setchra lowers into the water once more and pushes away from the pier.

"What if you don't see it?" Princess calls in alarm.

The mermaid slowly swims away, her blank silver irises shifting, displaying her inner struggle.

"When I sing, like in the forest, it has a certain tone that draws me near it, and to you."

Princess, enraptured by the smooth white pearl between her fingers, gratefully whispers, "*Tinksel*."

Setchra gently moves farther into the fast current. Her heart nearly breaks as she waves and swims away.

"Wait!" Princess shouts, tears welling in her eyes, "I'm all alone!"

With a heavy heart, Setchra exercises every ounce of willpower to push herself farther and farther away.

"Don't weave me here!" Princess yells, tears now streaming down her cheeks.

Setchra feels the current sweep against her side and accepts the invitation to reunite with the cold darkness. Like the child, tears flow down her cheeks.

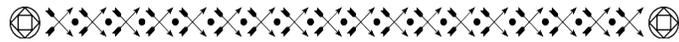
"I will never be far!" she shouts, then sinks into the glistening river and exposes her magnificent tail for the last time. A swirl of murky current disturbs the water's surface and the mermaid is gone.

Princess draws a deep breath and wails as another guardian disappears.



CHAPTER IV

FRIENDS & FOES



Princess grips the pearl tightly and hobbles up the trail, her chest heaving with emotion. The child passes a wooden sign that declares the waterfront to be “King Henry’s Port.”

Chirping crickets announce the cool spring twilight. Their classic song calms the girl's tortured nerves.

“When crickets chirp, danger is...,” she pauses, reflecting on the saying her father taught her. “Danger...” She waits for a moment, thinking back on his face and voice: *When crickets chirp, danger diverts*, she hears him say. In her mind, Princess sees her father run his fingers through his hair, his stern eyes locking on hers: *When crickets be still, danger is near*.

Although struck by a pang of grief at the memory of her father, Princess is grateful for his guiding counsel, even in his absence.

She walks along a narrow path lined with tall willows and wild grasses. While she walks, she watches the light breeze sway the cattails and blow apart their puffy tops. She watches their floating seeds sail away until their brown bodies are reduced to skeletal stumps. Buzzing mosquitoes hum in her ears and pester her with stinging bites. She runs down the path to escape their wrath. Soon, she hears frogs ribbit-ing all around her.

Princess watches a frog slowly roll out its sticky pink tongue and catch a dragonfly. With two harsh snaps, the winged insect disappears into the frog’s gullet.

“Yuck!” Princess exclaims. She hurries forward and looks for a new diversion.

She holds up her gleaming pearl. “What ‘tis your name?”

She lowers her voice: “Setchra,” she answers herself.

“I know a Setchra! She’s a mermaid,” she responds excitedly. “Don’t worry, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She looks up at the fading sky. “I’m tired,” she yawns.

The girl steps off the path and looks for a place to lie down. Cool, squishy grass covers the ground and pines sporadically dot the valley. Princess finds a thin tree only a few steps from the road. The lowest branches are near the ground and bow downwards, creating an evergreen skirt.

Princess walks to the tree, lifts a branch, and crawls underneath. Pine needles stick to the bottom of her wet feet and irritate the dark scab on her foot. Once inside, she leans against the scratchy bark and pulls her knees up to her chin.

“Oh no,” she whispers, pinching her thumb to her forefinger, “Tis sticky.” She whimpers and attempts to wipe the pinesap on her dress. “Tis very sticky,” she grumbles.

With a sigh, she looks around for a place to safely tuck her pearl as she prepares to sleep.

Her eyes light up. “You can sleep with me,” she tells the pearl, sliding it between her sticky fingers. She opens her hand and shakes it, but the pearl remains stuck fast to her fingers.

“See,” she smiles, “I told you I would keep you safe.” The cool evening air descends on the countryside, but the evergreen haven remains warm and dry. Princess rests her arms on her knees and her chin on her hands, and breathes in the soothing pine. She blinks once, then twice, and falls fast asleep.

Before sunrise, the familiar sound of sparrows and morning doves awakens the orphaned child. A morning mist makes her shiver.

Princess holds the pearl in her hand and stretched it into the open space outside the pine skirt. “Tis safe!” she croaks in a dismal replication of Setchra’s silky voice.

“Are you sure?” Princess whispers, “Tis awful scary.” The surfacing memories of her parents cause her to hesitate.

She answers herself with a low grumbling voice, “I know, but I’m very hungry.”

“Me too,” Princess confides to her pearl.

She moves the pearl all around, looking high and low with the pearly surrogate eye.

“No danger, come on out!” Princess creaks in a low voice.

“Alright then.”

Lying on her stomach, Princess shuffle-scoots along the foggy ground, and emerges from the pokey tree. Dried needles stab at her.

“Ouch!” she cries out. She brushes her dress to knock off the dried pine needles. “That’s not nice,” she scolds the prickly offenders.

Once Princess removes the painful pine needles, she skips back to the dirt path and notices her heel isn’t burning as badly. Though the throbbing is duller, the wound reminds her of her shattered, painful past.

She folds her arms and promises herself that she will be respectful of her deceased parents. She marches her legs high with her arms folded squarely, honoring her parents’ loss with a respectful, one-person parade. After several pounding steps, she leaves the willows behind and enters a grassy valley, a dense cluster of trees a great distance away. Her empty tummy grumbles.

“Ahhh!” Princess moans, her dry throat cracking as she rubs her stomach.

Looking all around, she finds no food, no homes, no farms, and no people. She presses her hand to her stomach and whimpers, “I think Setchra’s a liar!”

“No she isn’t,” Princess grumbles in a raspy voice. “Carry on.”

“Where are the kind people?” Princess demands, furrowing her brow. “You don’t understand, Setchra, ‘cause you don’t have a tummy.”

Princess searches around and finds a stick at the path’s edge. She picks it up and places Setchra’s pearl on the tip of the stick, pretending her pearl is the head on a stick figure.

“Now you understand what an empty tummy feels like!”

She looks at the pearl with satisfaction, but then feels guilty for making her pearl hurt.

“You are my new baby.” She cradles the stick. “It will be okay, baby. I will protect you.” She holds the stick closer to her chest, trying to keep the pearl on the tip of the stick.

“Do you walk like me or swim like Setchra?”

“I can swim,” her low, creaking, pretend voice answers.

“Really? Show me.”

Princess holds the stick up high and pretends to hover her imagined baby over the distant trees. With one eye closed, she moves the stick up and down like a dolphin diving into the green treetop ocean. As her hands move, she makes a splashing sound. “Woossh! Spooosh!”

Far off in the distance, a blue sky reflects a shiny object that catches her attention. Clutching her pearl in one hand, she drops the stick and shields her eyes with her other hand.

“What ‘tis it?” she asks her pearl.

“We should go see,” her raspy voice answers.

At the pearl’s urging, Princess skips off eagerly.

The early morning light graciously releases yellow beams through puffy white clouds. Princess hobbles along until she feels a sudden chill under her feet. She looks down and finds that she is standing atop a cobblestone road with piles of dried horse manure on it. Princess squats down and pokes at a flat yellow stone, noticing gray cement between the stones.

“A very unusual path,” she observes.

She stands back up and moves faster towards the shiny object, sparkling above the treetops. The child energetically skips a few paces until the memory of her parents brings her to a guilty halt. Her shoulders slump and she hops backwards once, rebuking herself for feeling joy.

“I know, I miss them, too,” she sniffles to her pearl.

Princess decides to reverently fold her arms and walk down the road holding the pearl in her fist.

The light blue sky deepens as the morning progresses, but Princess’ eyes remain fixed upon the glistening object in the sky.

After a short distance, the tree line reveals a dark blue cone pointing directly into the bright morning horizon. The shimmering object is a golden needle at the top of the cone, reflecting the early morning light above green treetops. Beneath bushy trees, gray mist covers the valley like a sea of vapor.

Still unsure of what she’s seeing, Princess throws Setchra up in the air so that the pearl can get a better look. Momentarily blinded by the rising sun, she fails to catch her prize. Frantically, she scampers around for a moment, then finds the white sphere on the cobblestones.

“I was so worried,” she professes, cupping both her hands around it.

“You swore you would protect m—” Setchra whines in a raspy voice.

“What was it you saw?” Princess demands curtly, cutting herself off.

The little girl whispers to herself, “Tis a blue cone with *sparklies* on top.”

She giggles then hurries down the road.

Her scratchy burlap dress shuffles back and forth while her little feet travel along the hard road. Soon, the tree line reveals a radiant white base topped by the blue cone. As she continues along the path, two smaller towers with blue tops come into view, standing on either side of the largest pillar.

“Tis many towers,” Princess tells her pearl.

As she continues on the path, a giant white wall comes into focus, towering over the forest.

“Tis a castle,” Princess rumbles in Setchra’s voice.

“A CASTLE!” she shouts, running faster than ever before in her life. In just a few moments she tires and feels a cramp piercing her side. She pinches her abdomen for relief.

“Why do you pinch your side?” her pearl asks.

“Because, Ma says it feels better!” Princess answers herself in gasps.

“Does it help?”

“No,” Princess whimpers.

Princess continues her journey with excitement as the massive castle continues to rise into view. White birds fly over the forest and pass in front of the blue cones.

Princess watches the morning scene with wonder until her stomach growls. “Tummy hurts,” she mumbles. She looks at the pearl and licks her lips. “No,” she decides, “I couldn’t. I eat what you eat.”

She continues walking towards the township, nibbling on her bottom lip. Tall grass turns into open green fields. From where she is now, the castle is still a half-day journey by foot.

“We’re never going to get there, Setchra!” Princess whines, her excitement fading.

She stops abruptly in the middle of the road and looks around, now gripping her aching tummy with both hands. Out in the center of a long green field, a flash of red catches her eye.

Like a lion chasing a gazelle, she instantly sprints out into the rectangular clearing. The red objects multiply before her eyes.

“Please be food!” Princess prays.

Pinching her side and holding her pearl, she bounds into a thick, leafy strawberry patch.

“Do you see it, Setchra?” she enthusiastically asks the pearl.

Without hesitation, her dirty little hands cram strawberries into her mouth. Forgetting all about the pearl in her hand, she shoves fist after fist of strawberries into her gaping mouth.

“You there! HALT!” a woman with fiery red hair shouts. The woman hikes up her blue apron and storms into the field, charging at Princess.

Princess, caught with a red berry ring around her mouth, looks up at the woman with a startled expression. She snatches a few more strawberries, stands up, and tries to flee.

“Don’t you run away from Auntie!” the woman yells, pointing her crooked finger. She lumbers toward the child, her cheeks turning bright red.

Princess crams the last few strawberries in her mouth. In her haste, she accidentally bites down on the pearl. She inhales sharply, lodging the half-chewed

strawberries and pearl firmly in her throat. Panicked, she tries to run back to the road. Her throat constricts and she starts to choke. The girl grasps at her throat and begins to cough and gag.

“I’ve got ya now, you thieving little bugger!” With one hand, Auntie reaches for Princess. She raises her hand, prepared to swat the perceived criminal to death.

Princess tries to run away but can’t move with the pearl blocking her airway.

Auntie seizes Princess by her elbow and whips her around, ready to slap the teeth out of her head. She softens when she sees the little girl clutch her throat, her face turning blue.

“See what thievery gets you?”

Princess tries to inhale, but cannot. Her vision fades and stars begin to cluster.

Auntie takes a knee, whips Princess around and bends the little girl over her lap. She slaps the child on the back, dislodging the pearl with a powerful blow. Princess coughs up pieces of red fruit. Her once pure pearl is now tarnished with crimson and mingled with strawberry chunks on the ground. She regains her sight and immediately reaches for the pearl. Before Auntie manages to spin her around, Princess snatches the slimy jewel from the ground.

“BREATHE, CHILD!”

Princess gratefully obeys. As swiftly as she can, she replenishes her aching lungs.

“Trying to get y’self killed over a handful of berries, are ya?”

Princess tries to respond, but her throat is too sore. She presses one hand to the base of her throbbing neck. With a sulking glance she attempts to beg Auntie’s pardon.

“Oh no, you shan’t!” Auntie counters, resisting Princess’ pucker. Without mercy, she seizes the little girl by the arm and hauls her across the field.

“Of all the things, thievery is the worst, if I dare say so m’self.” She shakes a finger in Princess’ face. “’Cept, for lyin’. Lyin’, I dare say, is worse than thievery! Well, what have you to say for y’self?”

Princess opens her mouth and tries to speak, but the woman cuts her off.

“Nothing, you’ve nothin’ to say for y’self, now do ya?” the middle-aged woman huffs. “Even if ya did, it’d be lies. ALL LIES.” Auntie rests her hands on her plump hips. “Next, it’ll be murder. Of course, murder is the worst of them all, and I do dare say so m’self!”

Auntie drags the child across the field toward a small cottage in the distance, barely letting her feet touch the ground.

“Let me get a good look at ya.” She examines the frantic child from head to toe. Her eyes soften even more. “Beautiful, aren’t ya?”

She squishes Princess’ cheeks together, inspecting her teeth. Princess squirms, trying to turn away from Auntie’s rancid breath and crooked yellow teeth.

“Well then, are you going to tell me your list of woes or aren’t ya?”

Princess takes a deep breath and looks down.

“Yesterday my parents were *killded* by a monster. My log rolled into the water where Setchra—” she holds up her pearl, her eyes still on the ground, “saved me.”

“Setchra saved you?”

Princess uses her low voice, pretending to be the pearl, “Yes, she did.”

“What’s this?”

“Setchra....”

“You were saved by a pearl?”

“No ... I was saved by the mermaid Setchra. She gave me this pearl. I named it Setchra.”

“Oh, I see.” Auntie’s temper evaporates. “Well, alright then,” she taps her finger to her cheek, deep in thought.

After a moment, Auntie takes the pearl, wipes it down, and holds it out, giving it a good look over.

“If I were a dirty thief,” the old woman says raising a scrutinizing brow, “I would keep this, ya know.”

Princess looks down and shuffles her tiny feet, her heart sinking. *Please don’t let her keep it*, she prays.

Princess snuffles, “I’ll never get Setchra back now.”

Auntie decides to show mercy. “Thieving is bad, ya know.”

Princess emphatically nods.

“But prayin’ is good, and that’s why I’m not going to steal your pearl.” Auntie hands the precious pearl back to its rightful owner. Princess gratefully smiles.

“*Tinksel.*”

“Bless you,” Auntie says, mistaking Princess’ misspoken gratitude for a sneeze.

“Have ya learned your lesson?”

Princess nods emphatically.

“Will ya tell me the truth?”

Princess nods faster.

“Were your parents really slaughtered?”

Princess’ nods slowly, her bottom lip quivering. Tears well in her big blue eyes, eviscerating any remnants of Auntie’s wrath.

“My folks was killed too, ya know. Tis dangerous times, no doubt about it, ‘tis dangerous times indeed.”

The old woman clucks her tongue and takes Princess’ hand. “C’mon then, let’s get ya cleaned up a bit.”

The fierce garden warrior disappears, her fiery rage now replaced by unfathomable kindness.



CHAPTER V

SOWING AND REAPING



The cock crows at the crack of dawn. The bird perches on top of a wood stack, proudly announcing the new day.

Princess leaps out of bed and shakes the sleep from her eyes. “Oh, I hope that wonderful doggy is still here!” she exclaims. “Tis happiness if he is,” she says, grabbing a plain white dress by the bed and slipping it over her head, “And sorrow if he’s not.” The horror of the last few days has partially faded due to a warm night’s rest and a glimpse last night of a large, fluffy dog.

Finally dressed, Princess bites her lip and runs over to the window to see if the dog is still in the yard. She pulls the window back and breathes in the crisp spring air. She jumps up and down enthusiastically when she sees a wagging tail.

“Hello there!”

She flips around and searches for Setchra. When she finds her pearl, she snatches it and runs out of the room, carrying her leather shoes. She hops and tries to slip them on one at a time as she heads for the front door.

She hops into the warm, bright kitchen. Light streams through the rectangular window and reflects off impeccably clean countertops. The room is filled with the scents of lavender, thyme, and rosemary, with sprigs of the herbs hanging near the window. On the opposite side of the room, the fireplace stands empty, flanked by a pile of stacked wood and a tin basin that holds an old washboard.

Princess heads to the door but is stopped by Auntie.

“Where are you heading this early, dearie? Come and eat some breakfast.”

Princess fidgets her arms but obediently slips onto one of the wooden chairs at the table. Auntie sets out breakfast and Princess wolfs down the food.

“My! You’re an eager eater.” She shakes her head, her red- and gray-streaked hair shifting in a large bun.

Princess shoves the last spoonful of mush into her mouth and chews. “Done!” she proclaims with a smile.

Auntie looks in the bowl. “Yes, well, I’m not as eager as you.”

“Can I go play with the doggy?”

“I suppose, so long as you do your dishes.”

Before Auntie can finish, Princess’ long brown hair flashes out the door.

Auntie chuckles to herself.

After finishing her breakfast, Auntie stands. A fierce pain freezes her knee in place. "Oh!" she cries out, grabbing her knee. She puts her other hand on the table to support her weight and breathes deeply.

"Oh, oh...", she moans, rolling her ankle. A few minutes pass before the pain subsides. "There, that's a bit better," she assures herself.

"I don't need to be made whole, Lord. I just need to be manageable."

Auntie puts pressure on her foot, testing the tenderness of her joint. "That'll do. Thank you, blessed Lord." She hobbles out of her cottage, carrying her bowl.

Princess runs up to the fluffy dog and throws her arms around his neck. Clouds of dust poof from his fur. Princess hacks. "You taste like dirt!"

"I see you've met Arthur," Auntie comments, coming out the front door.

Arthur pants and licks Princess' face.

"He likes me!" the little girl shouts.

Arthur looks at Auntie as if to beg, *Can we keep her?*

"Have you met the rest of the bunch?" Auntie asks.

"You have more dogs?"

"No, no. Arthur is my only dog. Though the neighbor's dogs sometimes come over and try to lick me bowls," Auntie concedes. She kneels down and pets the happy dog.

"The cock is Lancelot, the cat is Guinevere, and this," she proclaims as she picks up a shovel, "is Excalibur."

"I like Arthur! He's my second-best friend."

"Who's your first?" Auntie asks, hoping it is her.

"My pearl."

Auntie frowns. "Yes. Well, say goodbye to Arthur, who doesn't feed you or clothe you or save your life." Auntie thrusts Excalibur at Princess. "We've a field to till."

Princess stands up and brushes Arthur's fur from her hands. "Goodbye, Arthur, I'm going with my *bestest* friend, Auntie, who feeds me and clothes me and saves my life. We'll be back later, if you're still here."

Auntie smiles, her hurt feelings mollified. "Well, perhaps he can come with us, so long as you pledge to do all your work."

"Oh, I *pwedge*. What's a *pwedge*?"

Auntie smiles and kneels down so that she is eyelevel with Princess. "A *pledge* is when you vow to do something with your word."

"Then I pledge."

"Do you know what it means to keep your pledge?"

Princess presses her lips together and raises her head. "It's when a big eagle is about to eat you but you stay in the log anyways, 'cause that's what your Mum told you to do?"

Shocked, Auntie blinks rapidly. "Yes, well, 'tis that as well..." She shakes her head, clearing her thoughts. "Keeping your pledge is when you do what you say you are going to do."

Princess nods.

"But sometimes, it's not so easy, 'tis it?"

"Then why do it?" Princess asks.

Auntie folds her arms. “Well, without pledges and labors to back them, no one would trust anyone, now would they?” Auntie pinches Princess’ cheek. “And trust is what makes the moat go round.”

“The moat goes ... round?”

Auntie extends her hand. “Come, follow me. I’ll show you. But remember, you pledged to do your work first, before you play with Arthur.”

“I remember.”

Auntie leads Princess to the strawberry field she had found the girl in the day before. She takes the shiny shovel and pounds on the untilled portion.

“Farming requires constant labor,” Auntie teaches. Gripping the handle, Auntie shoves the tool into the earth. She tries to pull back on it, but it won’t break free.

“What’s wrong?”

“Stuck,” Auntie grumbles, “Worthless merchant metal!”

Princess looks back at the dog longingly and then reluctantly yields her attention to Auntie.

“This is not how we are supposed to use Excalibur.” With great effort, the middle-aged woman frees the shovel. She lifts it up and thrusts it back into the ground. This time, she stands on it with both feet, pushing it farther into the earth. She pulls back on the handle and removes a chunk of grass. It makes a ripping noise as the roots tear from the soil. Princess smells the rich earth and smiles.

“Flip the grass over like this--” Auntie turns over the chunk of grass before turning to hack at large rocks in the hole.

Princess focuses on the earthworms writhing as the blade cuts them in half. Her eyes widen and her mouth drops.

“Eeewwww!” she shrieks.

“It’s good for the soil,” Auntie responds.

Princess clears rocks while Auntie spends the rest of the day carving out a small clearing and dividing the earth into rows. Sweat drips down Princess’ back and saturates the neck of her dress.

“Tis a hot day!” Auntie says, fanning herself in the late afternoon heat. She removes a handkerchief and pats down her face. Feeling faint, she sits down on a rock for a moment.

“Once we divide the earth into rows—oh my, let me catch me breath,” Auntie gasps. Her pupils narrow, and her face flushes white.

Princess sees the opening and runs over to Arthur. As she is about to pet him, she stops and asks, “Is it alright if I play with Arthur now?”

“Oh, there's much more work to be done, dearie.”

“What about the pledge? You said if I did my work that I could play with Arthur.”

“Oh, go pet the dog!” Auntie waves Princess off, dismissing the child.

Mostly recovered, Auntie unties a cloth pouch from her rope belt.

“We must sow--” she pokes her finger in the moist soil and pushes a single seed deep into the earth, “So that we can reap.”

She plants a few seeds, then calls Princess over to plant the rest.

With his tail wagging and tongue panting, Arthur watches Princess push the seeds into the soil. He tips his head left and right each time she stabs the earth. Suddenly, his ears perk up and he barks loudly.

Princess jumps up to see what Arthur is barking at. The sound of metal and horse hooves clattering on cobblestone reaches her ears. Off in the distance, the sun's rays reflect off polished armor and blind her. She shields her eyes with her cupped hand, squinting to catch a glimpse of the approaching envoy.

Arthur sprints across the fresh clearing, his feet stomping down the wild grass as he runs past Auntie's house toward the road.

Instinctively, Princess runs over to Auntie and wraps her arms around the woman's round waist. Auntie pats the girl's head. "Tis alright," she comforts.

As the procession gets closer, Princess sees a black knight riding a black horse, a silver dragon emblem on his chest. His dark stallion shakes its mane as it rides at the head of a steady brigade. Behind the dark knight, a silver knight carries a crimson flag depicting a green dragon. Behind the flag-bearer, a trail of men holds lances in one hand and broad shields in the other. The shields vary in shape and size, each one displaying the family crest of its owner. Armor-plated Clydesdales lumber forward with thundering hoofs. They snort and neigh, their ears twitching. Around their necks and bulging chests, the warhorses carry heavy protective breastplates.

Princess feels the earth shaking beneath her and wonders how Arthur has the courage to bark.

"See that flag there, out in front?" Auntie points to the red flag with a green dragon on it.

Princess nods.

"Tis Sir Harmon's Dragon Brigade. Someone must've spotted a wretched beast."

A shiver goes down Princess' spine at the thought of a dragon. She grips Auntie's leg. "Will we all perish?" she squeaks.

"No, no, child. The Dragon Brigade will protect us."

Behind the knights, a group of peasants push a large catapult shaped like a crossbow. Their caterpillar-like legs roll the wooden wheels forward with agonizing grunts and growls. An arrow, as long as a tree, is mounted on the enormous crossbow. Six unarmed white horses pull the catapult while the men press against huge wooden posts to keep the huge weapon oriented.

"The test of a maiden is in her ability to catch a knight's eye," Auntie explains, batting her eyes and curtsying. The flag-bearer acknowledges Auntie by lowering the crimson flag. The brigade behind him uniformly renders a salute.

"You see?" Auntie boasts, continuing to bat her lashes.

Princess mimics the master and curtsies. A few of the knights wave, but fail to render her a salute.

"You have to be the first to curtsy, dearie. That's how a true lady attracts a knight's tender affections." She pulls out her handkerchief and waves it at the last knight in formation. "Yoo-hoo!"

Buffeting her advances, the inexperienced knight snaps his helmet back to attention.

Mimicking Auntie, Princess pinches her pearl and waves it at the knights. "Yoo-hoo" she squeals. Princess persists until the entourage marches out of sight. A trail of dust looms in their wake.

Auntie sighs. "In my younger days, I attended many a ball," she reminisces. She sways back and forth and pretends to dance with Excalibur. "One day, you shall as well."

She hands Princess her handkerchief and returns to the task at hand. “But until then, we have to teach you about profit. Back to work!”

Princess looks at the handkerchief, then up at the castle. “First to curtsy gets the knight. So, what do I do with the handkerchief?”

Auntie dismisses the question with a wave of her hand. “In only a few weeks, we have crops.”

“How much food does one person need?”

“Oh, this isn’t all for me. We take the excess to the market.”

“Where’s the market?”

“In town, a short distance from the castle.”

Princess’ face lights up. “Can we see the castle from the market?”

“I should hope so, dearie! That’s where we go to get our crop certified and weighed.”

Princess jumps up and down, shouting, “I’m going to the castle!”

Arthur gets excited and jumps up with his front paws on Princess’ shoulders.

“I’m the luckiest girl in the whole world, Arthur!”

Arthur licks her on her mouth.

Princess turns in disgust. “Yuck!”