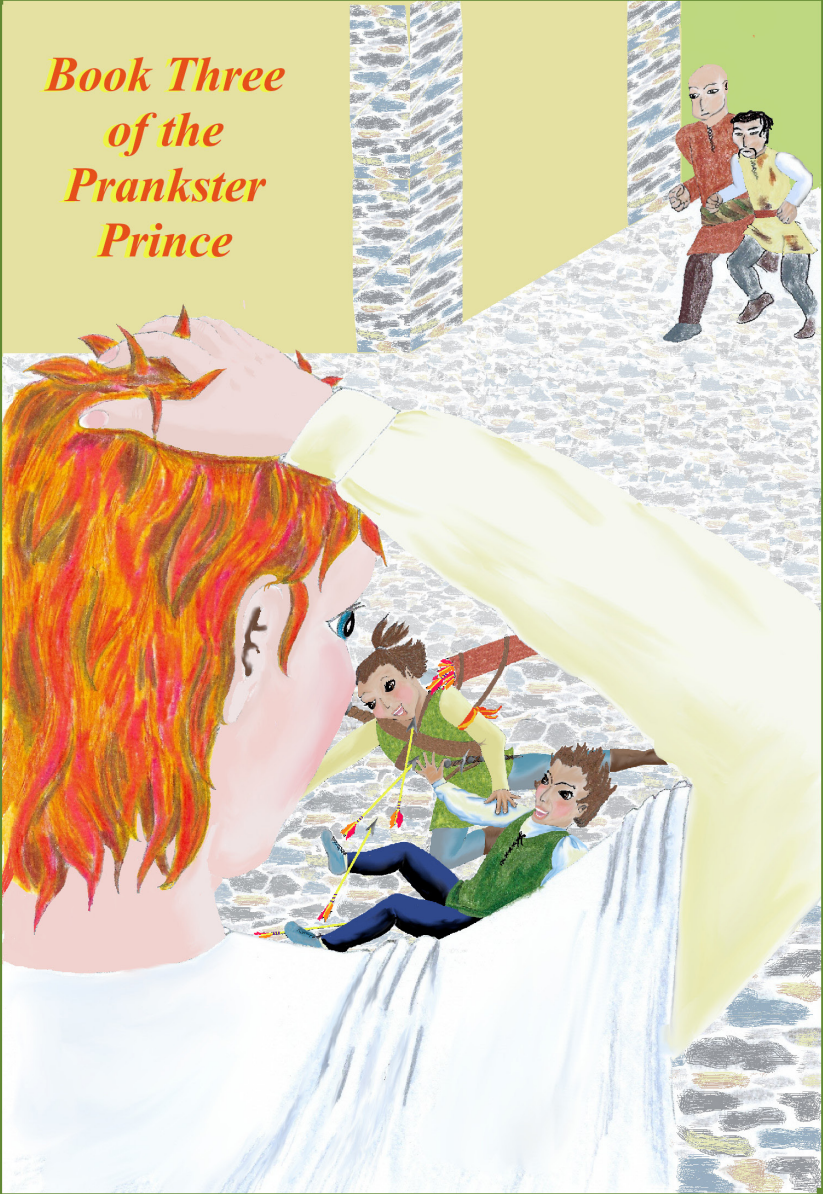


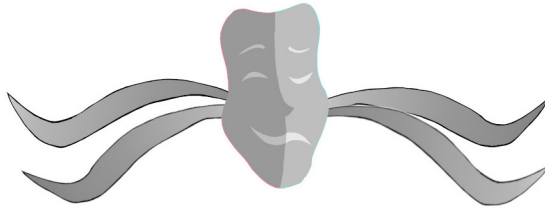
SO YOU WANT TO BE A HERO?

# *So You Want to Be a Hero?*

*Book Three  
of the  
Prankster  
Prince*



**MANGALA MCNAMARA**



***Neither of them noticed the package of trouble hurtling towards them until Amanita was extracting herself from under a jumble of girl, longbow, and brilliantly colored arrows that seemed to have spilled everywhere.***

“Ooops,” said the new girl without a great deal of regret. She looked up at them with a certain wide-eyed innocence that Thony couldn’t help but feel was a bit of a put-on.. Her leather jerkin was criss-crossed by a shoulder sheathe for a rather long sword, considering her size, that she was trying to untangle from her longbow and quiver.

“Don’t you believe in looking where you’re going?” Amanita demanded irritably.

“Usually,” the girl replied. “Sometimes. Um... occasionally?”

The greasy-seeming horse-dealer from earlier in the morning was also bearing down on them, his face furious.

Amanita’s gaze narrowed as she looked between the new girl and the new arrivals.

“What’s the matter here?” she demanded. “That girl just released all me stock,” the greasy guy snarled. “She’s goin’ t’pay for this trouble!”

Amanita looked over her shoulder. “Did you really do that?”

***The girl shuffled her feet and looked down – to hide a self-satisfied smirk, Thony rather thought.***

***“Eh... heh-heh-heh-heh-heh,” she chuckled uncomfortably, but didn’t deny it.***



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MANGALA MCNAMARA

RISING DRAGON BOOKS

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For everyone who finds themselves in a situation too big  
for them to handle – and who decides to keep on and  
find a ‘sideways solution.’

And for my kids, whose reaction to this book was  
“What do you mean you’re not writing the next one for  
*four months?*”

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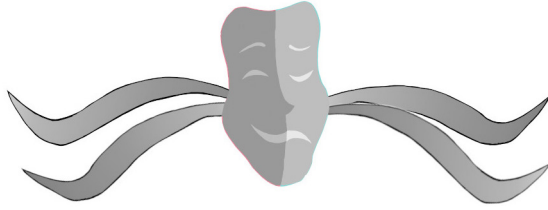
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# SO YOU WANT TO BE A HERO?



## Chapter ONE

### Trouble in Small Packages

“**W**ELL, AT LEAST BREAKFAST WASN'T quite as bad as dinner,” Thony said as the pair of them exited the Inn of the Starred Hoof. “And the innkeeper *did* give us directions to where there's a guy selling horses.”

Amanita *humped* over this assessment.

“Not that we *need* to buy a packhorse,” Thony added with a certain asperity as he followed her into the attached stables.’

“It was an excuse to ask for directions,” the fluffy-haired girl said nonchalantly. “And an excuse to wander around town.”

Thony rolled his eyes. He knew that. But it might get a little awkward with the innkeeper when they never actually showed up with another horse after she'd haggled over the cost of stabling for a third beast.

Not that they should likely be paying even as much as whatever Puck had paid for this slovenly mess of a place. The young prince wrinkled his nose and squinted his eyes against the heavy reek. The daylight sneaking in the cracks between the wall-boards didn't improve the place over what they, thankfully, *hadn't* seen the night before when they'd brought the equines into this place.

"Sorry, Twinklestar," he said as they came to the stalls holding their four-footed friends.

Not that his and Amanita's room was anything like luxurious, but at least it was clean.

The unicorn eyed him with irritation.

"Actually," Amanita said thoughtfully, "this isn't as bad as I thought it was last night. I mean it *smells* just as bad, but all the muck has been swept into that one corner. And there's fresh hay spread in the stalls – well," she temporized as Twinklestar snorted, "Fresher hay, anyways."

Thony was checking the troughs for feed and water. "The oats are good. And the water is clean. The innkeeper *did* say he hasn't been able to hire help since the Raven troops took over the town. But it also looked like he hadn't had paying customers with horses for awhile – so maybe he just hadn't felt he needed to clean up?"

Amanita gave the disdainful little sniff of someone who had been a professional at this sort of thing. "You shouldn't leave stuff in this state."

Thony shrugged. "Yeah, but if it's just him and his wife and that little boy of theirs – I imagine keeping the innroom ready and having stuff to serve the people who come in for a meal is probably his first priority." He paused. "It was nice of him to get up early to take care of the stables now that he *does* have paying guests using it."

Twinklestar seemed amused, but not inclined to explain.

“That’s just his *job*,” Amanita said, rather less forgivingly, but then she relented. “But yeah, this is good. I was thinking we either had to clean it all up ourselves or else move Twinkie and Silverfoot somewhere else.”

Thony recalled what a meticulous job she had insisted on doing in cleaning the hallway when he had first met her and had visions of Amanita forcing him to scrub the stable floor on his hands and knees, packed earth though it was. On the other hand, Puck had already paid for stabling here and he himself probably shouldn’t be squandering what funds he had, since there was no way to replace them once they were gone.

“Let’s go ‘look’ for that packhorse,” he suggested before Amanita’s neat-nut nature could manifest again. “We’ll take you guys out for some exercise later,” he promised the equines. Twinklestar let him know that it had been a long journey and he and Silverfoot were entirely prepared to rest peacefully for a couple days – but that a brief turn about the neighborhood to stretch their legs would be appreciated... perhaps after lunch.

An hour or so later, Thony seriously wanted to object to Amanita’s characterization of Flowerdust as a ‘small town.’

Granted, he’d never been farther than the nearest villages in Aldyrwald, and both of those were literally in the shadow of his father’s castle. And neither of those had more than a half-dozen streets. And it took both villages to have all the necessary artisans – they were really more like one really extended village, but the residents insisted they were separate and had separate village councils and inter-village competitions and made a Big Deal if a girl from one village wanted to marry a young man from the other one. (*Although you should have **heard** the caterwauling that had gone on when one of the local milkmaids went off to marry a cheesemaker from one of the neighboring valleys that*

*was also part of Aldyrwald's demesne. Her mother had carried on as if the girl was **dying**, not moving a few leagues away. Thony was just as glad he hadn't had to hear the parents of one of Queen Janet's maids from Schwannsberg who had fallen for one of Papa's footmen and decided to stay in Aldyrwald.)*

But Flowerdust – for all the disparaging comments that Amanita kept making – had a whole *row* of shops for clothes. Two tailors, a seamstress, an embroiderer, and a fellow who sold hats and gloves and fans and other fripperies that apparently were brought in from elsewhere. Not to mention the shop that just sold bolts of cloth, and the *three* shoemakers and two jewelers.

There were so many streets that the young prince couldn't keep them straight in his head; the streets even had names. (*Amanita said that in **real** cities the names of the streets were on sign-posts, like the names of the inns and taverns. Though they were usually done with pictures, not necessarily written in words.*)

Thony had counted at least three taverns – two of them without inns attached. (*Amanita called those 'restaurants' and said people went there only to eat.*) There had been at least two smiths, a saddlery, a *glassmaker*, three shops selling herbs and simples, and a shop that sold nothing but fresh-cut *flowers*.

There was a central open, cobbled square in front of a rather gigantic building that wasn't a castle but wasn't far from it. Farmers from the outlying areas and traders from visiting caravans had gathered there, just like on the market-day in the villages by the Devinthals' castle back home, each with a stall to sell his or her goods... And what goods! Thony had never seen such a profusion of fruits and vegetables and more bolts of cloth and ribbons and...

And there were *people* in all those shops and walking briskly from place to place, ignoring most of the others around them and greeting only the occasional person. Some were dressed in very fine clothes, and others in what was clearly working-wear. Kids, were there, too – again, some quite well-dressed, and others of them quite grubby and with a look to their faces that made Thony feel awkward in a familiar way – like they wanted something from him that he didn’t have the ability to give. (*Rather like the citizens of Aldyrwald, but **they** were expecting Thony to grow up and be their king. These kids should have no such expectations...*)

And they hadn’t made it halfway through the ‘town.’

Thony was practically reeling – and it wasn’t from hunger. Amanita had insisted they stop and purchase a snack from one of the farmers and he was pleasantly munching on the last bits of a roll that had sausage baked into it and had actual *flavor*, unlike what he sincerely hoped was the unpalatable-but-nourishing stuff at the Inn of the Starred Hoof.

Amanita, by contrast was fuming.

“That innkeeper,” she growled as she stalked through the streets, Thony following her a half-pace behind since he had no idea where they were going now. “I can’t believe he sent us – sent *you*, a *unicorn-maiden* – to such a shoddy excuse for a horse-dealer.”

Oh, yes, they’d *also* been to the outskirts of town to visit a horse-trader. And she wasn’t far wrong about the quality of the beasts they’d seen. Even the poorest farmers in Aldyrwald didn’t try to get work out of such swaybacked, toothless, old animals. And the man selling them had seemed kind of... icky. He’d left Thony with a feeling like he wanted to wash his hands after being in the man’s vicinity.

And that had been before Thony had gotten close enough to see the galls and lash-marks on some of the horses' hides. He'd felt sick looking at them, but the price the man was quoting them for even the least brokendown equine – a dispirited-looking donkey – had made it clear that rescuing the lot of them was beyond the young prince's abilities. Or at least his purse.

“He *did* say there wasn't much available for sale since the Raven troops came in,” Thony pointed out, ignoring the other thrust of the girl's complaint. They'd decided to have him keep wearing the crystal-white unicorn-maiden *robe* in order to maintain their... well, it wasn't really a *disguise*, given that Twinklestar *had* Chosen Thony...

Actually, the innkeeper had implied that there wasn't much of *anything* around for sale, perhaps trying to excuse the poor quality of the food he'd offered them. But everywhere Thony looked, there was absolute profusion...

Amanita snorted. “If I'd crossed his palm with copper, doubtless he'd have ‘suddenly remembered’ someone with better horses to sell. And if I'd crossed it with *silver*...” She shook her head fiercely.

Thony blinked in surprise. He'd read about this. “You mean *bribe* him?”

Amanita shrugged. “Compensate him for the information, I suppose. Nothing in it for him to tell us for free after all.”

The young prince told himself he didn't need to be shocked. It was... apparently just how things were *done* in cities.

Or, um, *towns*.

But... in Aldyrwald and its villages... information was free. Especially information like directions to somewhere or some person.

Amanita had paused on a street-corner and was looking at him with a tilted head.

“Don’t tell me the same thing doesn’t happen in Aldyrwald,” she said. “I got sent down from the castle kitchens to buy eggs and cream and stuff at the market a few times. And I bought them from the ‘wrong’ vendor because nobody told me who to buy them from and this other girl had better prices.”

Thony frowned. “I assume we have some sort of long-running agreement to make sure that the castle is supplied regularly. Though... I’d think that would mean we’d get *better* prices as a regular customer...”

She gave him an almost pitying look. “This was for extra stuff, not the regular deliveries. And I’m pretty sure some of the profit from those higher prices goes straight back into the Chief Cook’s pocket. Or maybe *Paul’s*,” she mused. “That would be just like him.”

Paul had been her nemesis during her brief tenure as an apprentice pastry chef.

Thony wanted to speak up and defend his people... but he hadn’t seen what she had... and he wasn’t sure how to do so without actual evidence...

...and Amanita was looking at him with that condescending expression...

...so neither of them noticed the package of trouble hurtling towards them until Amanita was extracting herself from under a jumble of girl, longbow, and brilliantly colored arrows that seemed to have spilled everywhere.

“Ooops,” said the new girl without a great deal of regret. She looked up at them with a certain wide-eyed innocence that Thony couldn’t help but feel was a bit of a put-on. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a partial ponytail, with the



rest of it hanging down to just above her shoulders. Her leather jerkin was criss-crossed by a shoulder sheathe for a rather long sword, considering her size, that she was trying to untangle from her longbow and quiver.

“Don’t you believe in looking where you’re going?” Amanita demanded irritably.

“Usually,” the girl replied, absently accepting Thony’s hand to stand back up and patting herself all over. “Sometimes. Um... *occasionally?*” She gave Thony a measuring look. “You’re stronger than you look.”

The young prince hoped he kept his wince internal. Proper Princely Behavior had demanded that he offer assistance – unless he knew he’d likely get socked for it, as with Amanita – and he’d forgotten that he was dressed up as a unicorn-maiden and wasn’t supposed to act like a prince – or a *boy* – at all.

“Um, yeah, about that,” he began uncomfortably.

The girl shrugged. “No problemo. People always underestimate unicorn-maidens. I should know. One of my best friends is one.”

Thony exchanged an alarmed look with Amanita – they’d been counting on no one in the area being familiar enough with unicorns to be able to call their bluff.

Not that it *was* exactly a bluff.

Thony *was* a unicorn-maiden, since Twinklestar had Chosen him and he’d accepted (*after a great deal of resistance, and only after he found out it wasn’t a lifelong commitment*).

But he was a *boy*, and unicorn-maidens *weren’t*.

And right now, he was dressed up in a white unicorn-maiden *robe* that was the remains of the usual crystal-white *gown* that *girl* unicorn-maidens wore... and he had it belted close with the usual cloth-of-gold sashy thing... and he’d manfully resisted the urge to trim his hair back to his usual length...

In other words, he was more or less (*really a lot more than less*) dressed up like a girl so that they didn't have to deal with *arguments* and *complaints* from random strangers and so that the usual mystique of unicorn-maidens would cover – and hopefully *protect* – them both.

Them *all*, but their other companion, the fairy-prince (*and commonly acknowledged King of the Pranksters*) Puck had needed to make a side-Quest to inform the Fairy Queen (*his Aunt... sort of*) about an impending invasion of the Fairy Wood (*and all the worlds it connected*) by the Evil Wizard whose troops currently controlled this town.

Presumably the umbrella of protection of being a unicorn-maiden's companions would be useful to Puck as well, once he got back and all three of them (*and Twinklestar, and Thony's-now-Amanita's horse Silverfoot, and Puck's fairy-mare, Chhilabiaen*) got back on the road. It was supposed to be several weeks or a month's ride to Puck and Amanita's homeland, a country named Pathremir, of which Thony knew absolutely nothing except that it was in the mountains and ruled by a matriarchy.

“People usually underestimate *me*, too,” the new girl was saying. She wasn't more than a hair's-breadth taller than Amanita and had similar dark eyes and coffee-colored skin. “Maybe not *that* guy, though,” she added thoughtfully, pointing back in the direction she had come from.

The greasy-seeming horse-dealer from earlier in the morning was bearing down on them, his face furious. He was a skinny little dude, so that would have been alarming, but not particularly so... but the huge bear of a guy following on his heels – and clearly at his direction – was rather more alarming.

Amanita's gaze narrowed as she looked between the new girl and the new arrivals. Thony could practically see the wheels clicking into place in her devious mind, so he wasn't surprised when his friend squared her shoulders and stepped between the angry men and the girl.

“What’s the matter here?” she demanded, using a hand to fend off the greasy horse-dealer as he tried to reach around her to grab the new girl. The big guy stopped a few feet back and folded his arms, apparently trying to look intimidating. (*And, it had to be said, succeeding pretty well.*)

“That *girl* just released all me stock,” the greasy guy snarled. “She’s goin’ t’pay for this trouble!”

Amanita looked over her shoulder. “Did you really do that?”

The girl shuffled her feet and looked down – to hide a self-satisfied smirk, Thony rather thought. “Eh... heh-heh-heh-heh-heh,” she chuckled uncomfortably, but didn’t deny it.

The young prince looked at the girl, feeling torn between being impressed and dismayed. Had she done it on purpose after seeing the state of those poor animals? He’d seen no solutions himself to their plight... not that he was sure that being released and then chased down would actually *improve* the situation for any of the beasts. But at least she had tried.

“I’ve had to hire a half-dozen louts t’track them all down,” the fellow was ranting. “It’s costin’ me a fortune, and I’ll never make ’t all back! So that girl’s a-going to pay me back instead!”

“But I don’t have any money,” the girl protested.

“Then I’ll take it out o’ yer hide!” the man growled.

They were starting to draw a crowd, Thony noticed nervously. All those fine people on their busy errands and their noses stuck in the air who’d been too busy to notice even a *unicorn-maiden* wandering around the town were far more interested when said unicorn-maiden seemed to be involved in an altercation in the middle of the street. A passel of kids in ragged clothing seemed to be arguing over something and exchanging money as they watched. At least none of the soldiers that he and Amanita had seen patrolling about in sharp-looking blue-and-black uniforms had yet been attracted.

“Nita...” he began warningly. She had told him earlier not to use her full name; it was part of the reasons that she hadn’t wanted him to know the name of her homeland, apparently, though she still wouldn’t say *why*.

But she clearly didn’t want anyone paying attention to them much more than he did.

Amanita heaved a great, put-upon sigh.

“Alright. I’m going to offer you a deal,” she told the greasy horse-dealer. “You leave the girl alone and I’ll buy one of your beasts. For any *fair* price you name.”

The greasy-looking man calmed down slightly and gave the ex-stablegirl a speculative look. “Ye’re the one was out to look at them earlier. I think ye had a few harsh words about the quality of me merchandise – likely an that ye didn’t have coin to actually *buy* anything.”

Amanita rolled her eyes. “I have coin. I’ll take that donkey we looked at last.”

The man settled his hands on his hips and gave her a crafty look. “And doubtless ye want a deal, because he’ll be exhausted after runnin’ ’round the city. I think ye’re in league wi’ *that* one.” He juttied the scraggly hairs of his beard at the girl standing behind Amanita.

“I doubt the donkey – or any of the rest – went very far,” Thony’s companion commented. “None of them looked like *running* was a thing they were even capable of *doing*. I’ll bet you got them all rounded back up even before you tried to chase her down. How many of them even tried to leave the paddock anyways?”

The man *harrumphed* a little. “That don’t hardly matter. She messed with me business. And I *still* say yer in cahoots with ’er.”

“I've never seen her before in my life. I just don't like your attitude,” Amanita pointed out with some asperity. “Do you want to make a sale or not? I have other places I can buy from. And I *wasn't* planning on coming back to *you*.”

The fellow *hemmed* and *hewed* a bit more, but finally quoted Amanita a price for the worn-out donkey that made her wince. She counted out half the money right there, promising the second half when she came by that afternoon to get the donkey. The horse-trader and his goon went off satisfied, and what was left of the crowd began to disperse. Most of the ragged-looking kids looked disappointed, but a boy in a dirty green cap regarded Thony and his companions thoughtfully before turning and vanishing back into the flow of foot-traffic, the other kids following him.

“Well,” the new girl said brightly. “That was a close one. Thanks, by the way. I guess I'll see you around.”

“Waitamminute.” Amanita grabbed at her arm as the girl seemed ready to dart off again. “You aren't going anywhere. You *owe* me, sister. *Big* time.”

Thony didn't think Amanita had meant the word as anything other than a convenient way to refer to the other girl. But once she said 'sister' it was impossible not to notice the resemblance between the two girls.

Maybe this *was* some relation and that was why Amanita had stepped up to rescue her.

“Who are you anyhow?” Amanita demanded as the girl squeaked again about not having any money.

Okay, so maybe they *didn't* know each other.

“Dae Goldeneyes, mercenary extraordinaire at your service.” The girl sketched a florid bow that was rather impeded by Amanita's grip on her arm and the way she had to grab for her bow to keep it from sliding off of her again.

Amanita reclaimed her hand and set her fists on her hips.

“You’re Dae Goldeneyes?” she said in a tone of utter disbelief.

“Yup,” the new girl said cheerfully. She looked at Thony. “Give me a hand with these arrows, dude?”

Thony blinked in surprise, but bent gamely to help her start collecting the scattered arrows. Yellow shafts banded with violet and fletched in orange and scarlet – he’d never seen such gaudy arrows. Not to mention that those weren’t arrowheads for hunting, they were for warfare. It surely wasn’t possible that a girl as small as ‘Dae’ could be a mercenary warrior – but her arrows and that huge sword on her back suggested otherwise.

“Dae Goldeneyes is a legend,” Amanita stated bluntly, watching as Thony picked up arrows and the new girl checked the fletchings before putting them back in her quiver one by one. “The youngest mercenary ever to graduate from Sonoro’s School of Soldiering. She’s, like twelve or something.”

Thony looked up with a frown. “A *school* for soldiers? And it let a *twelve-year-old* leave as a graduate? What kind of wack-a-doodle place is this?”

“I’m a child prodigy,” Dae informed him a little primly. “There was no need for me to stay when I’d learned all they could teach me.”

“I heard she was such a disaster that it was a delicate way of getting rid of her,” Amanita said dryly. “The Iana warrior I traveled with for a few months told me that there were bets on in the Mercenaries’ Guild about whether she’d survive the first month.”

“Well, it’s been almost three years,” Dae said cheerily. “So, I guess that’s pretty good.”

“*You’re a mercenary?*” Thony was boggled.

“Best one out there,” Dae averred.

“Has anyone actually *hired* you for anything?” Amanita inquired.

“Of course.” Dae contrived to look offended.

Amanita raised her eyebrows as Thony handed Dae the last arrow and stood up, brushing dust off his skirts. Not that they needed it; the fabric of the unicorn-maiden gown seemed to repel dirt and dust.

“Okay, not for awhile,” Dae hedged, squirming a little under Amanita’s gimlet gaze. “But I *have* been hired a few times. Mostly as a bodyguard for, like, royal kids and stuff. But they were *real* jobs.”

“And they paid *real* money?” Amanita inquired. “That you don’t happen to have anymore?”

Dae sighed. “I used it up. It’s... been a little while.”

Thony frowned. “Did the kids get assassinated or something? Why aren’t you still doing the bodyguard thing?”

“The kids are just fine,” Dae informed him. She winced. “I... well... see there was an accident... and I... kind of tripped on a duchess’ skirt. At, like, a really important royal event. And it... kind of ripped off.”

Thony winced.

“And... her petticoats kind of went with it,” Dae went on. “And she had on this *really* skimpy underwear. And she’d had the king’s name tattooed on her butt... in a heart... and...”

Amanita waved her to stop, one hand covering her eyes. “Please. Stop. Just... stop.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Dae averred.

“Uh-hunh,” Amanita said skeptically. “And I suppose letting all of that guy’s horses and things out of his paddock wasn’t your fault either.”

Dae gave her a wide-eyed look. “I just went inside to pat one of the horses that looked sad. How was *I* supposed to know that the latch was old and it wouldn’t close properly? And then when the guy saw me in there and got mad and started yelling at me, is it *my* fault if I got freaked out and startled all the equines? And that one of them pushed on the gate and the latch opened up and then *they* all got out?”

“Yes,” Amanita said.

“It was a good try, though,” Thony said with more sympathy. “I wanted to do something to help them, but I couldn’t think of anything.”

“Except this didn’t really accomplish anything,” Amanita pointed out. “Except for me to seriously overpay for a donkey to get you out of trouble.”

“Yeah, why *did* you do that?” Dae asked. “I mean, it was nice of you and all, but I’ve never met you before.” She paused. “Actually, I don’t even know who you are *now*.”

Amanita ignored this rather broad hint about as effectively as she did Thony’s hints about wanting to know *why* where she was from was such a Big Secret.

“I felt sorry for you,” the ex-stable girl said repressively. “My mother always said it’s our place to help those who need aid.” She glowered. “But you are totally *paying me back*.”

That... sounded a lot like Thony’s lessons in Gallantry and Proper Princely Behavior.

Well, except for the end bit.



Dae began to ask how that was supposed to be any different from what the horse-trader had been threatening her with and Amanita was suggesting they could still switch things around and give Dae to the man and get her money back—

“I hate to break this up,” Thony interrupted, “but a patrol of Raven troops just rounded the corner, and *no one* wants to get too close to them from what I've heard. Can we continue this conversation somewhere else? In our room back at the inn, maybe?”

“*Fine.*” Amanita gave Dae a last glower and began to stride off in a direction that Thony sincerely hoped would lead them back to the Inn of the Starred Hoof.

“*Fine.*” Dae glared back and flounced nonchalantly after her.

Thony sighed and started to trail after the pair of girls. Clearly they were two of a kind, and *one* Amanita was more than enough in his opinion.

He wasn't *quite* far enough behind to miss Dae 'whisper' loudly, “This redheaded dude looks like a girl in that dress. Does he know that?”