

SNEAK PEEK THROUGH CHAPTER ONE!!

THONY Goes Astray!

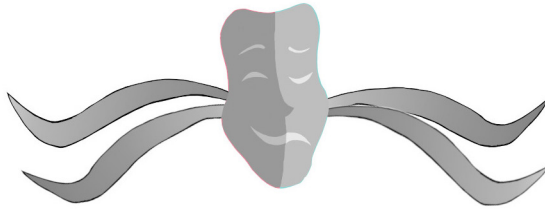
YA

(in the deep, dark, and dangerous Fairy Wood)



*Book Two
of the
Prankster
Prince*

KERRIDWEN MANGALA McNAMARA



***“Silverfoot’s trembling. Something’s wrong.”
Thony looked at Amanita.
“Could it be wolves?”***

The trees around them – which were already larger than any that the young prince had ever seen before – seemed to loom in and cut off the light filtering down through their leaves even more than they had been. That... had to be all his imagination, though... right? Even if his dapple-grey gelding, Silverfoot, was shaking from nose to tail.

Amanita looked around with an expression that was now shading over into concern. Her short, bushy hair flopped a little as she turned sharply from side to side, peering into the green shadows of the forest. Twinklestar, the unicorn she was riding, looked around with what might be equine trepidation as well.

“Can’t Twinklestar ***tell*** you the problem?” Thony asked urgently, leaning forwards to try to give Silverfoot a better caress.

The girl shook her head, looking rather red around the ears. “We’re not ***bonded***, so I can’t understand him in ***words***.”

If the unicorn was upset, Silverfoot was terrified. Thony was beginning to worry that the gelding’s reaction would switch from half-paralyzed with fear to–

Oh, damn.

It was unfortunate that horses were trained to interpret a rider hunching into their backs as a signal to go ***faster***. Because the only way to stay aboard a terrified horse that was plunging through a forest – instead of getting knocked off by low hanging branches – was to get as close as possible to the horse’s back.

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*(in the deep, dark, and dangerous
Fairy Wood)*

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Prankster Prince*



KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA

RISING DRAGON BOOKS

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For Namita and Nandita Sugandhi:
Co-conspirators in writing in our 'days of eld.'

And for my kids...
who kept insisting I get started on this.

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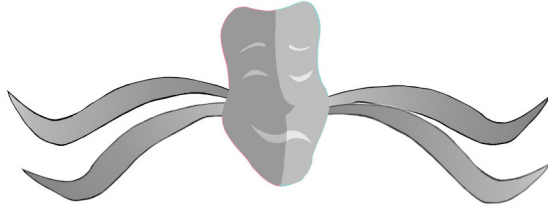
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Chapter ONE

The Adventure Begins... *Grumpy*

RUNNING AWAY FROM HOME FOR all the right reasons should be a great deal less *annoying*, Thony thought to himself as he guided his handsome, dapple-grey gelding along behind Amanita on the unicorn, Twinklestar. None of the stories he'd eked out of travelers – or any of the books he'd read – had mentioned all these *annoying* parts.

For one thing, *dew* was not just something that looked pretty and sparkly if one got up early enough to see it on all the grass and spiderwebs and things. It apparently dampened your clothes nearly as badly as if it had been raining. And wet clothes were a definite downer.

For another, dry cheese and hardtack tasted even worse than they sounded. And eating them a-saddle didn't help *at all*.

And *then* there was the 'company'. Though, presumably, some people had more choice of traveling companions and didn't get stuck with a bossy little girl on a grumpy unicorn.

To be fair, Amanita had followed him into his escape without any hesitation (*or being asked*) simply because she knew, firsthand, how very dangerous was the place he was going. And she knew that because she'd somehow traversed the Fairy Wood herself (*though with advice or directions or something from someone named 'Quellarie'*). And she'd done it with no warning from Thony that he was leaving, no plan or preparation... and she was taking him back to her homeworld, even though she didn't particularly want to go back.

It was the act of a true friend, and he'd known that Amanita had definitely been one of Thony's best friends even before she'd demonstrated it so thoroughly.

But Oh. My. God. did she have to be so *annoyingly superior* about how much more she knew about using the Fairy Wood to travel between worlds than he did? (*Or even just plain traveling than he did...*)

He'd almost rather try this alone than have to listen to another rant about how unprepared he was.

Well, no. No, he wouldn't. Not if there really *were* lava worlds and poison gas worlds and worlds full of *carnivorous plant people* that one might run into simply by going the wrong way around a specific tree in the Fairy Wood. And having a native guide to her homeworld was probably a good idea, too. (*Assuming her homeworld didn't have even worse things. Or maybe especially if it did, since it seemed he was going to be going there.*)

But, seriously? They hadn't been riding for a full hour yet, and he *was* doing everything she said. Couldn't the pint-sized girl lay off on giving him a lecture every time he asked a simple question?

Thony was beginning to think that Amanita really must come from a matriarchal culture, the way she'd always said,

and he hadn't believed. (*Because, girls? Running a country? How wack-a-doodle was that?*) She certainly didn't seem to think a boy could do anything without screwing it up... though she hadn't seemed to have this much of an attitude when she was working as a kitchen-girl and then a stable-girl back in Aldyrwald.

Where Thony was better known as Crown Prince Anthony Devinthal, the Affable and the Affirmative. *Of Aldyrwald.*

He hadn't cared much about his title then – it was a burden as much as anything.

If not for his title, Thony would have been free to make friends with the village kids, or at least the squires.

If not for his title, Thony would have been allowed to learn swordplay and archery and how to make a fire and maybe gotten to travel (*before forcing the issue this way*).

If not for his title, Thony wouldn't have had to flee home into the *deep, dark, and dangerous Fairy Wood* to spare his parents from having to make him marry an elderly princess while he was almost underage himself in hopes of averting a region-wide war that would surely shred Aldyrwald into itty, bitty, bloody little pieces.

Now, however, he found himself clinging to the stupid thing to remind himself that a Prince did not succumb to taunts and snarky comments from a pipsqueak of a commoner girl. A Prince used his Manners and was always Kind and Generous in Thought and Action with those of lesser birth. A Prince should be *Grateful* for the assistance his guide was providing... no matter how obnoxiously it was offered.

Perhaps making that last part clear would help. (*Or the second-to-last, anyways.*) Though he thought he'd already said it before – one of the few pieces of advice his father, King Bill,

had given Thony in the Ways of Women had been that you could never tell them positive things too often.

“Hey, Amanita,” he called out. “Thanks again for coming along like this. I really appreciate you offering to guide me through the Fairy Wood.”

“And well you should be,” came back the snarky reply. “You have *no idea* what you were getting yourself into here.”

With a manful effort, Thony did *not* grind his teeth so hard that she’d be able to hear it.

“It can’t be *that* bad,” he heard himself saying before he managed to censor the thought. “Joanna and Priscilla and Roger managed the feat just last year. *Without* a guide of any sort.”

A snort of derision came from ahead. “Yeah, and the Perushin tail Princess Priscilla has had *nothing* to do with that, of course. *Or* the fact that the three of them were destined to come back and be the new Gods of your world after they found their counterparts.”

That still sent a little bit of a chill up Thony’s spine when Amanita said it so nonchalantly as all that. Joanna and Roger had thought – as best he could tell – that they were taking the devastated Priscilla on a husband-hunting Quest, or a Quest to find out *why* and *how* the otherwise perfectly princessly maiden had a bushy, black, prehensile tail that was almost as long as she was tall. And maybe, just *maybe*, to find a way to make their own hopelessly ill-starred romance work out.

They certainly *hadn’t* been expecting to discover a not-so-evil Wizard and Sorceress holed up in an extinct volcano on another world who were apparently *waiting* for them because Cythera had been having dreams that she and Phillip were supposed to Save the World, except it wasn’t *their* world, it was *Thony’s* world that they were supposed to Save. And to be told

by the Fairy Queen herself that the way they were supposed to Save it was by *becoming* the next set of Gods – along with Roger and Joanna and Priscilla – when all the *old* Gods of that world died in some dramatic thing called a ‘Ragnarök’.

And the Fairy Queen had married Roger and Joanna to each other. And Phillip and Cythera. And Priscilla and her centaur boyfriend Jeremy as well.

And then they’d all come back home and Mama and Papa had made Roger and Joanna have a *second* wedding ‘for propriety’s sake’ (*i.e., to show the neighbors that they really were married*) and then the ‘Ragnarök’ had happened. Joanna had become Goddess of Earth and a mountain – Her *Holy Mountain* – had appeared and enveloped the back half of the Devinthals’ castle. And Roger had disappeared for a few weeks; He was now the God of Air and had a perpetual Holy Tornado spinning on the exact opposite side of the world, He told them. Phillip was now God of Water and Cythera was Goddess of Fire, and They had disappeared off to other places to do Their God-Stuff, and had only come by for a few hours for the wedding. Priscilla had become Goddess of Love and Animals (*the former title apparently being a euphemism as much as anything and explained the overlap with the second one, but Mama and Papa – and Thony – appreciated the euphemism*).

Mama and Papa were still trying to pretend Priscilla and Jeremy weren’t *really* married. Though since Thony had spilled the beans to Papa yesterday about Priscilla turning herself into a centaur-girl when she was out running with Jeremy and his herd... maybe that would help? Eventually? At least after Mama had a chance to faint over it a few times.

Thony hadn’t heard that the intrepid Questers had figured anything out about Prissy’s tail, though it was possible that he’d just missed the explanation in all the commotion that had included two rather upset pairs of parents planning an

emergency wedding and trying to make it look pre-planned and Roger's father nearly disowning him and Mama and Papa refusing to acknowledge Jeremy and having screaming matches with the sweet and agreeable Priscilla. Not to mention that the neighbors didn't believe any of the Ragnarök/new-God stuff and Papa feared they were going to claim that the Devinthals had lost the Divine Right of Kings and use that as an excuse to invade Aldyrwald and take it over.

Which came back to why he'd run away.

"What do you mean about Prissy's tail?" he demanded. How could *Amanita* know about this if *he* didn't?

"Perushin have all their magick in their tails," Amanita explained in a patronizing tone. "The tails give them luck and grant their wishes; they don't actually have to do *formal* magick at all since anything they *want* just sort of *happens*. Newborns receive a tail from an elderly one who's passing away, and the magick gets stronger with every generation. When one of their tails somehow goes astray, it's a Big Deal with them. Like your sister's."

"And you know this, *how?*" Thony said skeptically. Or, at least, he was trying to sound skeptical. He had no better explanation for Prissy's tail himself, after all. But it sounded made-up. He'd never heard of these 'Perushin' things before.

Amanita gave him one of those superior looks over her shoulder. "I spent a few days in the Perushin village on my way to Aldyrwald."

Hunh. He could have sworn that she'd said her mysterious mentor had given her directions to *his* world. And that it wasn't wise to take detours in the—

"You went *exploring* in the Fairy Wood, didn't you," he realized. "Even though you'd been told not to. And these Perushin things had to set you properly on your way again."

Her superior expression converted instantly to a scowl. “It wasn’t exactly on purpose.”

Twinklestar, the unicorn she was riding, snorted a little.

Something eased in Thony’s chest. “Uh-hunh. Right.”

Her lips pursed. “And I suppose you think you could do better, Prince Smarty-Pants. Without *any* instruction at all.”

The young prince put on a pious expression. “I didn’t say that. I just said I was grateful for your help, didn’t I?”

Silverfoot curvetted a little and Thony adjusted his grip on the reins. He patted the dapple-grey’s neck soothingly.

“Look, *dude*—”

Amanita’s irritated comment was cutoff as Twinklestar came to an abrupt, stiff-legged halt and Silverfoot actually bumped into him before stopping as well.

“Twinkie, what the hell—” Amanita began, but Thony cut her off.

“Silverfoot’s trembling. Something’s wrong.” He looked at the girl. “Could it be wolves?”

The trees around them – which were already larger than any he had ever seen before – seemed to loom in and cut off the light filtering down through their leaves even more than they had been. That... had to be all his imagination, though... right?

Amanita looked around with an expression that was now shading over into concern. Her short, bushy hair flopped a little as she turned sharply from side to side, peering into the green shadows of the forest.

“Can’t he *tell* you the problem?” Thony asked urgently, leaning forwards to try to give Silverfoot a better caress.

The girl shook her head, looking rather red around the ears. “We’re not *bonded*, so I can’t understand him in *words*.”

“He talks to *Prissy* in words,” the young prince objected. “And *they’re* not bonded.”

Amanita gave him a dark glare. “Look, *I* don’t get words from him. Maybe *you* can convince him to tell you why. In *words*. All I know right now is that he’s upset. And that’s easy to see from body-language.”

If the unicorn was upset, Silverfoot was *terrified*. Thony was beginning to worry that the gelding’s reaction would switch from half-paralyzed with fear to—

Oh, damn.

It was unfortunate that horses were trained to interpret a rider hunching into their backs as a signal to go *faster*. Because the only way to stay aboard a terrified horse that was plunging through a forest – instead of getting knocked off by low hanging branches – was to get as close as possible to the horse’s back.

Thony had just barely the concentration left to hear Amanita’s frustrated shout about this not being the right path. Silverfoot wasn’t following anything resembling a *path*.

It was the most terrifying handful of minutes of the young prince’s (*admittedly sheltered and overly protected*) life.

At last, however, the dapple-grey’s terror lost out to the extreme effort necessary to keep forcing his way at high speed through thickets and brambles. He came to a trembling stop in a glade alongside a small stream, his head hanging down and panting.

Thony kind of felt like hanging his head down and panting as well. Not to mention how much *he* was trembling. He more or less slithered off of Silverfoot’s back rather than properly dismounting, and stumbled over to the stream to put some water on his face.

The horse followed, to take a drink.

After a moment, Thony sat back on his heels on the mossy streambank, regarding his extremely-goodlooking-but-apparently-thickwitted horse with rather less enthusiasm than he'd begun with. He'd been so excited when the stablemaster had taken pity on him and found a way to trick Great-Uncle Sir Eddie into thinking switching Thony onto this gelding had been the old knight's own idea (*and then Great-Uncle Sir Eddie had convinced Mama and Papa...*). Silverfoot had seemed to be an improvement over the nearly somnolent mare, Rosie, that he'd recently been moved up to from the aged pony he'd been riding since he'd been eight...

...but right now, Rosie was sounding better and better. Even if she'd panicked like this, she wouldn't have managed to go nearly so far.

Oh, well. If it was his old *pony* he'd absconded on, likely the elderly equine would have just died of fright, leaving Thony on foot to face whatever the problem was.

Not really better.

Maybe.

Amanita had managed to convince him that the Fairy Wood was not a safe place to go exploring in. Going the wrong way around certain trees could apparently end you up in very different places. You had to stick *exactly* to known paths, she claimed. (*Although the recent conversation suggested there might be more flex in that concept than she'd insisted.*)

Well, *that* idea was clearly out the window.

He was lost and alone – except for his idiot horse – barely an hour's ride into the Fairy Wood.

Silverfoot gave him what might have been a sheepish look for a human and nosed at the seated boy. Out of habit, Thony scratched the usual itchy places on the large head, his heart softening.

“You did what made sense to you, didn’t you, boy?” he muttered to Silverfoot. “Not your fault if this wasn’t the place to follow your instincts. And... who knows what scared you so bad anyways. Maybe staying would have been worse.”

Which was all fine and dandy, but now he’d lost Amanita. So, he had no guide, as well as not having done a particularly stellar job of taking care of his friend; who knew what she and the unicorn had been faced with after Silverfoot galloped off?

Not to mention that she would never let him live this down, if he ever managed to find her again.

And if the Fairy Wood was as *deep, dark and dangerous* as she’d told him – and as impossible to retrace one’s path in – Thony was in even more trouble than that. Even outside of the issues of navigating in a place this tricky, he had close to zero survival skills. He *had* a tinderbox and flint-striker with him, for example, but he’d never built an actual fire and only knew how to get a useful spark because of having to light the occasional candle and for a set of pranks a few years ago that had not gone terribly well (*fire tended to get out of control, as he’d discovered the hard way, and a good prank should always be completely under the prankster’s control, in his opinion*).

Well. Breaking down big problems into smaller ones was the way to plan out a good prank. It would likely help here, too. Problem One, was immediate survival, but he and Silverfoot weren’t injured and it wasn’t even mid-day yet, so that wasn’t actually urgent. Problem Two, was safely navigating the Fairy Wood to a reasonable location where he could look for a princess. Important, but also not urgent. Problem Three, was finding Amanita and keeping her safe until he could get her back to her home... or possibly to Aldyrwald, since Thony was fairly sure their mutual friend and co-prankster, Wesley, was sweet on her.

Possibly he had Problems Two and Three reversed, but there seemed to be abundant sub-problems mixed in as part of each of them...

Which he should likely try to divide up more finely, given that he *still* had no idea what to do next...

“Girona, this way! I think we found them!”

He looked up in surprise at the cheerful voice, just in time to see a girl of about his own age come out of the thicket of trees on the other side of the stream. Long, dark hair, skin that looked tanned, but wearing a long, white gown of some sort. None of the noblewomen *he* knew would wear a gown that bared their arms and shoulders, nor allow their skin to become so tanned. But no commoner would ever even try to manage a floor-length gown of such a perfect, crystalline white. And certainly not in a forest.

As he frowned, trying to figure the girl out, another one partially emerged from the trees behind her.

This one was shorter, with hair that was up in a nice-looking messy bun, and wearing more of a tunic-and-pants outfit in – he had to blink at the colors – *lavender and chartreuse*. Some sort of magickal-ish looking symbols seemed to be sewn onto it. She was also too well-dressed to be a commoner.

“There’s only the one kid, Midele,” the shorter girl complained. “You said there would be two of them.”

The taller girl shrugged. “Maybe I was wrong. This is the boy from the vision anyways. I also thought that you’d simply be drawn to your mirror-self, but *you* thought it was wiser to make the compass. And it was the compass that got us *here*.”

“It was, wasn’t it.” The shorter girl’s face was still mostly in the shadows, but she looked rather insufferably smug, and the taller one rolled her eyes. “I should have come to visit you guys

in Quest's End *ages* ago. Nothing this interesting ever happens at home.”

Thony had climbed to his feet and put a hand warily on his horse as he watched the pair approach. They seemed harmless or even friendly, but he had nowhere safe to flee if they were actually ogres in disguise or something, and Amanita's stories had him pretty paranoid by now. “Um, hello?”

The taller girl came forwards out of the shadows of the trees. She was pretty, he supposed, but not dazzling or anything.

“Hi,” she returned. “I'm Midele Featherspray, and this is my cousin, Girona Starshine. I'm from Flowericka on the world of Eyola, and Girona is from a country called Happy-Go-Lucky. Who are you?”

This ‘Midele’ seemed to take it for granted that they might be from different worlds than him. Which said something right there. If he could only figure out *what*.

“I'm... Thony,” the young prince replied. No need for titles until and unless he really did find his princess, after all. “I'm from Aldyrwald... That's my country. I don't know if my world has a name. It isn't common knowledge at home that there *are* any other worlds.”

“Oh, it's not common knowledge on Eyola either,” Midele said easily. “But I'm a novice priestess of the Golden Sphinx and Girona is a student wizard. What do you do?”

The other girl spared him from having to answer. “Does it *matter*, Midele? We were supposed to find two of them, and there's only the one. Maybe you're wrong about this part, too, and he's not the kid you had the vision about.”

Thony gave the taller girl a raised eyebrow. “You had a *vision* about me?”

She blushed slightly in a way that looked entirely unplanned – not like Mama’s ladies-in-waiting, who practiced their blushes regularly.

“It sounds a little silly to just say it straight up like that. It’s... part of a meditation practice I’ve been learning as a novice priestess. Occasionally the Golden Sphinx grants us a vision. Usually, it’s of something we’re supposed to do. In this case, I saw myself and Girona meeting up with a girl who looks enough like her to be a twin – and a redheaded boy with a silver horse.” She nodded at Silverfoot. “There was supposed to be a white unicorn also – and Girona said that *they* never come out into Eyola, so we knew we had to go into the Fairy Wood.”

The shorter girl stepped out of the shadows, and Thony could see that she did, indeed, look like a perfect copy of Amanita. Well, except for the um, *assertively* messy hair and the outrageous clothes. He couldn’t have imagined his friend looking like this; Amanita was absolutely obsessed with neatness and seemed allergic to bright colors... though the last might simply have been because she’d always been wearing work clothes while he’d known her.

This girl looked like she took a sort of obscure pride in ‘not caring’ what other people thought of her while she intentionally startled them.

“My horse panicked – I’m not sure why,” Thony admitted. “He ran off and we lost my friend who looks like you,” he added, looking pointedly at Girona.

“Hunh,” the other girl even *sounded* like Amanita in a good mood, now that he was paying attention. “So, the compass worked after all. That is, I assume you set it to point to him and not to *her*, Midele,” she said in an irritatingly *knowing* sort of way.

Midele rolled her eyes again. “Of course, I did. The other girl should be your mirror-self from another world. I thought you’d be automatically drawn to each other, so we wouldn’t need any more of a guide than that. I thought the compass was overkill, if you recall.”

“*Mirror-self?*” Thony asked, beginning to be interested.

Midele started to smile at him, but Girona spoke first. “A lot of people have ‘*analogues*’ on other worlds. Someone who is just like you, but born somewhere else. Midi’s using the popular term. Since she’s not a *specialist*, like *me*.”

The taller girl shot Girona a dark look. “You’re a wizard *student*, Gronie, not a *specialist* in otherworldly travels. Not *yet*, anyways,” she added in what sounded like a mollifying tone.

Girona shrugged. “Fine, *Midele*.” She looked at Thony again and added in almost as condescending a tone, “There’s some evidence to suggest that *mirror-selves* are ubiquitous – everyone has one *somewhere*. And some wizards have hypothesized that there can be *more* than one, or that they can even appear on the *same* world. No one has proven that yet, though. And I don’t get to the classes on Alchemical Proofs for another couple of years,” she admitted.

“It shouldn’t seem hard to prove those things,” Thony objected. “Don’t you just need to find someone with multiple analogues or two of them born on the same world?”

She somehow looked down her nose at him, despite being half a foot shorter. The slope of the land might have helped; they were on the higher bank of the stream. The trees were smaller on that side, too. “There are more people on any given world than I think *you* can *comprehend*. And very, very few of them do any world-hopping. It’s a harder problem than you might think. What we’re looking for is a *theoretical* proof.”

“Hmnm.” Thony had grazed the ideas of mathematical proofs in his studies. It had sounded interesting, but more abstract than his tutor – the Minister of Aldyrwald’s tiny treasury – really understood himself, so the young prince had only the slightest idea of what such things were all about.

Midele shook her head, that long hair – knee-length at least – swishing back and forth as she did so. “The other girl should be attracted to you here, then, Girona. Maybe the point of my vision was for us to help the two of them find each other again–”

“*Eeeew!*” Girona’s reaction was about what Amanita’s would have been to that implication. Or Thony’s own, actually, so he didn’t feel a need to take umbrage.

“– so that they can navigate the Fairy Wood together. If they want to end up in the same place, that’s the only way to do it, after all. *Honestly*, Girona.” Midele shook her head again. “Just call the picnic basket, why don’t you, and let’s have something to eat.”

She started to bunch up her skirts in preparation to wade the stream, and Thony was startled to see that the novice priestess was barefoot. She was running around *barefoot* in the *forest*? That took... tough feet.

“Fine.” Girona stuck a couple fingers in her mouth, like one of the stable-boys, and whistled.

A large, well, *picnic basket* came sailing out of the trees behind them. It was floating a few feet off the ground. It halted next to Girona.

Midele had dipped her toes into the stream and winced a little. It was cold, Thony knew that for himself.

“You’re still sure you want to do this, Midele?” Girona asked. “That’s the boundary with Eyola, you know.”

The stream was a boundary with another *world*? Thony looked at it with more interest, comparing the insanely large trees on this side – some of them as wide around as small cottages – with the slightly more normal-sized ones closer to the girls.

“We’re just going to have lunch,” the taller girl pointed out. “We’re not going to go wandering through the Fairy Wood. Not *this* time, anyways,” she added, with a tone of concession. “We should definitely prepare a little more if we plan to do *that*.”

She was bunching her skirts up even higher – almost up to her knees – apparently to keep her dress dry as she waded. Thony was uncomfortably aware that *girls* weren’t supposed to show their bare legs like this. Even the village girls, whose skirts were only calf-length in the first place, always made sure their stockings covered the gap. *This* girl seemed... as unconcerned about her bare shoulders and legs as her cousin did about her hairstyle and color-choices.

“All right,” Girona said nonchalantly, then gave her cousin a bit of a smirk and sailed over the stream between one stride and the next. “Here, baskie, baskie,” she cajoled, and the picnic basket sailed over as well.

Midele looked up with a sort of pursed expression and continued to wade through the chilly water without a comment. Thony decided that Proper Princely Behavior required him to offer her a hand up the bank when she approached his side. He decided to ignore the broad hint that Proper Princely Behavior was giving him about stepping into that icy stream to help her across as well. It wasn’t like the girl would ever know the difference.

Midele gave him a smile of thanks as she accepted his aid in climbing out of the water.

Girona was already rummaging around in the basket, which continued to hover at about waist-height on her. The red-and-white checked blanket that had covered the other contents had been dumped on the mossy ground. “Spread this out, will you guys?”

Thony and Midele each took an edge and laid out the blanket. He was still feeling rather bemused by this whole encounter, but he was definitely hungry, and surely whatever they had in that basket had to be better than dry cheese and hardtack.

That was definitely true, as Girona began laying out a luncheon to match one of Queen Annabel’s nicer teas. A number of small sandwiches, a thermos of – yes – cold sweetened tea, several kinds of small, frosted cakes, and a container that proved to hold cubed pieces of watermelon. There was even a hot sweetmash for Silverfoot. The basket seemed to have more magick to it than its method of transportation, because there was no way that had all fit in the physical volume that Thony could see.

The conversation wasn’t bad, either.

A chittery gray mouse that had been hiding in the student wizard’s pocket was Girona’s pet, Snackers, and a strange scarlet-pink fluffball that didn’t seem to have any limbs or eyes and had hidden under Midele’s hair was her pet ‘*nifin*’. Midele also had a couple of other pets that they’d left home, and a rather vast-sounding number of brothers and sisters. Girona had a few siblings as well, but hers were far away. They thought it sounded interesting to be the youngest of three, like Thony, and they were sympathetic about his parents disbanding his circus-act-training program for rats.

And Eyola sounded even weirder than Amanita’s ‘matriarchal’ homeland. Girona and Midele claimed that

they didn't have royalty there. Just a lot of people who took turns being in charge or voting for someone to be in charge or something. So, his first impression – that they weren't commoners – wasn't exactly right. But it wasn't exactly *wrong*, either.

The girls were persuaded to trot out that 'compass' they'd kept mentioning. It looked like any other compass, but they claimed it was magickal and that Girona had made it to point to wherever you asked it to go. There were two separate settings, actually: one for the most direct route, and one for the safest route. Midele noted, dryly, that the second one had been *her* idea.

Amanita – and Twinklestar – arrived before they had moved on to the desserts. She was hot and grumpy and out of sorts. There were small twigs stuck in her hair and Twinklestar's mane and tail. And her attitude was *not* improved by coming upon Thony having a very civilized outdoor tea with a pair of strangers... and markedly neither searching for her nor looking particularly concerned.

The introductions and explanations about mirror-selves and so on had to be gone over again, of course. And more sandwiches and little cakes and sweetmash distributed as appropriate.

Amanita permitted herself to be mollified after about her third little cake and several pieces of watermelon.

Twinklestar didn't seem quite as easygoing about the whole thing – although he clearly enjoyed the sweetmash. His ire, however, seemed to be directed at Amanita.

Girona and Amanita got along beautifully, once they got over giving each other suspicious looks and trying to outdo each other in outrageousness. The story of why Thony was running away from home got trotted out in rather more detail

than he believed necessary. The reason why *Amanita* had run away from home was somehow glossed over again.

Girona seemed a bit skeptical that Thony's plan could work, but kept most of her opinions about that to herself. She thoroughly approved of the idea of getting out from under parental expectations to go off and do more interesting things. *Amanita* beamed at her, and Midele looked a bit worried.

"This seems like a rather dangerous way to solve things," she commented.

Thony shrugged. "I don't really have any particularly *good* options right now." He paused. "And I suppose it's less about solving things than buying me some time."

He didn't mention his secondary plan of coming back to his homeworld and sneaking off to his Uncle Louis' kingdom on the sea to look for more amenable princesses with powerful and supportive royal fathers in that region. Fathers with *armies* or at least large numbers of knights that they could lend to make Aldyrwald seem a much less attractive target.

Or vast magickal powers, like his great-great-grandmother's fathers had had.

He also didn't mention that he felt the whole thing was ridiculous. Both of his sisters and one brother-in-law were honest-to-goodness *Deities*, so how could the Devinthals possibly have lost the Divine Right of Kings? If the neighboring royals only *believed* in what had happened, they would all be competing to have their daughters marry Thony and be his future queen, rather than plotting to wed him to an otherwise unmarriageable relative who would then smother him in his sleep or something so that they could add Aldyrwald to their own demesne. And if they *believed*, then none of them would *dare* to consider starting a war to overthrow Papa or rip the

mountain-region apart by each trying to snatch up a piece of Aldyrwald themselves.

“I suppose,” Midele sighed. “And, who knows. Maybe something *will* change while you’re gone.”

“Either way, at least he can wait to come back until he’s actually a grown up,” Girona opined. “Didn’t you say that you’re old enough to rule on your own at twenty-one?”

More than *six years* to be gone? Thony didn’t really want to think about that.

“Old enough to rule doesn’t mean old enough to refuse direct orders from your liege-lady – or liege-lord,” Amanita told her mirror-self dryly. “That’s never actually a thing.”

Interesting that *she* understood...

Girona frowned, her noisy little mouse running back and forth across her shoulders. “Then what’s the point?”

Thony winced. Put like that, he wasn’t actually sure there was one.

“Lots of things can happen in a couple of years,” Amanita said, echoing Midele’s comment. She stood up and grabbed Girona’s shoulder. “Come on. I’m sure there’s something else we can talk about besides the sadsack here and his tale of woe. I want to hear all about this wizard stuff. If we’re mirror-twins, or whatever, do you think I might be able to do some of it?”

The look the former stable-girl gave Thony was rather more sympathetic than her words had been, but her words served to distract the other girl. Girona also stood up and the two wandered off, talking.

“Girona has... rather strong opinions about things,” Midele not-quite apologized, putting the fluffball *nifin* into his hands. It was as soft as it looked. A little weird, if soothing when it started *purring*... given that it didn’t seem to have a mouth.

Thony shrugged. “She’s not wrong.”

The novice priestess gave him a wry smile. “No, she usually isn’t. But I’d probably try the same thing you are if I were in your place. And so would she.”

“Hmnn.” Thony didn’t want to dwell on this. He petted the *nifin* absently. “So, tell me about this Goddess of yours. How did you decide to become a priestess?”

Midele’s brown eyes lit up with enthusiasm.

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