

THE FAIRY TAIL PRINCE



CHRISTOPHER GODFREY

THE FAIRY TAIL PRINCE

Christopher Godfrey

July 10th, 2019

Once upon a time, every story began “once upon a time” because no one knew what time it was. This was a problem that Oberon, Prince of Albion, spent every day trying to solve. With a sharp wit and every scrap of metal he could gather, Oberon worked on his first great invention: the time clock.

All alone in his room at the very top of Castle Albion’s Northwest Tower, Oberon dreamed of a day when the surrounding villagers would look up at the tower, see his clock, and know exactly what time it was.

Oberon imagined two friends meeting for lunch at a time besides high noon. He thought of farmers bringing crops to trade at a place instead of the market at a time besides dawn. He dreamt of a very fast runner who would finally know just how fast she was, and then could try to run faster. He thought of the million things one could do if you knew they time - mostly because he had so much of it. He had no one to meet for lunch, nothing to trade, and he never, ever, ran anywhere. Oberon spent every day in the Northwest Tower alone.

Except for Tail.

Oberon had a tail. Tail was always there. Tail was a part of him. Tail was long and skinny with a layer of thick blonde hair like a lion's tail, but was strong and articulated like a monkey's.

And Tail was a fairy tail, so Tail had a mind of his own.

As Oberon placed gears in his clock, Tail drew on the wall with a piece of blue chalk that Tail clutched with his wire-puff tip. The drawing was elaborate and required the full range of Tail's motion. Tail was as long as Oberon was tall and the tug 'o' war between their two projects was a daily struggle. With Oberon's hands deep within the gears of the clock and Tail stretching to the upper limits of his drawing, neither could make any progress.

"TAIL!" Oberon shouted. He yelled at Tail no less than fifty times a day. Tail whipped around like a cobra with a blue fang.

"If you would give me some space, or even some help, I'd be more than happy to give *you* some space and *you* some help."

Tail yanked him back to his drawing. Tail didn't think much of Oberon's drawing ability and was offered this deal before. Oberon would work on his clock until he was exhausted and then fall fast asleep. He hadn't bothered to look at Tail's drawing for days.

"How about this: just let me put this *one* gear in and I'll get you some new chalk."

Tail relented. Tail loved new chalk. Despite having strong hair at his tip, chalk nubs are very difficult to work with. And so, Tail agreed to the arrangement and held the clock still as Oberon placed the gears.

CLICK. The gears fit together perfectly.

"See? That wasn't so bad, was it?" asked Oberon.

Tail shook twice for “no,” then pointed Oberon back towards his wall.

“Fine. Fine. It’s your turn.” Lifting his head from the clock for the first time all day, Oberon saw Tail’s picture.

“I told you to stop drawing them.”

It was a portrait of Oberon’s parents, the former King and Queen of Albion. They both died of a terrible flu that swept the kingdom when Oberon was just a child. .

No one knew where the flu came from, not the wizards or doctors or the witches-who-knew-everything. Since the fairies were unaffected by the deadly disease, rumors arose in the villages that they created the flu and thus it was named after them: *The Fairy Flu*.

It was said that a fairy could transmit the flu with as little as a touch, a cough, or even the glance of an eye. As the losses mounted, pain became anger and anger turned into fear. Fairies were hunted into hiding across the known world.

Since Tail was a fairy tail, Oberon blamed himself for the loss of his parents. His father could have ruled another fifty years and his mother could have born many more princes and princesses. Now he, and his brother Merowech, were alone.

Oberon’s eyes drifted out the slot window and into the castle grounds below. He rarely left the Northwest Tower and only under the cover of darkness, but no one knew the castle better. He memorized every spire, every servant, and every changing of the guard. He even knew the precise timing of the horse that pushed the mill wheel, the big, soft brown eye passing the single window with such regularity that Oberon could set his clock to it - if he could only get it to work.

Oberon wiped the chalk from the wall with his hand, smudging the chock across the stone wall in a single swipe. Tail’s picture was a distraction and there simply wasn’t *time* for that.

Tail, in immediate reprisal, dipped into the clock and

yanked on a coiled spring! The tight-fitting gears exploded into the room!

“Not again!” Oberon screamed as a gear whizzed by his head.

Tail fluffed up and shook with a naughty giggle that enraged Oberon. It took hours to get the coiled springs into place.

“One of these days I’m going to tie you down, Tail!”

Tail whacked Oberon in the face, sending him backwards across the hard stone floor. Oberon reached behind himself to grab Tail, but Tail was quick and already over his opposite shoulder, tickling his nose.

“A...” Oberon took a deep breath, a sneeze building in the back of his throat.

“Aaaaaa...” Tail distanced himself, the trap already set.

“Aaaaaaaaaa...” Oberon’s eyes closed tight as he fought off the sneeze. Tail couldn’t resist. He shot up between Oberon’s legs and gave his nose one last tickle.

“ACHOOOOOOO!!!!”

Oberon knocked himself over into the fragile clock. The few gears that were still in place stuck into Oberon’s back. Tail, wriggled beneath him, trying to get free.

“No. I will *not* move. Not until you apologize for ruining my clock!”

Tail refused, tickling Oberon’s ribs in the hope of making him laugh.

“Apologize!” laughed Oberon. He was very ticklish. “Apologize or I’ll dip you in tar! Or honey! And then I’ll sit right down in the mud!”

Tail stopped tickling and tapped Oberon three times: twice short, then once with a long ruffle. This was Tail’s sign for giving up.

Oberon stood to his feet, giving Tail room to move. They looked each other eye-to-tail.

“We’re a team, Tail. We’re in this together! Once this clock is built we’ll be famous and people won’t even mind that I’m... That *you*...”

He trailed off. Tail shook back and forth with a “no.”

“Well, maybe they’ll see that tails aren’t so bad and that fairies aren’t so bad either. And they’ll love your drawings too! I know it.”

Tail wanted to believe Oberon, but Tail was sure they’d be stuck in the tower forever.

There was a knock at the door.

“Oberon?” It was the old, gravelly voice of the Wizard Randor. “Are you *decent*?”

“Come in, Wizard.”

Tail hated the Wizard and snuck up under Oberon’s shirt to hide.

The Wizard Randor entered the room with his midnight blue cloak dragging up the stairs behind him. His eyes were wolf-close and the nostrils of his ski jump nose flared from a lifetime of sniffing potions. He carried a staff in one hand and crystal ball in the other. It was unclear if he knew how to use either one.

“Your brother, the *crown* prince, will see you at once.” The Wizard was always quick to point out that Oberon was second in line to the throne.

“He’ll see you at once,” he repeated.

“We’re actually in the middle of something at the moment. Let me check my *calendar*.” Oberon reviewed a stack of papers each with a neatly drawn grid. His *second* great invention, the calendar made it possible for people to keep track of many days, instead of just one. Only a few days old, the calendar was empty.

“We?” The Wizard would never dignify the idea of Tail and Oberon being spoken of separately. “You’ve spent more than enough time on your silly tinkering.”

The Wizard so hated science. Rational thought flew in the face of his unfounded prognostications.

“This is an urgent matter and the command of your sovereign.”

The Wizard took the calendar from Oberon and tossed it on the floor among the scattered gears. Before it rested a moment, Tail darted from beneath Oberon’s shirt, scooped up the calendar, and threw it at the Wizard’s head. It barely, but intentionally missed him. Tail had a very accurate aim.

“And you will restrain that *thing*. That *TAIL*.”

Tail cowered before the Wizard’s rage. He was scary, ugly, and rumored to be a powerful sorcerer, even though no one ever saw him perform any *real* magic.

Oberon returned Tail beneath his shirt and held him tight to his chest.

“After you, Wizard,” said Oberon, always remembering his manners.

“And for the sake of your parent’s dignity, clean off that awful picture. It doesn’t look a bit like them.” The Wizard disappeared down the stairs.

Oberon looked back at Tail’s drawing. His parent’s faces were still intact, but now they looked rather sad. A drawing couldn’t change on its own, could it?

“Oberon! Now!” the Wizard called from the staircase.

“Coming!” Oberon yelled as he ran down after him.

To prepare for combat, Merowech, the Crown Prince of Albion, kept himself fit by fighting peasants. The peasants were offered food, coin, or livestock and in turn, Merowech would chase them with a dull version of whichever weapon he sought to perfect that day. Since it was his eighteenth birthday, Merowech spiced up the day's combat by fighting with his bare hands.

For two hours that morning it was Merowech's feet, not his hands, that were put to the test.

Angus, a shepherd boy of ten, ran Merowech ragged around the arena. Angus was acclimated to Albion's higher altitudes and since he spent his days chasing loose sheep through rocky and diverse terrain, he evaded Merowech's grasp with ease.

"Get back here, yo filthy peasant!" Merowech panted.

"No thank you, sire. Surely you will clobber me with thine royal hands."

When Merowech dove at the boy's feet, Angus jumped atop an armory cabinet, keeping a safe distance from the prince.

“Gameskeeper said that if I best you, I get a goat of my choosing, sire.” Angus loved goats. A royal goat would be the envy of all the highland shepherds.

“Best *me*? Merowech? The Crown Prince? Never!” Merowech climbed to his feet and flung open the doors to the cabinet, rocking it back and forth as armor dumped out all around him.

Angus wobbled atop the cabinet. Soon to lose his balance, he jumped as high as he could and grabbed the chandelier above him. Relieved of the boy’s weight, Merowech pulled the cabinet down on top of him!

Angus dropped down onto the back of the cabinet, trapping Merowech was beneath the heavy piece of furniture.

It was then that the Wizard and Oberon arrived from the tower.

“Brother?” Oberon could only see Merowech’s hands and feet sticking out from beneath the cabinet. “Is that you?”

Merowech remained silent, embarrassed to be bested by the shepherd boy.

“He’s under here, alright” said Angus as Merowech struggled.

“Release me, boy!” he roared.

“Do I get the goat, sire?”

“No! You have not yet beaten me. I must speak with my brother. We will pause for a moment, and then, after we have spoken, I will resume beating you.”

“Your *brother*?” Angus, like most of Albion’s citizens, did not know Oberon existed. Angus kneeled atop the cabinet and bowed gracefully. “Your Highness.”

Oberon smiled. It was a nice gesture, and not one he was accustomed to.

“To your feet, please.” Angus stood, reapplying pressure to the cabinet and causing Merowech to groan.

“I’m afraid, sires, that if I let Prince Merowech up, I’ll not

get the goat. I do think I've earned the goat. Haven't I?"

"If you were promised a goat, I'm sure my brother will fulfill that promise," said Oberon. "He is a *prince*, after all."

The Wizard rolled his eyes. Merowech rarely kept such promises. It was his custom to have his competitors return until he bested them, usually by cheating in some way, and then send them home empty handed.

"Are you sure?" Angus knew well the stories of Merowech's deceit.

"I will guarantee it myself. I *too* am a prince." It felt good for Oberon to say that. Perhaps he could one day be remembered as "Oberon the Fair" instead of "Oberon with Tail." Oberon then wondered if he would be remembered at all.

Angus hopped down from the cabinet and in a display of great strength, righted the cabinet with his own hands. Merowech dusted himself off, then grabbed the shepherd boy by his woolen collar.

"You were lucky, boy. Pure luck. I've been distracted by the day's festivities and am not my usual self. Return this evening so that I may conquer thee!"

"Will there be a second goat? Two royal goats is a fortune!"

"No. You have not bested me and there is only one goat. If it were not for my brother's distraction, I would have thrown the cabinet off and you with it! You were in terrible, terrible peril."

"That's not what *I* saw," said Oberon.

"This is *not* your concern, brother! Leave us, peasant. We have royal things to discuss. Leave us and think of how badly I will beat you come twilight."

Angus bowed. "As you wish, sire." With that, Angus left for the royal pasture to pick out his goat, a task he deemed far more difficult than beating the prince.

Oberon followed Merowech to the wash basin where he

failed to clean his face or hands. Since Merowech refused to bathe for much of his last decade, a splash of water made little difference.

“Do not contradict me in front of my subjects, Oberon. I am to be king. If you continue on like this I’ll have no choice but to...”

“Lock me in the tower?” Oberon interrupted. “I am in the tower by my own choice.” Tail, uncomfortable with the conversation, crept out from beneath Oberon’s shirt.

“I must appear regal!” said Merowech with soap in his eyes. He searched blindly for a towel.

“You do sire, always,” said the Wizard.

“Burning! My eyes!” Burn burn burn!”

Tail found a towel and ‘handed’ it to Merowech.

“Thank you, brother.”

It was then that Merowech saw Tail.

“Ahh! NO!” He swatted at Tail, who dodged him more easily than Angus. “Get that ghastly thing away from me!”

Tail coiled up behind Oberon’s shoulder, ready to strike.

“Did it touch me? Did it?” Merowech threw the towel at the Wizard Randor.

“Burn this Wizard! Burn someone is infected!”

The Wizard set fire to the towel with a wall torch. It was a terrible waste of a royal hand towel.

“You’re *fine*, Merowech. Tail just wanted to help.”

“*Help?* That *thing* could have killed me!”

“You’re fine,” Oberon repeated.

“*All fairies can and do, carry the deadly Fairy Flu,*” sang Merowech.

“Just because it rhymes doesn’t mean that it is true.” Oberon hated the nursery rhyme.

“Put the tail *away!* It disgusts me.”

“I will not!” protested Oberon. Tail bristled up, happy that Oberon was speaking up on his behalf.

“That *thing* is why I summoned you. As all the kingdom knows, today is my eighteenth birthday. While I have been a man for some time, I must marry to be crowned king.”

“It is an ancient and right custom,” said the Wizard, “stretching all the way back to Albion the Great who did not see it fit to be king until he found a bride to soften his soul and give good counsel.”

“We...” Merowech looked at the Wizard, “I mean *I...* made arrangements with King Camilo of Kalif to marry his daughter. After generations of war and the shared destruction of the Fairy Flu, I will unite our two countries in peace and prosperity!”

Tail ignored this slight, busying himself picking through the armaments scattered on the floor, searching for a blade light enough to wield.

“But you have not met the Princess. What if she...” Oberon lost his thought, trying to keep Tail out of the weaponry.

“What if she is ugly? It is no matter. I am uniting a kingdom, not writing a silly storybook.”

“Not that. The Kalifians are renowned for their beauty. What if she doesn’t want to marry *you?*”

“That is ridiculous, brother. Who wouldn’t want to marry *me?* She has to. We’ve made *arrangements.*”

“If I may get to the point of the matter,” said the Wizard, “the issue at hand is still your tail, Oberon.”

“That *abomination,*” said Merowech.

Tail could search no longer for a suitable blade. He dove to the toe of an iron boot and gave Merowech a stiff kick to the behind.

“Watch out! It’s *armed!*” screamed Merowech.

“Don’t you mean *legged?*” Oberon removed the boot from Tail, shook him twice with a scalding ‘no,’ and tucked Tail back under his shirt.

“You see! It’s possessed!” Merowech hid behind the cabinet.

“The Fairy Flu devastated Kalif,” said the Wizard. “Some say worse than here. It even claimed the life of King Camilo’s three sons. A grim tragedy.”

“And so?” Oberon knew where this was headed.

“So you can’t come!” said Merowech from behind the cabinet in a childish tone. “You can’t come to the welcome feast. You can’t come to the wedding. You can’t come to the coronation. Until all is said and sealed you mustn’t be seen. It could ruin *everything*. After it’s all done, maybe in a year or so, if you are good, I’ll introduce you.”

“If I am good?”

Tail slumped onto the floor, as lifeless as uncoiled rope.

“Merowech, we are brothers. We are family. Don’t you want me at your wedding? At your coronation?”

“No. Why, If it weren’t for you and your kind, Father would be alive and I would be off to *crush* the Kalifians in battle. Instead, I’m to be married and when King Camilo dies, I’ll be king of both Albion *and* Kalif. I can’t have you messing that up too.”

“Do you truly believe that? That I caused our parents deaths?” said Oberon.

“Not *you*, but fairies yes.”

“Fairies like me, Merowech?”

“Is there any other kind?”

Oberon did not know what other kinds of fairies there were, he’d never met one. He knew that Tail was a fairy tail and he was a fairy. He didn’t think himself to be diseased or dangerous, in fact, he thought himself and Tail to be quite special, but there would be no convincing Merowech of that.

With both hands, Oberon scooped Tail up off the floor and carried him back to the Northwest Tower.

Jarocasta, Princess of Kalif, answered only to “Joan.” It was a nickname her brothers gave her, an acronym for ‘(J)arocasta (o)nly (a)nswers (n)o.’ “No” was the first word she learned to speak and her last word on every issue thereafter. It was also her answer for everything regarding her duties as a princess. Joan *always* answered no.

Unlike other princesses, Joan was most comfortable on the back of a horse at full gallop. Each morning she would rise from bed before the sun and servants, saddle one of the famous Kalifian thoroughbreds, and ride out to the raptor roost on the far side of the castle grounds to fetch her old grey goshawk, Persephone.

It was critical she leave before the stable hands began their work for they were under strict orders from Joan’s governess that she be seated side-saddle in a hat and dress. To Joan, this was nonsense. She learned to ride with her brothers and would hear their ghosts snicker every time she sat awkwardly across the back of a horse. If one rides sidesaddle at anything more than a trot, they are sure to end up in the mud.

On her eldest brother's saddle, in her middle brother's boots, and sporting her youngest brother's gloves, she kept their spirits alive as she chased Persephone through the forest in search of game.

Falconry was not considered ladylike and thus forbidden to the princess. Luckily, the old hand who worked the roost cared nothing for social norms and spent his last years tutoring Joan in the way of the raptors. For two days prior he withheld Persephone's rations, so on that morning she was light, hungry, and eager to kill.

Chasing Persephone on a hunt was the greatest joy in Joan's young life. Dipping and ducking between branches and darting through fallen trees, Joan's heart beat with her horse's and the world disappeared. For a brief moment, she was not a princess, not last of her royal line, and not betrothed to some stupid Albion prince she had never seen. She was only a hunter, chasing a hawk, chasing a hare.

When Persephone screeched, a shrill call that could shatter glass, Joan knew the hare met its end. She slowed to a canter, sat up in her saddle, and walked the horse into the clearing. Persephone looked up at her from the kill, ready for breakfast.

"Not yet, old bird. You'll make a mess of it here."

As Joan climbed down from her saddle Persephone shuffled her talons and screeched. Joan covered her ears.

"Bark all you want. I won't have you bloody a perfectly good pelt over ten minutes of impatience. At the rate you're killing, I'll have a coat by winter."

Persephone screeched, this time louder and longer. She was hungry.

"If you wait you can have the liver," Joan said as she reached for the hare.

Persephone opened her razor sharp beak as a warning.

Yes, they were a team, but what had Joan done? Followed along? It wasn't fair.

"Fine. Here is a piece of pheasant to hold you over."

Joan tossed the piece of meat into the brush. Persephone followed it, leaving Joan a moment with the hare. She took it by the ears and held it high in the morning sun. It was a beautiful specimen, larger than she had taken with a bow and with better musculature than the fattened rabbits of the castle cages. Joan couldn't help her jealousy.

"Pleased with yourself, aren't you? Not a care in the world." Persephone swallowed her pheasant and returned to Joan.

"You could do this on your own, Persephone. You could live out here wild and free. You could take all the rabbits you please."

Persephone fluttered up in front of Joan, hovering until the princess stretched out her glove. The goshawk took her perch, not out of obedience or dependence, but because Joan was her own. They belonged to each other.

A trumpet blast from the castle signaled that they were to return at once.

"No time to spare, Pers', the Governess hates to be kept waiting."

ONLY THE SMALL OVAL OF THE GOVERNESS LUPERCA'S FACE was exposed to the bright Kalifian morning. Not for the sake of her complexion, it was freckled and dark, but in a strict adherence to her order, the Wolfmothers. Equal parts nun, nurse, nanny, and educator, the Governess was raised from birth to care for the Kalifian royalty. She took great pride in her work, and since there were no children left, the Princess received the full measure of her attention.

The Governess would not lift the bottom of her robe above her ankles so it dragged in the stable dirt. That was reason enough to hate the place, but she held the stables in particular contempt as it was the very embodiment of her failures in conditioning the Princess. Stables were no place for a lady. Yet, on this particular morning, the place was filled with them.

All eight of the Princess' ladies-in-waiting stood on the lawn of stable's presentation circle wearing a different gown. Upon her arrival, Joan would pick one to wear for the introduction to the Albion Prince. If she did not choose one, she was sure to answer 'no' as always, the Governess would choose one for her.

The hushing of the ladies constant gossip heralded the Princess' approach. Persephone, or "that damned hawk" as the Governess called her, circled above the ladies, lowering and stalling to signal that she might relieve herself at any moment.

Joan did not break gallop when she entered the presentation circle, reviewing the dresses in a single pass.

She hated the dresses almost as much as she hated the ladies inside them. The ladies were smiling sweetly, full of breakfast bread and dressed in fine silk, but when the Princess was gone they would twitter like finch in a grain silo, competing in volume and cruelty over their favorite topic: Joan's unladylike behavior.

Joan long ago learned to ignore them. They had the luxury of being ladies, she would be Queen. Since they were little girls the maidens would lose every game, give every compliment, and hide their true intentions from Joan, lest they be dismissed by the Governess. Joan did not hate them or know them. She learned from her father that lions do not concern themselves with field mice.

After hitching her stallion, Joan took the hare down from

her saddle and nailed it to the fence for dressing. From the breathless gasps of her maidens, Joan was sure that the only rabbits they saw were in cages or cooked on silver platters.

Persephone made a final low circle, passing so close to the Governess' head that she could hear the whistle of her wingtips. She landed on the fence and watched Joan split the hare from neck to tail. As was their agreement, Joan separated the liver with the tip of her knife and flipped it to Persephone's expectant beak.

Joan looked from the blood on her black gloves to the red dresses.

"I shall not wear red," she said, flinging rabbit blood from her fingers.

"Your Highness, red and gold are our colors. The royal colors of Kalif." Both of them knew this, but the Governess was glad that the conversation was oriented towards what the Princess *would* wear.

"You may yet force marriage upon my soul and this kingdom, but who among you can force a dress upon my flesh? Tell me Governess, how many ladies do you intend to bring to dress me? Twenty of these at least." Joan taunted the Governess with a jackal's grin. Tormenting the Governess was so natural to her that she hardly remembered the woman within the cloak, the one who had played with her as a baby, prepared her meals, and stitched her wounds.

The maidens whispered to each other until Persephone demanded their silence with a screech before tearing into a pile of intestines to their horror.

"I hope to avoid that altercation if possible, Princess, by seeing to it that your gown is made to your exact specifications. Perhaps a blue and white gown? Prince Merowech would be pleased to see you in the colors of Albion."

"Blue and white... They are so *visible*."

“You are a Princess, you are supposed to be visible. Visible for all to enjoy your beauty.”

“Enjoy my beauty? Not my intellect? Not my skill or virtue? If all *they* care about is my looks, why should I care what *they* think at all? I shall wear my own colors. Green as deep as winter pine and brown as dark as the rain-soaked earth.”

“Green and brown?” The Governess was not pleased. “Those make for a very dark gown, Princess.”

“Then line the cloak with white fox fur, that which is never cold nor wet. My personal items...” Joan, in a swift yank, separated the rabbit from its skin, holding the pelt high to inspect its quality, “will be the wool of river sheep and tailored to my skin.”

“The Prince will be surprised by *that*, I’m sure.”

“It is what the Albion Guard wears beneath their armor, I am told.” Joan studied the Albions with great interest, but only their military units.

“That is hardly appropriate, it is not as if you will be wearing chainmail, your highness.” The Governess’ embarrassment for the dress and her failing at raising the princess would echo through time. The Wolfmothers kept careful journals of such things, and her story was proving to be a cautionary tale of what not to do with a wild princess.

“From what I’ve heard of Prince Merowech, I’m right to be prepared.”

“As you wish, your highness.” The Governess was content that work could begin on *something*. They were weeks behind schedule.

“We will need to clear these fabrics, particularly the river wool, with Dr. Jal’al. We can’t have you breaking out in hives in the Throne Grove of Albion.”

With the hare’s carcass in one hand and the pelt in the

other, Joan walked close enough to the Governess for her to smell the warm rabbit blood.

“I’m due in his laboratory today. I will tell him myself.”

Once Joan was out of view her ladies-in-waiting broke out into cruel laughter that neither the Governess or Persephone could silence.

The cool stone beneath Dr. Jal'al's bare feet always reminded him of his childhood in the arid Eastern Deserts. How he longed in those days for a break from the hot sand or to stand upon hard, level ground. He even kept a basin of water to stand in and washed his feet more often than he ate.

There is some dispute whether the Akoma once wore shoes and abandoned them or if they had forever been bare-foot as their legends claim. A frightful story tells of their first and only Akoman cobbler who, upon inventing shoes, was unable to feel the sand moving beneath his feet and was swallowed alive by the desert itself. An Akoman priestess could step upon a cactus without flinching, name it without looking, and know when it would next flower. They made no sound when they ran upon the stone and left no trace when they ran upon the sand. All could eat with their feet, many could write, and the best could sew.

Dr. Jal'al's feet were unremarkable by Akoma's standards as they were only good for standing, kicking, walking at a moderate pace, and adjusting blankets on cold nights. For this

reason, and many others, he left the famous Carved Canyons of Akoma to study the sciences of the world. His mastery brought him fame, such that he would never have known in the desert, and in the first days of the Fairy Flu, employment by the royal family of Kalif.

Dr. Jal'al's expertise could not cure the flu, but he was not blamed for the death of the three princes. Instead, King Camilo built Dr. Jal'al a laboratory to his specifications for the single purpose of studying the flu's origins and protecting the health of the royal family, particularly the princess.

After years of investigating the princess' allergies there was no headway on her symptoms or their cause. An itchy rash would start on her chest and climb to her neck. Her eyes would water and her nose would clog. Finally, her throat would close until she could scarcely breathe. Dr. Jal'al tried every procedure known to man to cure her, or at least find the cause, but his attempts at treatment amounted to little more than senseless torture.

With no other choice, and in agreement that a solution *could* be found, Joan and Dr. Jal'al carried on together in weekly appointments.

"Please lift your shirt, your highness."

With arms still dotted with the hare's blood, Joan reached back and pulled her tunic over her head, exposing the checkerboard of lines the doctor drew on her back the week before, placing a different reactionary agent in each box. He compared the boxes, accounting for the smallest changes in her complexion, and noted them in his ledger.

"Any symptoms since last week?"

"At dinner, two nights ago" she shuttered, recalling it.

"What did you eat and drink?"

"I had yet to eat. In fact, I wasn't at all hungry or thirsty. I was wearing my normal clothing. I spoke briefly with my father... about the wedding. "

"I saw you that night, in this lab. Do you remember?"

"No."

"You collapsed from the allergy attack."

Joan nodded. It embarrassed her that she could be so vulnerable.

"Any attacks since then?" the doctor asked.

"No."

Dr. Jal'al inspected a suspicious bump in square A-4, below her neck and to the left of her spine. He poked it.

"Ouch!"

He poked it again.

"Stop that!" The Princess' elbow flew behind her but did not hit the Doctor. He was swift and always ready for her reactionary attacks.

"Does that hurt, your highness?"

"That question is too dumb to answer, Doctor. It is a pimple, and a sore one at that. My quiver rest there and the leather rubs it when I am riding."

"Shall I lance it for you?" The doctor loved to lance.

"It will heal on its own, won't it?"

"With enough time, all things do."

Joan pulled her tunic back over head and handed the Governess' list of fabrics to the doctor. He reviewed it with care.

"These are for your dress. Exciting times!" he said, trying to lift the mood.

"Exciting for who? Not for me."

"Fox. River sheep wool. Are you going to battle, princess?"

"Worse, I'm to be married!" she said, without a hint of sarcasm.

Joan wandered the lab as Dr. Jal'al made notes about the garment as if writing the words down would reveal some

secret meaning. They did not. The Princess' allergies, like the Fairy Flu, were a lost cause.

"Have you been to Albion, Doctor?" Joan asked as she stood before the map Dr. Jal'al made of his travels. It was his life's work, and perhaps the most complete in the world.

"I studied there, briefly, with their court wizard, Randor."

"They have a court wizard?"

"The colder climates tend towards magic, your highness. Perhaps there is something about the cold for it makes life so difficult. Every living thing that survives does so by some sort of trick or magic. Or perhaps it is being stuck inside for the winter."

"Does the wizard perform any great acts of magic?"

"Our concern was the flu, and there was no magic that could cure it."

"The *Fairy Flu*" she corrected the Doctor.

"There is no proof of fairy origin, Princess, and at least within this lab, proof of all things are required."

Joan looked across the room at Dr. Jal'al. She knew that he had soft spot for fairies. Perhaps he felt some kinship with them since he no longer felt welcome with his own people.

"Have you met the prince?" she asked.

"Merowech?"

"Is there another?"

Dr. Jal'al paused his writing long enough for Joan to notice. She had a keen eye, the eye of a hunter. She knew when the game was set to run and in which direction. She could see the tension in the doctor's hand as he rested his quill.

"What are you hiding, Doctor?"

"It is not my place, your Highness."

She crossed the lab and stood over his shoulder. Joan was much taller than the doctor and stronger too. Her shadow loomed on his desk.

“I order you to tell me, Jal’al.”

“There are matters beyond my fealty, Princess.”

She dug the heel of her riding booting into the doctor’s barefoot.

“Your Highness, please.”

She stomped on his foot, but it did nothing. That she would go to such an extent was injury enough.

“You will stop doing that now.” The calm in Dr. Jal’al’s voice was commanding, even to the Princess ‘who only said no.’ She knew she would hear the truth.

“There is a second prince. He lives away from public life. In Castle Albion’s Northwest Tower.”

“He lives there by his own choice?”

“I’ve said enough. Off you go.” Dr. Jal’al retreated into the lab without another word.

Joan could not comprehend why a royal son of Albion would be kept in hiding.

Unless, of course, he was a fairy.

While Oberon searched the horizon for the Kalifian Royal entourage, Tail was hard at work on a picture of Meroweck. The picture, done in pain-staking detail, featured Tail holding Meroweck by his feet over an erupting, toothed volcano. The lava did nothing to erode the volcano's razor-sharp teeth. Adding joyful expressions to the tropical villagers below the volcano would take Tail the rest of the day.

From the castle-facing window of the Northwest Tower, Oberon could see from the mountains to the sea. The eastern mountains were called the Albion Range by the Albions and the Kalifian Range by their southern neighbors. The Nahal River ran down from the mountains and divided the two kingdoms, nourishing the farmlands on both sides. The Nahal ended at a waterfall that crashed down into a delta that led to the sea. Where the delta met the sea was a swamp, the Fairy Swamp. In the Fairy Swamp, lived the fairies.

Fairies lived elsewhere, but only in secret. They wore plain clothes, did regular jobs, and if they stayed hidden, none were the wiser.

In the swamp, the fairies lived as they pleased in great numbers. No one knew how many, for very few people had gone into the Fairy Swamp and returned. There were no books describing it in the library and no one Oberon knew had ever been there, save the Wizard Randor, and he would not speak of it. Oberon longed to see it for himself and even more so, to be seen.

Oberon did leave the castle, but it was always at night and he would return before first light in case someone might check in on him. He knew every single way in and out of Castle Albion, but once outside, and with no one but Tail to keep him company, there was very little to do. He would wander for a bit, pick some fruit if it was in season, and then return home, longing for company and adventure.

What free time was left after building his clock was spent studying and preparing for life beyond the castle walls. Oberon read every book in the library that might come in useful. He even made an armored vest for his protection and, more importantly, Tail's concealment.

Fearing he might injure himself, or worse, leave the castle, the Wizard would not have armor made for Oberon. Merowech's old armor was far too large, so Oberon decided to make his own. Since most armor was bulky, dull, rigid, ugly, and too heavy, Oberon searched the dusty pages of countless books to find a better solution.

In a travelogue about the Snowtrians who lived high in the Albion Mountains, there was a chapter about the wonderful crafts they made with the hard bones of the flying fish that ran in their alpine rivers. The bright blue bones, particularly the eye sockets, were used to make rope, blankets, ladders, doorways, and flexible sleds that allowed the Snowtrians to ride down their snowy hills on magic blue carpets. As the Snowtrians had no enemies, no one had

thought to apply the technique of bone weaving to armor. No one but Oberon.

For the seven months when the rivers were not frozen, Oberon demanded that his three meals a day be flying fish bought from the Snowtrians themselves. It was a bratty and specific request that only furthered his reputation as an eccentric monster by the Albion Guards that served and cleared his plates of half-devoured skeletons.

Over time, and with much trial and error, Oberon taught himself to split and join the socket rings. Never to be left out, Tail learned to scrimshaw, tap-tap-tapping away with the fish's teeth, making beautiful designs in the bone. In three summers of seven months eating only flying fish, the shimmering blue vest was completed.

From a distance, the front of the vest bore the Albion coat of arms, but on closer consideration, one could make out great moments in Albion history. The clock was Oberon's, the walls were Tail's, but the vest belonged to them both. Not only was it a lovely and useful piece of armor, but it held a promise: that one day they would leave and never return.

Oberon did not try the vest on until the day that Kalifian entourage's flag poked up over the horizon. The vest sat upon its form opposite the clock, an odd figure waiting to come to life. When the entourage came into view, Oberon knew it was time.

"We will not stay in this tower forever" he proclaimed.

Tail perked up, leaving his happy volcano villagers half completed.

"I am a prince of Albion! I will attend the welcome feast whether Merowech likes it or not! And the wedding! And the coronation!"

Tail shot straight up and waved back and forth with excitement. Oberon crossed the room and lifted the vest from the

form, feeling the smooth fish bones as they rippled through his fingers. He lifted the vest over his head and pulled it down around him. Tail tugged at every corner. It fit perfectly.

Oberon took Tail in his hands and pet him like a puppy.

“Tail. You’re a good Tail.”

Tail pulled away. Every time Oberon started with a compliment, bad news was sure to follow.

“I’m going to the feast tonight. That means *you* have to stay hidden.”

Tail shook two times, hard. “NO.”

“We have no choice in the matter. If someone sees you they may call off the wedding. Now please, Tail, be good and hide.”

Tail struck Oberon in the face with all his might. Oberon grabbed Tail at his own backside and worked his way up toward the end. They wrestled about on the floor, neither wanting to concede.

Once Tail was exhausted, Oberon forced him under the shimmering blue vest and secured him there with a length of cord. Tail ceased struggling, worked his tip around to Oberon’s heart, and collapsed.

If they could both cry, they surely would have. Instead, Oberon cried alone.

Sitting across the carriage from his daughter, Camilo, King of Kalif and eighth of his name, marveled at how much she looked like her mother. Her hair was coarse and black, her skin was the same deep amber, and the corners of her electric blue, almond-shaped eyes lifted at the corners like a jungle cat.

Their similarities ended with appearances. Joan was stronger than her mother. The Princess' birth nearly claimed both their lives and only Jarocasta survived. Later, when the Fairy Flu ravaged their house and he retreated from the public eye, Joan kept up the public persona of the royal family by brazenly riding out of the castle day after day. So what if they called her a tomboy? She could best them all.

"Jarocasta?" He knew that she hated to be called by her full, given name. She thought it too flowery and ornamental, but it was he that gave it to her, so he had every right to use it.

"Yes, Father?" They had ridden for hours in silence save Persephone's occasional flutter beneath her leather hood.

“If you were not a princess, and I was not a king, if you could do as you pleased, what would you choose?”

It was an odd question that drew attention to the fact that Camilo had sealed his daughter's fate to Merowech, but he was curious and a flight of fancy seemed the best way to pass the time.

Though no one had ever asked, King Camilo dreamed of being a shark man - raising, herding, and breeding sharks the way they did on the outer reefs. Perhaps he could win a blue ribbon for his prize shark at a seafair if such a thing existed. It didn't matter to him that it was a dangerous job, one never knows what a herd of sharks might do, but that is the point of daydreaming.

“I would be a foot soldier” answered Joan. She looked out at the royal entourage, placing herself within it.

“That is very dangerous work, my dear.”

“I know. I would love it with all my heart. I would start as a squire to a knight, a good and kindly one that you approved of. I would study his every move. With my hair short I'd be thought a boy until I distinguished myself in battle and given my commission to the army. Once my sword was renowned and feared I would come to visit you at the castle. You would see me in my armor and I would show you my scars.”

“That would be something to behold.” This talk worried the King. War was a grim and terrible reality. He despised the longing for battle when it came from foolhardy men, but even more so from his daughter.

“A great, honorable war would call me to the front lines. When all was lost I would rally my soldiers around me and we would prevail, tearing us from the very jaws of death.”

Persephone cooed, excited by her master's tone.

“When the fighting ended I would show myself as a woman. With my great victories, the men would make me

their general and I would lead an army so fearsome that a lasting peace would forever rule the land”

The King knew that such talk was the folly of youth. War never brought peace, but he could not begrudge his daughter her dreams. He asked and she answered honestly.

“Would you then return home to your father, to comfort him in his twilight years?” asked the King.

“Yes, so that you could be my butler. You would draw my curtains in the morning when you brought me fresh milk and eggs.” Joan smiled at her father.

“A life of service is a good life. Better to be your butler than the king! You do know, however, that I am *not* a morning person.”

“You would learn... or I would have you whipped.”

They laughed together for a good long while before the Princess returned her attention to the strange Albion landscape.

“But it is not so, Father. You are king and I am a princess and our carriage rolls over Albion grass.”

The tall, golden grass waved in the wind as if it heard the Princess.

“A new beginning, my love. After generations of war and a great sickness, our kingdoms will be united in peace. The marriage is not for me, or even for you, it is for our people, so that they might have farms and family instead of pointless, unending bloodshed. And who knows, you may fancy Prince Meroweck. He is said to be quite strapping!”

“And what of his brother? The hidden prince?”

King Camilo was taken aback. How had she learned of this? Surely, Jal'al. The loose lips of the Akoman were as famous as their bare feet.

“In the Fairy Swamp there is said to be a bat so big and so hideous that if it is seen in daylight, will scare a horse to death by looks alone.”

Joan hated when he answered questions in this vague, dodging way. He reached across the carriage and took her knee.

"Somethings are best never seen," continued the King.

"I was hoping the same of my wedding day" replied Joan.

Out the window, the Castle Albion came into view, growing closer with every clip-clop of the horse hooves. Squinting her eyes, Joan leaned out the carriage window so she could see the tall Northwestern Tower and, perhaps, the prince moving inside.

“**W**hy can’t some dirty peasant bathe for me?” Merowech asked the Wizard Randor. Merowech stood naked next to the tub, the wizard behind a curtain.

“Because the ‘dirty peasant’ will not be meeting your future Queen today, your Highness.”

Merowech hated bathing. He believed that the grime of his battle training and its disgusting stench made him more formidable in combat.

“Do women like that? Cleanliness?” Merowech knew very few women, only the kitchen staff that he tormented for late night meals.

“Yes. Very much so. Kalifian women most of all. To impress a Kalifian maiden once must bathe regularly. Monthly even!”

“Disgusting. What a backwards people.” Merowech poked the tepid water with his finger. “Who has the time?”

“You have no choice in the matter, your highness, you must bathe, even if I must force you to do so.”

“You stay behind that curtain where I can’t see you, Wizard.”

“THEN GET IN!” boomed the Wizard. The water stirred as if it had heard one of the Wizard’s dark incantations.

Merowech got into the water, slowly. A many-colored slick of dirt and oil ran off him and glistened atop the water. Handfuls of dirt shed from his skin and settled to the bottom of the tub. The Wizard tossed a bar of soap over the curtain and it splashed next to him. Merowech held the soap like a delinquent holds a rock in front of a stained glass window, afraid to ruin its perfection.

“Use the soap, Merowech.”

When he touched the soap to his skin, he did not become clean as much as the soap became dirty.

“Your brother intends to come to join us at the Welcome Feast.”

“I ordered him not to.” Merowech believed that his orders were always followed, though they rarely were. “How do you know this? Has he left his tower?”

“No, but he has taken that vest off the form and intends to wear it. It took him years to make and I can think of no other occasion to wear it.”

“He’s gone mad!” said Merowech.

“He may have, your highness. It isn’t good to stay locked up in that tower. Perhaps his tail has taken over. It is a common thing for fairies. They are unable to control themselves and turn to madness.” The Wizard was considered an expert on the subject of fairies, though there was no way to tell if any of his knowledge was true.

“My brother is very clever though, isn’t he?”

“Yes. But the deeper the water, the larger the monsters.”

“They cannot be separated? Oberon and his tail?”

“It would likely kill him, your Highness.”

“There is no other way?”

“There is a theory...”

“What kind of theory?” Merowech did not know what a ‘theory’ was.

“If Oberon were to focus the magic of his tail to its very end, then remove it himself, voluntarily, he may survive. There are some who say that we are all fairies before choosing otherwise.”

“I’m not a *fairy*.”

“No, of course not, but perhaps someone in your family, long ago.”

“You will take that back, Wizard, or I will have your head!” This was such a regular, empty threat that the Wizard did not bother to apologize.

“It is only a theory, your highness.”

Merowech sank his dirty head of hair beneath the water. In the murky silence, he pictured that pesky Tail being cut off by an executioner’s ax. He could see Oberon’s face as the blow fell. Then, without asking, he saw his parent’s faces as well. He remembered them perfectly, far more accurate than the paintings on the castle walls. Merowech saw their tears, but since it was *his* imagination, he turned them into smiles, then laughter. They patted him on the back, thankful for ending their family’s humiliation.

Through the water, he could hear the trumpets sound. The Kalifian Entourage was arriving and his bride was at the gates.

What would she look like? Would she fancy him? Was she ready to be queen as much as he was ready to be king? He lifted his head from the water and stepped out of the tub. The dirty water fell a foot and the tub would never be the same.

“I have your royal tunic, Meroweck, and will leave you to dress.”

“Thank you Wizard.”

If nothing else, he wouldn't have to worry about what to wear.

It was a great distance from the stone doors at the entrance to the Throne Grove to the Throne Tree at its head, much too far to make out a face. Only a famous giant, dwarf, or a knight was recognizable before making it halfway to the Throne Tree. While the trumpets sounded the entrance of the Kalifians, it was some time before Joan and Merowech would see each other for the first time.

Castle Albion was built around the Throne Grove which stood for a thousand years before the first stone of the castle was laid. When the Throne Tree was first sat upon by Albion the Great, it was a lone redwood on a mountain plain; by the time Joan arrived there was a colonnade of a hundred others. All of Albion society was there among the trunks to see the woman who would be their queen.

As she walked the long aisle to the Throne Tree, Joan listened to the tap of her Governess' hard-heeled shoes, her own riding boots, her father's soft loafers, and between breaths, Dr. Jal'al's bare feet. Beyond them, she could hear the flicker of the candles that lit the trees and the occasional

whispering onlooker. The birds and wind were silent and the quiet.

Merowech had never received guests in the Throne Tree before and was unsure how to compose himself, particularly where to put his hands. Though he practiced sitting on the throne, first on his father's lap and then in his mind every day after, he never imagined how long he would have to sit without moving..

"Sit still your highness, fidgeting is unbecoming of a king" whispered the Wizard through a small hole in the Throne Tree. An insect had long ago worked its way from outside to inside, allowing a single voice to wander softly into the ear of whoever sat upon the throne.

"You must sit as if all of Albion rests upon your shoulders, for it truly does."

Merowech gripped the arms of the throne and let his weight fall into the seat. This was where every monarch had sat, from Albion the Great all the way down to Merowech. He wondered if his father and his father felt as nervous as he did. In painted pictures they always looked so comfortable on the throne. They never stirred or sweat as Merowech did. He wished that he were already king so that the crown could soak up his perspiration.

The sweat was the first thing Joan noticed of the prince's face, thirty paces before Merowech could even see her eyes. She enjoyed great vision and having a hawk for a friend taught her what to watch in wild game. Would a squirrel run up a tree or out its branch? Would the sparrows bank together or break ranks? How far was a gopher from its hole? Persephone knew in an instant and from studying the hawk, she knew as well.

Joan missed her hawk terribly. Persephone was flown, fed, and hooded in Albion's roost. The towering evergreens of the Throne Grove could use a hawk to hunt in them. The Throne

Tree itself was so tall that the stars were hung from its branches. Only when Persephone flew the tree would Joan know how large it really was. There would be plenty of time for that, Joan realized, as this would soon be her home. Forever. With that thought, she joined Merowech in sweating.

UPON BEHOLDING JOAN'S FACE MEROWECH CLOSED HIS EYES for a full second as if the sun had just risen behind her.

Opening his eyes again he was sure the he had never seen anyone like her. Her skin was darker than the girls in Albion and her eyes were brighter. She walked deliberately, cautiously, as if at any moment she might break into a run. The Princess was taller and stronger than any woman Merowech had ever seen. She looked not as if she would one day be queen, but that she always had been. She stood before the Throne Tree and looked up into its branches as if it had always been hers.

“Her Royal Highness, Princess Jarocasta of Kalif! And her father, Camilo the Eighth, King of Kalif!” the Herald called out from his perch in the Shouting Tree. His voice echoed through the Grove, reminding Joan just how much she hated her full name. She could hear her brothers laughing at her, louder now than ever.

“Attending her are the Governess Luperca of Kalif and the esteemed Dr. Jal'al of Akoma, Court Physician and adviser to the King.” The volume and depth of Herald's voice surprised the Kalifians, like water crashing at the bottom of a waterfall.

“All rise for Merowech, Crown Prince of Albion.” For the crowd gathered in the Grove this was nearly a formality, as they were already standing, but once the announcement was made they closed in around the Throne Tree, eager to watch the proceedings.

The furthest from the action was Oberon, still locked away in the Northwest Tower. He longed to be beside his brother, but did not find the courage in time. With Tail still secured beneath his vest, he leaned out the window to see the Kalifians below. He could not make out their faces or he see his brother within the Throne Tree, only the gathering crowds and the voice of the herald.

Merowech did not know how to address the royal entourage. Since the passing of his parents there had been few state visits and the Wizard Randor saw to them all. Looking out from the inside the Throne Tree, the sea of faces seemed as if it might swallow him whole.

“Welcome honored Kalifians, King Camilo, and my bride, Jarocasta” whispered the Wizard through the hole in the tree. Merowech repeated them right up until “my bride” which brought him to a halt.

“*My bride... Merowech! My bride!*” the Wizard urged Merowech on.

Merowech was silent.

Joan watched him as Persephone would, unsure if he would dart like a squirrel or burrow like a gopher. Seeing Merowech stall, and feeling the eyes of the Governess Luperca on her, Joan bowed her head.

“Your Highness, Prince Merowech.” As Joan lifted her eyes to meet his, a great calm fell over them both, for they both felt *nothing*.

Somewhere birds were singing, bells were ringing, and fireworks were exploding, but within those two royal hearts, there were two different, individual pulses that would never beat as one.

No, the great miracle of love did not visit them that day and never would. Love could no more easily grow between them than a flower grows by pulling at its petals. It was a relief to them both.

In an instant, both the Prince and Princess had moved on from the matters of their hearts to the reality of their arranged marriage. For Joan, that meant the rich hunting lands and Albion's legendary game. She would finally be rid of the Governess Luperca and the ghastly ladies that followed her wherever she went. When she did return to Kalif as the queen of a joined kingdom, she would have them muck the stables. Not even her father could stop her from this petty little revenge. Nor would she have to wear dresses to impress a man, for she would already be married. Married to *him*.

For Merowech, not only would he be King of Albion, but he would king of a new kingdom, the largest the world had ever known. Through marriage he would achieve what no Albion before him had done: he would conquer Kalif. Such an army would he amass beneath him that no man alive could beat him and no country could refuse his power.

"*Merowech!*" the Wizard was still whispering to him, "invite them to the feast."

"I invite you to your feet" shouted Merowech, confusing the entourage. The Wizard cringed.

"It would be an honor," said King Camilo, realizing his error. King Camilo bowed his head as well, which surprised Merowech. He had never been bowed to by a king before.

"What color tunic will you be wearing tonight, your highness?" asked the Governess Luperca, "so that the Princess might dress to accompany you."

For the first time since she left Kalif, Joan felt her skin rising. It itched as if ants were marching along with her hemlines and biting her at the corners. She took quick breaths through her nose to stave off her allergy."

"This one," said Merowech. "I'm not changing. I hate change."

"Then we will see you this evening," said King Camilo.

The entourage bowed, then exited the Grove to the apart-

ments where they would live for the duration of their stay. Once the Kalifians had gone, the Wizard accompanied Meroweck to his room.

“That went well, didn’t it?” asked Meroweck.

The Wizard lied and told him it had.

The first steps Oberon took down from the Northwest tower were difficult, not only because he was painfully shy, but because Tail was lashed beneath his vest and fighting him with every move. This resulted in a tense waddle reserved for walking slippery logs and rushing to the bathroom.

“If you would just mind your manners, I wouldn’t have to tie you down!” Oberon reasoned with Tail.

Tail doubled his efforts, pricking Oberon’s skin with his bristled tip. Oberon cinched the vest even tighter, limiting their shared circulation to a minimum and giving Oberon a shapely, hour-glass figure that would be the envy of many women at court. Unable to articulate his bristles any further, Tail conceded his fate and patted Oberon to let him know that he would cooperate.

“Promise?”

Tail patted him one last time for “yes” and Oberon loosened the shimmering blue vest, though not enough for Tail to go free.

“I’m very sorry, Tail. Let’s get through this, a couple

hours, and it will be done. Then you can have all the chalk you want. Maybe even some paint.”

Tail relaxed. They had a deal.

Down, down, down they went. The Northwest Tower, the highest in Castle Albion, was a long way from the Feasting Hall. Oberon could not remember the last time that he was there or the last time there was a feast.

It was a beautiful night, clear and full of stars, so Oberon cut through the Throne Grove to the Feasting Hall on the southeast side. Even the oldest parts of the castle appeared new with the decorations placed to impress the Kalifians.

It was some time since guests gathered in the Throne Grove and signs of the day's commotion were everywhere. The ground was covered with footsteps and small birds were picking their way through the litter looking for food.

Behind the Throne Tree, on the Northern side, were the trees planted for the royal family. Each tree stood as a living memory of Oberon's family, every one of them who was born, lived, and died in the castle.

It was the custom of all Albions, of royal or common birth, to grow a tree in each child's name in the hopes that someday it might be planted in the Throne Grove. Warriors of great valor, saints who worked miracles, poets and singers, adventurers and explorers, even jesters famous for lewd satire, could be found among the trees. The trees were decorated on holidays and gifts were laid at their roots. The superstitious believed they were an antenna for speaking to the departed and the irreverent would carve slurs in their bark. The Throne Grove a living monument to Albion's past.

From his books and many late nights sneaking about, Oberon knew the namesake of every tree and the legends that went with them, but on that night, he only stopped to look at his own tree.

Beyond his parents and besides his brother's tree was a

thin, frail sapling. The little oak tree was an inch shorter than he was, smooth of bark, with wisps of branches that couldn't hold the smallest icicle. A good tug could separate its roots from the soil and it would be lost forever.

Merowech's tree was crooked and strong with pointed needles befitting a desert pine and the hard-footed birds that sit upon them. It bent at the bottom and the shadow it cast blocked Oberon's tree. This was not intentional for "*trees are trees and grow as they please*" as their nursery rhyme went, but much was written in Oberon's books about the magic within them and the fates they predicted.

If a nest of wrens was built in a tree, it meant great fortune, while a woodpecker's arrival was considered a curse. A broken branch could foretell injury, and a squirrel taking up residence meant that a children would soon be born. Oberon's mother's tree was once home to a nest of bees that many in Albion believed signaled her untimely death.

Oberon stood before his tree measuring it to see if it had grown since his last visit. He dreamt of the day that it would stand as tall as the others, but feared that it would not endure. Not everyone's did.

According to the Albion custom the Kalfians brought a tree for the princess to plant beside Merowech's. Oberon wondered what kind of tree it was and if it would outlive his own. Would it be one of their famed olive trees who fruit was sweet in winter and spiced in summer? Or had she done as his mother had and brought a tree that would survive among the evergreens and grow alongside her husbands?

Would the Princess' tree finally block the last of the sun from Oberon's tree? Were Oberon and his tree doomed to live forever in the shadows? And what of Tail? Did Tail and Oberon share his tree, or was Tail a weed that grew in his roots? Or was Tail a branch that balanced him and made him strong?

Oberon shook his head. This was all so foolish. *A tree is just a tree.*

Through its stained glass windows, the Feasting Hall glowed more brightly than Oberon remembered it, the long-neglected chandeliers ablaze with a thousand new candles. There was a joyful chit-chat rumbling below the herald's announcements of each and every lord and lady in Albion. There was food, music, and maybe even dancing if Oberon were brave enough to enter the hall.

High in the tower he rehearsed his entrance a million times. He practiced his walk, with his shoulders back and his head held high. He called out every syllable of his name as his imaginary herald would. "It's *him*" the ladies would say. "It's really *him*."

Oberon stood between his parent's trees, each as wide as man and as tall as twenty, and stretched out his arms in either direction, wishing he could touch both trunks at the same time. He pushed his feet down into the dirt, feeling for roots, wondering his parents were with him at that moment.

"If you can hear me, or see me, please, help me. Not just for me, but for Merowech, and for all of Albion. I promise I'll do my best to make you proud."

Oberon listened to the trees, for something. Anything.

There was no answer.

A tree is just a tree.

“Oberon, Prince of Albion!” called the Herald. The words hung still and choked in his throat. The Herald had not seen Oberon before and believed he never would.

There were neither gasps nor cheers in the Feasting Hall, not a single guest repeated Oberon’s name as he long imagined. There was only the silence that hundreds of staring eyes make at once, the same sound great pyramids make on still days. It was the sound of weight, stillness, and fascination.

The guests stared, for none but Merowech or the Wizard Randor had ever seen the prince. For those who imagined him to be only a boy, he was tall and mature. To those accustomed to Merowech’s strapping frame, Oberon looked small. Some noticed his mother’s high cheekbones and others noticed his father’s eyes. But as Oberon made his way through the Feasting Hall to the head table, the thing that *no one* noticed was his tail.

Tail knew the importance of this moment, perhaps better than any flesh and blood person in the Feasting Hall and so

Tail remained still, roundly coiled beneath the shimmering blue vest. He helped Oberon to walk with his shoulders back and his head held high, as comfortable and confident as ever. Oberon thanked Tail in his mind, knowing that Tail was listening.

The head table stood above the others with a space cleared in front for the night's entertainment and the receiving of guests. Merowech and Joan sat at the center, facing out into the Hall. They had not spoken a single word since they were first seated.

To Joan's right was her father, King Camilo, who sat next to the Governess Luperca. On Merowech's side were the Wizard Randor and then Dr. Jal'al. There was no setting for Oberon, but this did not surprise him. Merowech and the Wizard were sure Oberon would not find the courage to attend.

Joan marveled at the prince walking towards her. Beneath the shimmering vest, the envy of all in attendance, there a gentleness and grace to Oberon's gait and a sweet sadness to his face. She thought of him as a jungle cat kept too long in captivity that forgot how to hunt. Oberon's face was strikingly familiar. She would never mistake him for anyone, or anyone for him.

"He doesn't look like a fairy" Joan whispered to her father.

"Do you know what fairies look like?" he answered.

King Camilo took his daughter's hand beneath the table and squeezed it. As brave as his daughter was, she had much to learn. People were not always people and fairies were not always fairies. No one is ever just one thing, and anyone, or anything can become a monster.

"Soon, he will be your brother." The last word hung in her head. Brother. She had lost three and would now gain one. The joining of families can be very strange mathematics.

The Wizard Randor pursed his pale, pink lips with tense

frustration. King Camilo had many choices for his daughter's suitor. The wars between Albion and Kalif turned the River Nahal red for centuries and none before Camilo would broker peace. Only now, with their respective countries crippled by the Fairy Flu, could progress be made. Oberon, strutting down the aisle with his Tail behind his back, might very well ruin it all.

"What do I do?" whispered Merowech into his cup as he drank, hiding his words from anyone who might be listening, particularly Joan beside him.

"I... I don't know, your highness." The Wizard was sure that Oberon would be too scared to face the Feast. For this reason alone Oberon was never locked in the tower, a choice the Wizard was now regretting.

Joan's ears were too sharp to miss the exchange, the first of many times she would be underestimated by Merowech. For the first time, she thought of herself as a queen and asked herself what a queen might do.

"Seat Prince Oberon beside me, if you please, so that I might come to know my new brother" Joan declared for all to hear.

There it was again, that word: brother. Who could refuse her? Her father beamed with pride.

Merowech clapped twice, wrongly thinking this the appropriate manner for calling wait staff. They were already fetching the chair.

"Set a place for my brother next to my bride!" he barked in his practiced regal tone.

The Albion waiters, as respected as their trees were tall, had a chair in place before Oberon reached the table and a place setting before he was seated. Only King Camilo stood for Oberon as he was seated, a gesture of regal kindness and manners that Oberon would never forget.

Standing at the table, Oberon looked out over the guests,

smiled, and raised his cup to the room and offered a toast in a clear voice that few heard before.

“To the bride, Jarocasta of Kalif, her father King Camilo, and the entire Kingdom of Kalif, to my brother Merowech, to the Kingdom of Albion, and a lasting, loving peace between us I offer the toast of Stronash, Kalif’s famous warrior poet: *‘Spill not blood, spill not wine, only love from your heart and mine.’*”

The toast was perfect and received with a smashing of glasses that spilled great amounts of wine, despite what the words of the toast suggested.

The guests smiled and returned to their conversations, warmed by Oberon’s words. As he sat, Tail shifted to make room, a strange shimmy that was noticed by both Joan and her father.

“I did not know that you were familiar with Kalifian poetry,” asked Joan, breaking the ice.

“What do you know about me?” Oberon responded in earnest, though it was not received that way by the Princess.

“Only that your parents would be very proud of you” interjected King Camilo, before the moment became awkward.

“Oberon loves his books!” said Merowech. “Can’t get enough of them. Ask him something. Anything! I bet he’s read a book about it. He hasn’t done anything or seen anything, but if it’s in the pages of a book...”

The Wizard tapped Merowech with his elbow, hoping he would stop.

“There will be time for a great many discussions, I’m sure,” said King Camilo, noting how uncomfortable Oberon was with Merowech’s tone.

“A book taught you how to make that shiny vest, didn’t it?” asked Merowech.

Tail shifted again, and so did Oberon.

“Yes. Many books. And trial and error and...” Oberon trailed off, thinking of all the help Tail had given. It was Tail that held the fish eyelets so he could crack them. It was Tail’s scrimshaw that gave the vest its beautiful designs. It was Tail’s company that kept him from going mad in the Northwest Tower.

Joan took a closer look at the vest. She could tell that it was light and impenetrable. She wanted one for herself.

“You made it on your own? It is exceptional” she asked.

Tail jerked beneath the vest, wishing to stand tall and accept the praise he so richly deserved. Oberon tightened the vest.

“Yes. I did it on my own” he answered.

Tail relaxed completely, leaving Oberon to feel as if there were no tail at all.

“Not completely on your own, eh brother?”

“Leave him be, Merowech.” It troubled the Wizard that the Crown Prince seemed determined to humiliate his younger brother.

Merowech turned with a huff and, ignoring his silverware, tore into a venison steak with his hands and teeth. The Governess Luperca gasped audibly at the act. Is this what had become of Albion manners?

Joan could not turn away from Oberon. Though she knew the guests of the feast were watching her every move, she was drawn to the mystery of Oberon, and revolted by his brother. Oberon returned her attention.

“Do you enjoy reading books, your Highness?” Oberon asked, hoping to find common ground between them.

“I suppose. I admit it’s been some time since I’ve read one. I’ve been given many books to study, but have not chosen many on my own.”

"That's too bad," said Oberon. "What subjects do you prefer? There are books on every topic you can imagine! From studies of antelopes all the way down to the manufacturing of zippers." Oberon became very excited talking about books.

"What is a zipper?" asked King Camilo.

"A fantastic invention! There are two rows of teeth with a wedge between them. As one draws the wedge to and fro, the teeth lock and unlock. A zipper can join parts of a tunic or seal closed a saddle bag. Wonderful things!" Oberon turned back toward Joan. "Books don't need to be practical either. The very best books, I think, don't have any practical purpose at all. They are funny or sad or take you somewhere you've never been, or maybe, somewhere no one can go, a place that is only imagined."

"I've never read a book like that," said Joan, feeling a bit cheated by her Governess. The books she ever read were about how to be a good princess.

Merowech, his mouth full of venison, interrupted: "He means *FAIRY STORIES*. Obi just loves *fairy stories*." He leaned across Joan, pointing his finger at his brother. "Don't you?"

If a pin dropped to the floor of the Feasting Hall, you would not be able to hear it. Not because of the silence, but because Oberon's steak knife was stabbed into the table with such force that it twanged like a tuning fork.

Oberon looked at his two empty hands and realized that it was Tail's bushy tip holding the knife. Tail swayed serpent-like between Oberon and the knife's hilt for all to see.

"Tail! Stop!" Oberon insisted, grabbing Tail. He realized that Tail could have escaped at his leisure and Merowech had chosen the moment. Tail yanked the knife from the table and held it aloft, threatening all in striking distance.

Before Oberon could tame him, Tail encircled Joan and held the knife to her throat, pulling her and Oberon together away from the table. Fear and panic engulfed the Feasting Hall.

Oberon and Tail had never taken a hostage before that day and Joan was never held hostage. The attendees of the feast were never party to a hostage crisis either, so once Tail held the steak knife to Joan's neck, everyone present was at a loss with regard to what should happen next.

There was screaming and yelling, pushing and shoving, and all manners of confusions. It was clear to Oberon that they needed to get out of the Feasting Hall before someone was hurt.

Merowech swung his own steak knife at his brother, hoping to finally be free of the cursed tail. He missed, striking the empty chair. By the time he recovered they were gone.

Joan was taller and stronger than Oberon, and may have disarmed Tail, but she was so surprised by the situation that she backpedaled with them into the servant's hallway and then the kitchen beyond. The cooks and servants abandoned their work as the calamity of spilled food and clanking stock pots rang over the tiled floors.

Joan's eyes darted from stove to counter in search of a means to defend herself, pawing the surfaces around her until she found what she thought to be the tip of a rolling pin. It was a carrot. Turning the orange sword on her captors she was surprised by Tail's great dexterity as he sliced the carrot into neat medallions with the panache and expertise of a swashbuckler.

Beyond the kitchen were storerooms, and beyond the storerooms were the servants quarters. Past the servants quarters was a dead end. If Oberon carried on in that direction he would be cornered like a rat. That simply wouldn't do.

"I'm sorry, Princess. I..." Tail loosened his grip, dropping the knife. It was over.

"We need a horse" Joan gasped, getting her voice back.

"A horse?"

Tail turned the princess around, making a bridge between them.

"I don't want to marry your brother and now *you*, both of you, are criminals. Show me to fast horse or we are all doomed!"

Tail released Joan but remained raised between them. Oberon was too shocked to speak.

"OBERON! We need a horse!" She was fierce and decisive. The red in her cheeks was giving way to the red of her allergic rash.

"Are you ok?" asked Oberon.

"HORSE!"

Tail pointed the way and off they went, not to the stables, for that would be the first place to look for them, but to the grain mill behind the kitchen. There, Albion's greatest horse was chained to a wheel. Her name was Buttons.

Though he could see her from his tower window, Oberon often snuck into the mill to marvel at Buttons, so called for the black spots on her white coat. She was twenty-six hands

tall, too large for any tack or saddle, and refused to be ridden by any who dared to break her.

Due to her obstinance, Buttons was chained to the mill wheel where she ground the finest flour that made the best bread, cakes, and cookies the world has thus or will ever see. She hated that wheel and fought it every step, longing for freedom, her lone comfort was the ventilation window that looked up to the Northwest Tower, and the boy who looked down upon her.

Joan could not believe her eyes. As she placed her hand on Buttons' snout the noble mare snorted like a thundercloud. Once Oberon and Tail had freed her from her yolk, Buttons reared back onto her hind legs then slammed back to the earth, shaking every bone in Joan's body. Buttons thrashed in the wheel room in fury and anger, ready to destroy those who had imprisoned her.

Joan held her hands wide and summoned the deep quiet within herself. She silenced the rash of her allergy, slowed her breath, and spoke with the still voice of her heart. She spoke with the internal voice that horses hear. Buttons stared deep into Joan's eyes. The Princess did not know if she was going to be licked or trampled.

Rearing again onto her hind legs, each as wide and tall as a man, Buttons waved her hooves in the air, then came down upon mill with such power that the wood shattered. Dust clouded the room and splinters rained down upon the floor. When the air cleared Buttons was kneeling before Joan, her head laid on the ground and eyes closed.

"I can't ride a horse. I've never ridden a horse" Oberon stammered.

"Good thing I have."

Joan climbed onto Button's back and pulled Oberon behind her. Tail swept around them both as a belt and secured the riders together. With Joan's hands in her mane,

Buttons took a last look at her prison then knocked down the mill's stone wall in a single stride.

The knights that gave chase that day abandoned their pursuit before Buttons breached the castle walls, knowing they would never catch her. The guards upon the walls held their weapons still and jaws slack as the white mare with black dots tore the castle's gate from its bricked hinges.

Looking back at Castle Albion, Oberon wondered if he would ever see it again. He looked at his room in the Northwest Tower and imagined the clock hanging from the window. He wondered what time it was. It would be nice to know when they left so he could know just how long he'd been gone.

It was then, leaving home for the first time on a horse that could not be tamed, with a woman that he did not know, that Oberon noticed how time could slow down, and if it wanted, stop altogether. And if time stretched and stalled as it pleased, what was the point of having a clock?

It didn't matter, Oberon was sure he would never see the castle again.

Persephone knew something was wrong from the moment she and Joan were separated in Castle Albion.

The journey was long, but not her first one hooded, tied, and riding in a carriage. She was carried by other handlers than the Princess or the old man who manned the Kalifian roost, but never for long and only for her own convenience. She was rarely without human company, which she preferred.

To her great displeasure, Persephone was taken from the carriage and kept with the Albion hawks in a mew next to the royal stables. It took her only a moment upon being chained to her perch to count and classify the raptors beside her. Her presence made the seven other birds fluttered uncomfortably, each by their own size and rhythm.

The mew was presided over by an Eagle Owl that was thrice her size and unhooded. It waited for the others to flit and squawk before spreading its wings and flapping them a single time, sending a great whoosh of air through the mew.

The others were a peregrine, two red tails, a gyrfalcon,

and the kestrel beside her. They sounded healthy, well fed, exercised, and accustomed to each other's company.

Persephone stayed in mews before, but not often and not for long. Joan once thought it important to socialize her with other birds, but soon realized that her own company was the only concern and that hawks prefer killing to kindness.

So little did Persephone care for the company of the Albion hawks that as soon as the door to the mew was closed she formulated a plan for her escape that entailed the orderly dispatching of her noisy bunkmates. First, she would have to pull off her hood.

Prior to that day the hood was a comfort to her, so much so that she would lift it for Joan to place over her head so that she could rest her busy eyes. To behold the world as a hawk, to see so much at so great distance is an exhausting privilege and Persephone liked to relax, rejuvenate, and consider her own thoughts. She could not recall when she first wore a hood, but she could not remember a life before Joan either.

On flights through the woods, Persephone saw other goshawks and their nests. She knew that she was free once, that she had her own mother and father, but her every memory belonged with Joan.

Joan could walk before they met, but walking is easy. They learned to fly together. They learned to hunt together. When Joan's brothers passed, they mourned together. From then on they slept in the same room.

Little by little Persephone picked at the leather hood with her beak, pulling it forward a scratch at a time. With no errors or slippage, she would be free of it by the next afternoon. Picking the chain from her perch would take longer, but not more than two days. Killing the other hawks would be a messy business, especially the eagle owl. Her plan was to leave one bird alive, the gyrfalcon, and then lay dead with her

chain loose upon her. When the falconer entered to rescue the gyrfalcon, she would fly away.

It was a gruesome and tricky plan, but all those born in confinement are. Just as Buttons desired her freedom, Persephone longed to be with Joan. Anyone or anything between them was in harm's way. She would be tireless in her efforts, for she loved Joan more than anyone. Anyone but her father.

The stables were alive with the mounting of horses and rattling of arms, so much so that Persephone failed to hear the mew door open. Hawks are not known for their hearing, it is why they scream so loudly at each other, which is exactly what they did when King Camilo entered.

"Persephone..."

From the tone of the King's voice Persephone knew that something terrible had happened. She fluttered and yanked her chain until her foot bled. The King caught her, held her by her snare, and took her by glove out of the mew. Forty-three paces and twenty-three steps later he removed her hood.

Persephone and King were atop Castle Albion's Southern wall, facing towards their home in Kalif. Riders with both Albion and Kalfian banners galloped away from the castle with hunting hounds beside them.

Persephone knew at once that Joan was gone.

The world is made of many forces, light and dark, good and evil, magic and mundane, and no one knows them all quite as well as birds. They know when to flee danger and when to take comfort in their nests. They can map their migrations by the distant poles and if their beloved is missing, as it was for Persephone, there is nothing to keep them from finding it.

Persephone knew where Joan was deep within her heart. She would feel her as she flew and know when she was getting

closer and when she was further away. She would not stop until she was home, and home was upon Joan's wrist.

King Camilo stroked Persephone's feathers but said nothing. There was no need. He released the snare on her foot and Persephone took to flight.

Wherever Joan was she needed her hawk, and in that moment, Persephone was all the King could provide.

Merowech was using whichever weapon was closest at hand to destroy the castle's furniture. This was of little concern to anyone but the Kalifians, for it happened so often that local carpenters worked throughout the year to keep Castle Albion appointed. The once ornate furnishings, save a few rooms, were replaced with roughly assembled facsimiles that were easily replaced, difficult to destroy, and usually uncomfortable. The Governess Luperca turned her nose up at every piece, but not more so than she did at Merowech's temper.

"How dare he?!" Merowech split an armchair with a mace then, nearly hitting himself in the backswing, tried to split it again. "We are celebrating *my birthday!* Does he not care that is *my birthday!*?"

"Your birthday was last week, your highness. But in a larger sense, yes, I'm sure Oberon knows that this grim, hostile act will affect your marriage and thus your coronation" said the Wizard.

"He is *mad*. That *thing* of his has taken over."

Unable to free the mace from the chair, Merowech swung

the two together, smashing them into a crudely built table upon which lay many more maces.

Dr. Jal'al, who was watching the Prince for some time, joined the conversation: "There is no conclusive proof, medically or scientifically, that being a fairy contributes in any way to one's psychology. Neither positively or negatively."

"What does that even mean? If it is 'neither positively' that means *negatively!*" said Merowech. He now held a mace in each hand and was swinging them in all directions, unable to exhaust his anger.

"I saw the tail as you did, Doctor," said Governess Luperca, "it would have killed the princess to facilitate its own escape. She may be dead already."

"She is not dead," said the Wizard. "Neither Oberon nor his tail are killers."

"And how do you know that?" she retorted.

"Because he is a *Prince of Albion!*"

"Then what will he do with her?" The Governess was nearing panic.

It was then that King Camilo arrived. Having released Persephone he stopped in the kitchen to make sandwich for himself and plate of meat and cheese for the others.

Due to the night's events he had not eaten, nor had anyone else, and he was the only person wise enough to know that an empty stomach makes for an empty mind. He needed his wits about him and could not abide the other minds and stomachs being empty either.

"Put down the weapons, boy, and clean off this table."

Merowech's jaw, as well as the two maces, hit the floor. He was not accustomed to being spoken to with such authority. He did as he was told. It was clear that Merowech needed such guidance and that he had not received it in many years.

King Camilo laid the plate on the table and encouraged the others to eat. He took a deep breath and bit into his

sandwich. It was made of the Kalifian venison brought for the feast and at least for one moment, his stomach felt at home.

AS THE OTHERS ATE KING CAMILO SURVEYED THE ROOM and concluded that the Albions were intent on pursuing the fugitives as far as the Fairy Swamps, where surely they were headed. There would be an incursion to rescue the princess, and when the fairies did not willingly turn her over, there would be war. Why? Because Merowech longed for war.

King Camilo cared only for his daughter's safe return but could see that great danger lie ahead for them all.

"Tonight we will eat and rest if we can. There is nothing more to be done or to discuss. Our best riders, Kalifian and Albion, are in pursuit of the prince and princess."

"He is *no* prince!" said the Governess.

"I have seen his eyes and he is no less royal than I am!"

"It is not less," said Dr. Jal'al, "that concerns them. He is more. Much more. They fear him because he is a fairy."

"I'm not afraid of Oberon," said Merowech, his mouth flush with meat.

"So be it. If there is nothing to be afraid of, then we may all get a good night's sleep and expect their return in the morning. I needn't be reminded again that my daughter left here at the point of a knife."

"If they aren't back by tomorrow I'll hunt them down myself," said Merowech. He hadn't listened to a word the King said.

The King took Merowech by the arm, pulling him aside.

"My daughter and your brother are not game to be hunted, boy. If you wish to marry her, to be a king, then you must act like one."

When he released Merowech's arm the King paused for a moment to look into Merowech's eye's, taking the measure of

his would-be son-in-law. Merowech was confused, frustrated, frightened, and dangerous. His eyes were wild, like a wolf that never hunted in a pack and did not know his place nor how to accomplish anything bigger than himself. A lone wolf cannot drag down a moose.

“I am going to bed,” said King Camilo, “and I suggest you do the same.”

With that, the King left, but he did not go to bed as he said he would. He returned to the kitchen to make another sandwich. His sandwich so impressed the Albion cooks that Camilo made sandwiches for them as well. After helping the staff wash the pile of dishes left from the feast, he joined them in the servant’s quarters for strong ale and cards.

He lost every hand. The servants knew that he was doing so on purpose, but allowed the King to gamble away his robes and jewelry. He even allowed the servants to take turns wearing his crown as they dealt. Together they laughed and told stories until late in the night.

The King slept soundly on an empty servant’s cot without a single worry for his daughter, for he knew in his heart that she left of her own accord.

The Fairy Swamp lay in the vast delta at the mouth of the Nahal River that ran down from the mountains and divided Albion from Kalif. The interconnected waterways of the swamp could not be mapped. The waterways changed often and mapmakers, a studious, academic bunch, hate more than anything to be told they are wrong, so no map of the Fairy Swamp was ever made. Everything was in constant movement and the weather could change in an instant.

The trees of the swamp were as tall and mobile as sailing ships. Often bored and restless, the trees would pick up their roots and float or walk to a new location with better soil, water, and more or less sunshine. Some trees sought the company of their own kind, creating a vast canopy that would be the envy of the finest cathedral. Others mixed and mingled as they saw fit, climbing up, over, and through each other until no plant could be recognized from the other. There were ugly vines famous for their medicinal properties and beautiful flowers that could kill with a single touch.

There were flies as big as eagles and bears as small and

numerous as wrens. Every species of reptile hunted the waters and camouflaged themselves as plants. Industrious land mammals built airtight shelters beneath the waters and enormously fattened sea cows climbed high into the trees. The birds could swim and the fish could fly and everything ate everything else.

The Fairy Swamp was ancient but always new, dangerous and inviting, and no one in their right minds ever went there. Luckily, Oberon, Tail, Joan, and Buttons were not in their right minds.

There was no discussion between them about where they would go. The matter was clear as Buttons' mighty gallop took them south out of Castle Albion. They could not cross the River Nahal into Kalif, they would be recognized and apprehended at the water's edge. They could not go east to the mountains without supplies or preparation, nor could they go west into the sea without a ship. They would go to the Fairy Swamp to seek refuge and new lives of their own.

The Fairy Swamp did not have a definite beginning or end, but once the earth turned to boot-stealing mud, they knew they had arrived. After a night of outrunning slow horses, they found themselves in a deep, wet wood where only the birds atop the trees could see the rising sun.

Oberon hoped his library of knowledge would finally be of use, but the colorful pictures he remembered were inaccurate compared to what he saw. To Joan the swamp was an opportunity to demonstrate her abilities as well. There were traps to set, weapons to fashion, and shelters to build, but she was soon aware that she was the prey, not the hunter. Tail swung from side to side grasping at everything in reach, because Tail loved trouble and trouble was everywhere. Buttons stomped through the swamp with an uncontainable joy of muddy freedom.

Yanking her hooves from each hole and squashing them

down into the next, Buttons sprayed and flung mud with joyful abandon. She dirtied her white snout in the dark slime and spit the dirty water out with her lips. She sniffed exotic flowers and tasted different grasses. She laughed at the fish stirring in the water and when it was deep enough, splashed around with them. Buttons was so safe and sturdy a swimmer that Oberon and Joan could have served tea on her back.

Unfortunately, they had no tea. They had no cakes or sandwiches or nice platters to serve them on either. Since their last meal had been interrupted, which Joan brought up more than once, food became the center of conversation that morning.

There were no hand pies, ice cream, lemonade, potatoes baked or mashed, or even any of the things they did not like, liver and old cabbage, which they would have happily taken over their empty stomachs. Once they found a dry spot next to a large clean pool of water, they sat down to fish.

In a matter of minutes, they were fast asleep.

They did not fall asleep because they were tired, though they were very tired, and they did not fall asleep because they were hungry, though they were certainly that. They fell fast asleep because of the two sleeping dragonflies that bit Oberon and Joan and twenty that bit Buttons.

The laziest of all insects, sleeping dragonflies love the deep, peaceful kind of sleep that comes on a warm afternoon when chores must be ignored and the only thing to wake you is an even warmer breeze. Being the cuddle bugs that they are, sleeping dragonflies prefer the safety and shelter of a warm body. Once bitten, they will wait for their victims to fall fast asleep and then find a warm corner to sleep in. The best places to locate a "sleeper," as they are known, is in an armpit, behind the ear, or at the back of a bent knee.

The sleepers that bit them did not arrive on their own. They were released in secret by Jacquimo, a swamp man who

was following them since Buttons first wet her hooves. They did not see him because they were not looking for him, but those who did look for him were never successful. Jacquimo was impossible to find.

Jacquimo wore a floor-length coat that was made of leaves that changed colors by the second instead of the season. The green skin of his face was covered with mud and his nose was wide and flat, making it possible for him to lie as motionless like a crocodile. He laid so still that he was only inches away from them when he removed the jar of sleepers from his coat and released them into the air.

Once they were asleep, Jacquimo emerged from the water to search for useful things, finding his victims to be strangely unprepared. Save the largest horse he, or anyone, ever saw, they were defenseless against the swamp. Reaching Oberon, he rolled the prince over looking for something to take, possibly the shimmering blue vest he was wearing. All he found was Tail. A fairy tail.

With a deep sigh, Jacquimo rolled Oberon back into a comfortable position, returned his sleepers to their jar, and watched over the travelers as they got a good days sleep. He passed the time fishing and picking his banjo, which fit by some strange magic into his coat.

The fish could not resist Jacquimo's song. It was an ancient song in an ancient tongue, that only he and swamp people spoke. It made the fish jump and skip upon the water as if they were in a square dance, leading them one at a time onto his hook.

The smell of roasting fish reached Oberon's nose first, then his stomach, and then finally he opened his eyes. Tail lifted and swayed behind him in a lazy circle and then flopped back to the soft earth. Jacquimo nodded to him, acknowledging that he was awake, and returned to spicing the fish with jars of herbs from his leaf jacket.

Jacquimo waved Oberon to sit beside him at the fire. Oberon was cautious, he'd never seen anyone like Jacquimo before, but then again, he hadn't seen much of anything.

Joining Jacquimo at the warm coals, Oberon marveled at the roasting fish. Its teeth were as big as his fingers and its eyes were as big as his fists. It was laid skin-side down and filled with vegetables that smelled like carrots and onions but looked like cacti.

"You's hungry," said Jacquimo, poking the coals with his bare finger.

"I'm fine" responded the Prince, simultaneously polite and afraid.

"Stomach ain't. Growls 'n growls. Scarin' da fish!"

Jacquimo laughed hard, in a manner that Oberon had never heard. It started way up in his nose and then petered off, ending deep in the bones of his feet. “Hahaaaaaaa! Quiet’em down stomach!”

Jacquimo cradled the fish with a thick leaf and offered it to Oberon with both hands, saying a quiet prayer as he did.

The fish was spiced red and orange and unlike anything Oberon had seen or tasted. He’d eaten a lifetime’s worth of flying fish, but it was always steamed, unseasoned, and bland. The first bite he took of Jacquimo’s fish was full of flavor and spice. It burned his mouth. Oberon coughed, waking both Joan and Buttons.

“Is gooo-OOO-ood! No? Wakes a spirit ‘n burns dem bugs!” Jacquimo laughed. Before Oberon could drink a handful of swamp water Jacquimo knocked it out of his hand..

“Drinkin’s dyin’ E’ry kind of squiggidly no-see-um innit!” Jacquimo offered Oberon a jar from his pocket instead. It tasted of sweet cream and blueberries and calmed the fire on his tongue.

Joan pretended to still be asleep. If she could surprise the swamp man, she might be able to pin him and escape.

“Playin’ a possum won’t be no good, girly! Hahaaaaa!” Jacquimo didn’t turn to look at her. “Now you come eat... or be eaten.” He flashed her his jagged teeth, filled another shoot of grass with fish and gave it to Joan with two hands and the same prayer.

Jacquimo watched them eat and drink, his attention on Tail.

“You’s fairy” he pointed a long fingernail at Oberon then Joan. “You’s ain’t.”

“We’re just... passing through,” said Joan, “on our way to Kalif.” She made the mistake of lying when she was scared.

“I’d eat liars whole, but them lies get in ya. Say truth or I

let the biters 'n scratchers have ya.” He tossed a piece of fish into the water. It boiled with the snaps of matchbook-sized turtles whose claws were as sharp as their beaks.

“I’m Oberon and this is Jarocasta. We’re on the run.”

“Joan” she added. “Call me Joan.”

“On the run?! You means sleep! Hahaaaa!” Jacquimo shook the jar of sleepers in front of them. “Jacquimo is *my* name. Now, you run ‘cause your fairy and she runs cause she’s yours?”

“I belong to no man,” said Joan, arching her tone.

“No one belongs to no one ‘cept death and death can’t have Jacquimo! Tried to buy me a thousand times! Hahaaaa! All I means is that you here ‘cause him ‘n that Tail. Is plain to see!”

“She’s our hostage,” said Oberon.

“Hostage? Doubt it. Hahaaaa!” Jacquimo rolled onto his back and held his knees. “So you do belong ta him! Hostage?!” Jars of all kinds fell out of his coat.

“I can leave whenever I want!” Joan protested.

Jacquimo gathered himself, tucking the jars back into his leaf jacket.

“Be calm, girly. Jacquimo jus love a laugh. That boy ain’t got a hostage. Plain ta see that as you ain’t goin’ Kalif. The vest is Albion, ain’t it? You’s lost or you’s hidin’”

“We don’t know where we are going. We can’t go home” said Oberon.

“Old swamp sayin: ‘Closed mouth can’t be fed.’ Seein’ you ate, you’d ask for help if ya need it.”

“Will you help us, Jacquimo?” said Oberon.

“Please?” added Joan.

“Thanks for askin’!” The swamp people believed that every person one helped in this life would be there to help you in the next, and although Jacquimo was sure that death

would never find him, he'd take all the help he could get. "We go ta Mercya. Float right on there."

"Mercya? Isn't it dangerous?" Joan heard stories of Mercya since she was young. All children were told scary stories of Mercya. It was where parents threatened to send naughty children.

"Whole world's dangerous, but not Mercya. Food, music, magic. Fairy city and ain't no danger fairy. Scary fairy, sure. Hairy fairy, HA! Buncha them. Mercya nice as being kissed twice. We float right on there. You's be home there."

Jacquimo took a big breath and slipped into the water without causing a ripple. He was under the tree for some time before the little patch of dirt shook violently, sending Buttons into a panic. Unsure of her footing, she circled the tree.

Jacquimo's head popped up out of the water.

"Stop that steed from stompin' an rockin'! Hahaaaa!"

Joan did her best to comfort Buttons as Jacquimo dislodged the tree's roots, setting the island afloat.

Kicking his flat, bare feet, Jacquimo fluttered the island downstream towards Mercya. From time to time he would break into song, even rolling onto his back to pick his banjo where the current ran fast enough. The songs, at least those that Oberon could understand, were lists of ingredients to his favorite recipes, directions to his friend's houses, what food they served, and those recipes as well.

"I'm sorry for kidnapping you, Princess," Oberon said when there was a break in the music.

"I accept your apology, but it wasn't *all* your fault."

Tail flitted about, waving at Joan.

"He's my Tail and my responsibility. We would never hurt you or anyone else. I promise."

"That's not a promise you can keep, Oberon. People get

hurt. Sometimes by accident and sometimes on purpose. All the promises in the world can't stop that."

"I promise to try. And if everyone tried, all at once, who knows what might happen?"

Joan looked at Oberon's wide, innocent eyes and thought about how little those eyes had seen stuck up in that tall tower. She liked how naive he was and hoped it could remain.

"Let's be friends," said Oberon. "You could be my first one!" He meant this as a joke, but then realized that it was true.

"You're my first friend too." said Joan.

She offered him her hand the two shook hands. Tail joined in, wrapping his bristles around their hands like a big hairy glove. Buttons neighed, for she too had never had a friend, and Jacquimo laughed because he was friends with everyone and laughed at everything.

After a sizable lunch, Merowech spent the afternoon chasing Angus the shepherd boy around the arena with no success.

Angus was happy to oblige the crown prince for a second goat, but Merowech was so tired from his lunch that he could not run at all. He followed Angus around the arena at a snail's pace, waiting for the boy to stop so he could swing his dull ax to no affect, and then follow him again.

With little to do besides await word from the riders, King Camilo, the Governess Luperca, and Dr. Jal'al watched the spectacle from the catwalk above. For the first hours, they cheered for Angus to evade the prince, but seeing how mismatched the battle was, they turned to cheering for the underdog.

"Corner the boy! Stalk him and stay wide!" said King Camilo.

"Maybe you'd like to try, King..." wheezed Merowech, dropping his ax and then himself to the ground.

"The insolence of that boy. Once they are married I shall make his manners my primary concern" said the Governess.

“You’ve done such an excellent job with the Princess. You’ll surely be a success” taunted Dr. Jal’al.

The King called down to Merowech: “I would be honored to face such a worthy adversary.”

“You’ll break yourself and the royal lineage with you!” protested the Governess.

“Such is my right, Governess!” The King leaped from the catwalk to the ground below, somersaulting out of the fall in spectacular fashion.

“He’s crafty, that shepherd boy. I hope you lop his head off.” Merowech thrust his ax into the King’s hands.

“Do I get a third goat for besting you, m’lord?” Angus asked from atop a small training wall where he balanced on one foot.

“I shall do you one better. You shall have an entire flock. The sheep of Kalif are the finest in the world!” said the King.

“Pssh. I mean no disrespect, King, but...” Angus danced a jig on the wall and sang:

*“Ain’t no sheep like Albion sheep
Her wool is fine and her milk is sweet
No grass too tough, no hill too steep
Ain’t no sheep like Albion sheep.”*

“WELL, PERHAPS YOU ARE RIGHT! THEY CERTAINLY HAVE A nice song.” The King returned the ax to the wall with the other weapons.

“Pick anyone ya like, sire! Two if ya want!”

The King reviewed the weapons, their polished steel glimmering in the afternoon sun. With his back to Angus and fifty paces away, King Camilo took up a sword and turned it in his

hand, watching the shepherd boy in the blade's reflection. As the blade turned, a beam of light danced across his dark tunic. Camilo smiled.

"Whenever you're ready, your high..."

The King stepped clear of the beam of light, sending the glare directly into Angus' eyes.

The shepherd boy lost his balance, and fell from the wall. In an instant, the King was upon him, his boot resting upon the young boy's chest, the sword above him.

"Uncle! Uncle!" Angus shouted.

The King lifted him off the ground and patted him on the shoulder.

"It was a good effort boy, but the folly of youth will never overcome the wit and wisdom of age," said the King.

The shepherd boy bowed deeply at his waist.

"Ya sure is a crafty one! Learned something from ya!" said Angus, smiling.

"Take the goat you won from the prince and see yourself home."

Angus smiled, picked out the very best goat, and returned to the hills, stopping to tell every person he met how the King of Kalif bested him with a flash of light.

Merowech could not believe what he saw. He never learned the clever way of doing things. He believed any manner beside strength and force to be cowardly. He hated weakness and did not understand the power that comes with forethought and gentleness.

King Camilo again put a hand on his shoulder, a gesture Merowech was coming to hate. The King was not his father and soon they would be equals. Until he married Princess Jarocasta the King was just another man from Kalif, Albion's sworn enemy.

"If you chase a dog, it runs," said King Camilo, noting that Merowech pulled away from his touch.

"I don't need to chase dogs," said Meroweck, missing the point. "I don't even like them. In fact, I hate dogs. Dogs are stupid. That's why they run."

"What could you possibly have against dogs?" the King asked.

"Their tails" Meroweck replied with an ice cold glare.

The Wizard Randor joined Dr. Jal'al and the Governess atop the arena with news from the riders.

"As we suspected, Oberon took the Princess into the Fairy Swamp. Our riders could not track them into the waters." The Wizard paused for a moment, then added: "I assume the Princess is unharmed."

"But we can't be sure, can we?" asked Meroweck.

"Of course not. Fairies are as unpredictable as they are dangerous" said the Governess.

"What do you propose we do, Wizard?" asked the King, concealing his thoughts. He knew the Wizard already had a plan.

"It is too dangerous to enter the swamp. The water gives cover to all manners of beasts and fairies and we shall never have the upper hand. We must dam the river and drain the swamp. The fairies will have no choice but to hand over the princess and the fugitives."

"And I will cut my brother from his tail to give to my bride as a wedding present," said Meroweck.

Dr. Jal'al shook his head. He considered the plan as foolhardy as striking a beehive with a stick.

"What of the water? Surely you will flood farms along the river in both Albion and Kalif?" asked the doctor.

"There will be sacrifices on both sides," said the Wizard, "but if word spreads of the Princess' capture at the hands of an Albion prince, there will be a century of war."

King Camilo knew the word had already spread. Every man and woman who attending the feast told everyone they

knew. Those people told everyone they knew and the ones that wanted war would have it.

"Think of the Princess' condition, your highness," said the Governess.

The Wizard and Merowech shared a glance. What condition? There was no time to ask.

"Your Highness," asked the Wizard of the King, "do we have your support in this? To dam the River Nahal, dry the Fairy Swamp, and rescue your daughter?"

This was a delicate matter and the King did not like to be rushed, but he could not appear to be uncaring about his daughter, no matter what he believed about her intentions.

"Wizard, you will share your plans and the specific site for the dam with Dr. Jal'al who will provide me with a detailed analysis of the effects, not just for the Fairy Swamp, but for my subjects living along the river."

With those words the King left the arena in the same direction as Angus the shepherd boy, wishing very much that their two positions were reversed.

“**T**hat’s Mercya! Hahaaaaaa!” cackled Jaquimo before breaking into song. He sang a catchy tune in his swamp dialect with “Mercy-aaaaa” pouring forth every couple words, but never in a chorus or a refrain. Instead it was peppered through the song like the call of a strange bird.

The island-raft made a tight turn around a moss-draped tree and the canopy gave way to clear skies and deep water. Boats of all kinds bobbed up and down in front of Mercya, the great fairy city.

In the afternoon sun Mercya’s bone white buildings sat like straight rows of teeth in the mouth of the swamp. The buildings were centered around great trees that sprouted fruit both in and outdoors and served as staircases. Narrow canals of crystal blue water ran between the buildings instead of streets. The innumerable balconies faced each other with lights and lines running between them in every direction.

Joan stood forward on the bow of the island-raft. She would have jumped into the water and swam to speed their arrival. Mercya smelled of good food, sounded of church bells

and front-porch music, and felt at once like home. She smiled at Oberon who failed to control Tail as he whipped about in frenzied excitement.

As they pulled into the mouth of the central canal Joan and Oberon could finally see the magnificent inhabitants of Mercya. The fairies were of every size, shape, and color. They were achingly beautiful and perfectly ugly. There were thin fairies and fat ones, young fairies and old fairies, bald fairies and fairies covered entirely in hair or feathers. There were fairies like the one you are imagining right now and fairies you could never imagine. They were the first fairies Oberon had ever seen besides the one he saw in the mirror.

The fairies jumped from rooftop to rooftop and hung from balconies, calling out to each other in strange tongues. On the bottom floors they operated shops that sold all manners of goods and ran restaurants that served all kinds of food, making their homes above them. No two fairies were alike and so their homes were different as well. They housed fairy families with fairy grandparents and fairy great-grandchildren and every kind of fairy uncle, aunt, and cousin as well.

Jacquimo knew every fairy in the city, calling out to them along the canal to see what they were serving for lunch or preparing for dinner. The fairies shouted curious questions about his new friends, particularly Buttons who even among fairies who were accustomed to seeing strange sights, was the strangest sight of all.

Joan felt out of place, a feeling she was accustomed to among the ladies of Kalif, but much more so there. Her normal eyes, normal ears, and normal appendages made her the most abnormal thing in all of Mercya.

For Oberon, the boy who lived too long in a tower, Mercya's wonders were food for his starving eyes. Especially the tails. There were fairies with tails that were bigger and

smaller than his, but there were also tails in twos and threes and sometimes more, working and wandering and getting into mischief. Tail waved at them all with giddy excitement.

In the center of Mercya was a geyser that provided clean water to the city. A constant stream of crystal clear water shot forth from the geyser and rained down in a vast circle where the fairies gathered water, bathed, and escaped the swamp's hot summer days. Oberon could feel the cool mist on his face as they approached.

With one last kick, Jacquimo drove the raft ashore and crossed over the raft-island to the dry ground where he said a quiet prayer of thanksgiving for a safe journey.

"Yous come along now! Gotta meet that queen! Gotta meet the queen!" Jacquimo rushed up toward the geyser with his leaf coat drifting behind him. "Hurry now! Sure already knows you's here!"

Oberon disembarked and turned to offer help to Joan. She was already ashore. As Buttons stepped off the raft-island it rose a full foot in the water as every fairy in view remarked on her tremendous size and beauty. No sooner were they off the raft-island than a family of iguana-looking fairies boarded the craft and made it their own. They whipped their tails back and forth with great power and drove the raft-island back upstream.

Jacquimo led Oberon, Joan, and Buttons around the geyser to the column-lined pavilion on the far side. They were delayed often by the fairies, all who knew Jacquimo and wished to know about the giant horse. Buttons, after so many years tied to the grinding wheel, soaked up the attention.

Passing through the first of the tall stone columns they could see, and be seen by, the biggest, loudest, happiest, PURPLEST fairy of them all: Queen Titania.

Titania did not wear a crown or sit upon a throne, for neither was necessary to assert her authority. Her two tiny,

green wings beat like a hummingbird's, floating her toward her guests, her toes dangling a grass-blade above the ground.

"JACQUIMO! Whatchu find this time?!" Titania's voice, as loud as a marching band, shook everything but the stone columns.

"Queen Titania..." Jacquimo bowed and then presented his guests. "This here Tail's on Oberon, in the handsome blue vest. He gotta hostage named Joan. And *this*, THIS is the most horse anyone or Jacquimo or you ever seen!"

Titania's toothy smile was warm and welcoming. "Oh, I know all about Y'all, but lemme see that horse!" She pet Buttons' nose and the horse turned to putty in her hands. "I've never ridden a horse 'cause there's never been one pretty enough for me, but honey, you a *fine looker*! You have a name? 'Cause if not I'll give you one!"

"Her name is Buttons, your highness," said Oberon. Buttons neighed.

"Well, you're a polite boy. I like that. Buttons, eh? Small name for such a big, pretty horse. You like that name, honey? Buttons?"

Buttons tipped her head from side-to-side.

"Well, you let Titania know if you want a new one. Ain't no one got two lives to live, so love it or change it. I'm Titania" she continued, only talking to Buttons, "but I wasn't born Titania, I became her. Flower don't start out a flower, she starts out a seed, you hear? So you let me know, *Buttons*."

"Excuse me, your Highness?" Joan, royalty herself, was comfortable addressing the Queen, though she could feel her itchy bumps rising on her chest. "You said that you've heard of us? And I'm not his hostage. Not anymore. To be clear."

"Being clear, are we? The fairy prince from the tower and the princess who only answers no - especially to her wedding. Oh, we've all heard of *you*."

"How did you know?" asked Oberon.

“Bird told me. Told me *everything*” said Titania, floating back from Buttons.

A loud screech rang through the geyser water and echoed through the colonnade. It made the fairies wince and Joan smile from ear-to-ear. It was Persephone, her beloved goshawk. She landed on Joan’s shoulder and nibbled her ear with affection. Joan was elated.

“Persephone *spoke* to you?” Joan asked Titania with envy, as she had spent years in silence with her best and beloved friend.

“Oh no, honey, but it just don’t sound good to say: ‘I heard from a parrot who heard from a hawk that y’all on the run.’ Now does it?”

Titania pointed to a small bearded fairy with a green parrot on his shoulder. The parrot ruffled its feathers and in a bright, clear voice, addressed Joan.

“I speak crow, finch, swallow, and some dialects of hawk. We lived near a kept goshawk when I was a chick. Persephone speaks well, but too loudly.” The fairy smiled, proud to have such a worldly, multi-lingual companion. It allowed him to remain silent, which he always did. “She told me that she was kept from the banquet, but that your father sent her to find you. Now here you are.”

“Did she say anything else?” Joan asked. Persephone screeched.

“She’s happy you are safe” said the parrot.

Joan rubbed Persephone’s neck feathers and listened to her coo from deep within her throat. Tail, never to be left out, rested upon Oberon’s shoulder and imitated the parrot’s beak with his bristles.

“That’s some Tail, Oberon. Actin’ a bird!” said Titania.

“And wielding a knife. And taking a hostage” said Oberon. “He’s a good tail, I just wish he didn’t get us in so much trouble.”

“Trouble ain’t always a bad thing. Sometimes the wrong thing is really the right thing and right thing ain’t nothing at all! Like you locking yourself up in that tower. Ain’t right or wrong, just whatchu did.”

“You knew about that?” Oberon was surprised.

“Honey, everyone in the swamp knows about the fairy prince locked up in the tower. You’re famous! The Fairy Tail Prince!” She slapped him on the back with her great big, purple hand. “Why, I bet they’ll even write books about you one day!”

“If you knew I was up there, all alone, why didn’t you do something? Or say something? It was so lonely in that tower!” Oberon pointed at the fairies gathered around him. “You could have flown up, or climbed up, or just even just said hello. You left us up there all alone!”

“Now HOLD A SHAKE, Prince so-and-so! Don’t go pointing your bristly tail at me. You could have come down that tower just as easy as we went up. Since y’all invented the “Fairy Flu” you’ve been killing fairies on sight! That’s how it is!” Titania’s anger had made her even more purple than usual.

“Invented the Fairy Flu? Your flu killed my brothers!” protested Joan.

Titania took a deep breath and fluttered about the colonnade to blow off steam. Once she returned to her normal shade of purple she fluttered back.

“Y’all are our guests and we’ll treat you as such. No more fussing about for now. We’re gonna feed you, wash you, give y’all a nice feather bed. Then we’ll talk. You’re safe now. Mercya belongs to everyone. You’re home.”

But it didn’t feel like home to any of them. Not for Oberon, whose home had been a stone tower, or Joan, whose home was filled with ladies in waiting and the Governess watching her every move. It didn’t feel like home to Buttons, who had so long walked in the same milling

circle, or Persephone, whose home was a black leather hood.

It only felt like home to Tail, who was no longer *THE* Tail, but *A* tail, swaying with so many others in the warm swamp air.

Dr. Jal'al searched high and low through Castle Albion looking for the King. He checked every alley and apartment, closet and cabinet, until finally a maid pointed him in the direction of the Northwest Tower. Her matchstick finger said everything as it pointed skyward.

Built on an outcropping of rock above the Throne Grove, it was a climb just to reach the foot of the tower and Dr. Jal'al was out of breath before he arrived at the corkscrew staircase that climbed forever upwards. The cold stone of Castle Albion's floors and steps made his bare feet ache, so he took a moment to catch his breath.

Sitting on the bottom step of the staircase, Dr. Jal'al reclined and pressed his feet flat against the circumference of the wall. His feet were accustomed to soft ground, hot sand, and frequent naps. Napping is a specialty of all desert people, since day travel is hot and foolish, and Dr. Jal'al longed for the days when all would come to rest, conversations would slow to a near stop, and shade was more valuable than gold.

How had he come so far from his childhood home in

Akoma? He never felt himself to be a good fit in the desert, Kalif suited him no better, but Albion was the worst fit of the three. Dr. Jal'al was a resident at Castle Albion for a fortnight as a guest of the Wizard Randor. They met gathering light frogs in Albion's frozen alpine glades and the Wizard invited the doctor back to the castle to warm himself.

Born without throats for calling to each other, the Light Frogs glowed neon pink in the winter months and when frozen solid, would remain so until thawed without harm. Kind and sociable creatures, Light Frogs made excellent pets and were such a wonder that they could be traded for almost anything. Jal'al traded them for spices and minerals and the Wizard required them for the appearance of magic. Any trick could be improved with a Light Frog and all the Wizard's tricks needed improvement.

When Dr. Jal'al arrived at Castle Albion it was a place of great warmth and comfort. Far more inviting than the empty halls he'd just spent hours wandering. In the same way that two bakers can follow a recipe and produce two wholly different cakes, Castle Albion's current, flavorless, dry, crumbling excuse for a home could only be explained by the lack of a single ingredient: love.

Dr. Jal'al remembered the King and Queen well. The Queen was pregnant with Merowech and the King, having bested his rival in Kalif, sued King Camilo for peace and returned his soldiers home. He spoke of a world without war and the peace his son would enjoy as King.

Dr. Jal'al wondered what he would say if he knew that King Camilo, his enemy, was at that moment atop the Northwest Tower. Dr. Jal'al did not visit the tower in those days, but there was little reason to beyond astrological readings and the divination of birds and he thought both practices foolish. The stars were distant yet orderly and the birds made sense

to each other. That was enough for him. It was also a very long climb, one he hoped to do this one time and never again.

As Dr. Jal'al climbed the tower stairs his thoughts turned to Oberon, poor Oberon, the prince with the fairy tail. How was the prince first led upward into the tower? Was he forced, dragging and kicking by the Wizard? Was he promised a new toy? Did Oberon long for privacy and choose the room himself? Was he singled out as a fairy by his brother and retreated to the tower in shame?

Out of breath for the second time, Dr. Jal'al reached the top of the Northwest Tower and looked through the door's keyhole, wondering which side it had locked from and who held the keys.

"Your Highness?" Dr. Jal'al called out while tapping on the door.

"Come in, Doctor" King Camilo answered.

Dr. Jal'al entered the room to find the King standing before a circular contraption. It was a maze of metal disks, springs, and levers with the numbers two through twelve written around the circumference.

"You are a worldly man, Jal'al," said the puzzled King, "what do you think *this* does?"

Dr. Jal'al inspected the device on all sides. "I've seen nothing like it. Perhaps it is a game the boy plays against himself?"

"It appears to be for counting, but what is there is twelve of?" asked the King.

"A great many things, your Highness. Cookies, cupcakes, bread of all kinds. Eggs as well. Anything that come in a dozen."

"Yes," the King scratched his chin, now two days off shaving, "but once you counted your dozen, and that isn't a hard number to count, why would you continue counting? And

why so complicated a machine? I can nearly count to twelve on my two hands!"

"You are the King of Kalif, sire, I'm sure we could find you a six-fingered man to count dozens for you if necessary."

"What is even more strange are these drawings!" The King pointed to Tail's drawings, many which showed Merowech being tortured in some comical way.

"They are... revealing, your Highness. The shading, depth, and artistry cannot be denied." Jal'al inspected the picture of Merowech being thrown to the toothed volcano. "They are immensely creative."

"Can you imagine it, Doctor? Living out your youth in this room? Hiding in fear, or worse, being hidden away?"

"It is enough to drive one mad, your Highness."

"As mad as a fairy?"

"That is not proven, your Highness. As always, I choose only to believe what science can confirm."

"That Wizard and Merowech, they think the boy is mad. That he is a crazed murderer. That he, like all fairies, is insane. I believe they will kill him if given the chance. "

The King crossed the room to the form where Oberon stitched his vest. On the back was a self-portrait of Tail in many colors. It was as vibrant and magical as Tail wished to be seen.

"Merowech lost his parents to the flu, but why does the Wizard hate the fairies? You know the man, did some great wrong come to him?"

"Not that I know, your highness. But if I may..." Dr. Jal'al stopped. He was not fond of giving unsubstantiated opinions.

"Please, speak Jal'al. There is no voice I trust in this castle but yours."

"I have seen many wonders in my travels. I have witnessed great miracles and magic and have always sought the secrets beneath them, the laws and order that govern them. There is

no force as mysterious and powerful as the love and hate that live in our hearts. They are born of the same fire and consume souls without want or reason, changing with the gusting winds and destroying all in their path.”

“Oh my, that sounds very serious, Doctor.”

“You asked a serious question, your Highness.”

“Have you known many fairies?”

“I have, your highness.”

“Were they mad?”

“No more so than you or I.” Dr. Jal’al stopped. “I apologize, your highness, I did not mean to say that you were mad.”

“I brought my beloved daughter here against her will to marry a buffoon. That is madness, Doctor. I have brought chaos upon us in the hopes of peace and now Merowech and Wizard will bring war to the fairies.”

King Camilo stood in the tower window and looked out over the Throne Grove towards the Fairy Swamp and his kingdom beyond.

“Is there nothing we can do to stop this, doctor? Could we not leave them be, my Joan and Oberon and return to Kalif? Joan is strong and the boy seemed kind, didn’t he? Perhaps they will return on their own, and if not, that is their choice. We could do that, couldn’t we? Leave them to live their lives?”

Dr. Jal’al did not answer the King.

Oberon and Joan were given staterooms on the port side of a stately riverboat once called “The Navigator.” A shallow drafted ship with an enormous paddle wheel built to allow guests to explore the Fairy Swamp from the safety of their luxurious cabins. When it ran aground before reaching Mercya, the ship was boarded by the delta’s hungry manatees. They drove the guests into the lifeboats and consumed everything onboard. The ship was henceforth known by the fairies as “The Manatee Party” and was used for special events and the housing of unexpected guests.

From his portal window, Oberon looked back at the shimmering lights of Mercya. They were more colorful and beautiful than the village lights he looked down to from the Northwest Tower. They never dimmed or darkened and when he opened the window music drifted into his room across the water. Trumpets, drums, strings, and songs whispered in his stateroom. But so did something else. Scratching.

Oberon was sure that a rat was within the walls, but when he tapped on the wall, the scratching stopped without a

scurry. Oberon knew the behavior of rats well since Castle Albion was full of them. Seeing Tail they showed no fear of him when searching for morsels of food and Oberon showed no fear of them either.

The scratching resumed with a furious passion. Oberon pushed his ear to the wall, expecting to hear the rat within. He could still hear the scratching, but with between the scratches came the occasional sob. It was Joan.

“Joan? Are you ok?” Oberon asked through the wall.

“I’m *fine*, Oberon.” She was not fine. The scratching resumed.

Oberon went out into the hallway and knocked on her door. Joan did not answer. He knocked again.

“Joan? Why don’t you open the door? Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s ok.”

There was no response. The scratching ended with a thud.

Before Oberon could knock again Tail darted into the door’s keyhole, fiddled with the chamber, picked the lock, and pushed the door open.

Joan lay on the floor, her body covered in bright red hives. Her chest rose and fell in hurried breathes, none effective enough to calm her.

Oberon was afraid to touch her for fear that the bumps were contagious, but Tail was not. Tail cradled Joan’s head until her eyes opened and her breathing calmed.

“Help me...” Joan whimpered, reaching up to scratch her neck.

Tail braced Joan’s neck as Oberon lifted her to her feet. Gasping, she supported enough of her weight to get to the door. Oberon could not carry any further than the hallway. He was neither tall or strong enough, not even with Tail’s help. Oberon shouted for help.

A bellhop appeared at once. He was half as tall as Oberon

but with the strength of twenty men from carrying luggage all his days. The bellhop lifted both Joan and Oberon onto his shoulders and ran as fast as his stubby legs could carry them into the center of Mercya to the hut of the witchdoctor.

To call Ms. Bindlestiff a witchdoctor would be fair, for she was trained in both arts, but it would not fairly explain her mastery of ailments and ability to treat patients.

She knew how to stitch a wound and which crickets to call to ward off fevers, but more importantly, she could weigh and measure the quality of her patients, their strengths and weaknesses, and prescribe a course for their future. She knew that some broken legs are healed in a cast while while others are healed by climbing mountains.

When the bellhop arrived at Ms. Bindlestiff's door she was busy making Three Month Soup from a recipe that reported to take only ten weeks. Her pot had simmered for a month and she could already tell that the soup would not taste the same.

Not a single mouse had come to sniff the rich broth and thus no unlucky mice had fallen into the pot, a crucial ingredient of Three Month Soup. It simply wouldn't do. When she heard a knock at her door her heart leaped. Perhaps it would be a hungry solicitor or salesman that might fall into the cauldron and the soup would be saved.

She was disappointed.

"No, no. That isn't *my* luggage, bellman. Why, they couldn't carry a single change of my underwear. Return that to the lobby. And don't expect a tip, either." She shut the door and returned to her soup.

After another knock, she returned.

"Please, doctor, my friend is very sick," said the boy with the fairy tail, still atop the bellhop's shoulder, facing away from her.

"Do you have any mice with you? Are you a mouse? Do

you *taste* like a mouse?" The question confused him. "Are you hungry? Do you like soup?"

"Very much so, but now is no time for soup. My friend needs your help."

Joan shook violently atop the bellhop's shoulder. He squeezed her with a tight grip, ensuring that she never touched the ground.

"Are you sure you're not a mouse?" It was a fair question. Tail shook "no."

"Were you a mouse?" she continued.

Tail shook "no" again.

Ms. Bindlestiff grabbed Tail just below the bristles and gave them a lick. Tail yanked away and whipped himself rapidly, shaking off her saliva.

"Well, *you* taste horrible. I won't ruin my already ruined soup with *you*."

"Please. Can't you see she needs help? Please!"

Ms. Bindlestiff looked the boy over. His skin was pale and his fingernails were clean. This was an inside boy and inside boys don't make for very good soup. She could tell that he was good and belonged to a very nice tail, as fine a tail as she had seen.

"Fine. But the bellman stays outside. I don't want him to not disturb my perfectly dusty floors with his clean shoes."

The bellhop set Oberon down, handed Joan to him, tipped his pillbox hat, and held out his hand for a tip.

"I *said*: 'no tip!'"

The bellhop cocked his head to the side and tipped his pillbox hat a second time. The bellhop delivered the luggage. He deserved a tip.

"I have nothing to give him," said Oberon.

Ms. Bindlestiff searched her apron and produced a hummingbird wishbone.

“Be careful who you break this with, bellman, for tiny wishbones grant tiny wishes.”

The bellhop tipped his hat again and rushed back to his station on the Manatee Party. He lived a long and happy life wondering what he should wish for and who with, but never broke the tiny wishbone for fear that would have been the end of his wondering. It was a good tip for carrying the prince and princess.

Oberon carried Joan to the chaise and collapsed on the ground next to her.

Ms. Bindlestiff stood over them both. She was a large woman. When she stood over Oberon she blocked out the rooms candlelight making for a strange sort of eclipse.

“So the problem is these bumps? She’s scratched herself into quite a tizzy, hasn’t she?”

Tail shook “yes” and Ms. Bindlestiff directed all further questions to Tail as it was clear that Tail was in charge.

“Has she eaten anything?”

Tail shook “yes” they had been given sandwiches by the fairies.

“Drink?”

Tail shook “yes” again, there was iced tea.

Ms. Bindlestiff tugged at Joan’s clothing, inspecting her undergarments. “These woolens are river sheep. The manner that the Albion Guard wear. She’s too dark to be from Albion. And this? This is fox fur.”

“She is Princess Jarocasta of Kalif,” said Oberon.

Ms. Bindlestiff gave a loud snort. “I would have figured that out you know. You shouldn’t rob someone of their guesses. It isn’t fair *or* fun. You didn’t even give me a hint first! What good is knowing things if you don’t use them to figure out other things?” She pointed her finger at him. “I suppose that makes you Oberon of Albion.”

Joan jerked straight on the couch in a spasm that pulled

every string in her body. She clutched at her skin, tearing at it like wrapping paper.

“Please, help her Miss...” Oberon realized at that moment that he let his manners escape him. He he did not know the strange woman’s name.

“BUNDLESTIFF!” she declared, puffing out her chest.

“Miss Bindlestiff, please. She needs your help.” Oberon pleaded and Tail did as well, bending over in supplication.

She nodded, pausing for a moment to consider the situation. She had seen this condition before. She turned her back on Joan and looked into the cottage at her many remedies. There were jars of herbs, sacks of reptiles, and all manners of books and charts to consult, but she quickly came to the best remedy of all.

Miss Bindlestiff sat down.

She sat down directly on top of Joan, her posterior as wide as hippopotamus’ and no less the weight. It covered Joan from her thighs clear up to her neck, crushing the Princess below her.

“Wha... wha... what are you doing?!” Oberon sprang to his feet, pulling at Ms. Bindlestiff’s elbow as she crossed it on her chest.

“Let me work, boy!” She batted him away like a fly.

Joan’s eyes bulged from her face, her face turning red from the trapped blood.

“She can’t breathe!”

“Of course she can’t. I’m very heavy.” The witch doctor looked down at her patient, struggling beneath her weight. Joan’s toes curled and her free hand slapped at Ms. Bindlestiff’s knee as if she were trying to loosen mustard from the bottom of a jar.

Again Oberon tried to pull Ms. Bindlestiff off and again she dispatched him with ease, sending him crashing into her broom collection on the cottage’s far wall.

“I expect you to clean those up. Just because you are royalty, *Prince Oberon*, doesn’t mean you can go mucking about in other people’s homes. My brooms are alphabetized by straw width. Not that *you* noticed.”

Bindlestiff checked her patient again, her face ran from red to purple and her itchy hives had disappeared.

“You’re responding to the treatment well. Just a moment longer” Ms. Bindlestiff said to Joan, patting her on the head.

If Oberon had a knife or sword, anything really, he would have struck out against the old witchdoctor with all his might. As usual, it was Tail that found the solution. It was a white stick, as thin as a finger and as long as an arm. It sat alone on a shelf above where the brooms were organized.

Ms. Bindlestiff took immediate notice when Tail held it aloft.

“Be careful with that! You have no idea what that is!”

“It is a magic wand and we’re not afraid to use it. Now get up!” said Oberon with all the authority he could muster.

“It is not a *magic wand*” she laughed, “it is a *baton*, and, again, you have no idea how to use it.”

Tail waved the baton erratically at Ms. Bindlestiff. A deep hum rose in the room as if an orchestra were tuning up. It startled Oberon.

“I’m not getting up for you. Let’s be perfectly clear about that.” Ms. Bindlestiff stood up, again eclipsing the light in the room. She took one look at Joan to see the blood running out of her face.

“What do you think you were doing?!” hollered Oberon, rushing to Joan’s side.

“Curing her. See for yourself.”

It was true, the rash was gone and Joan was breathing normally. Ms. Bindlestiff returned to stirring her soup.

“How...” Joan was mystified. “How did you cure my allergies?”

"Allergies?! Ha! The only thing you're allergic to is *FEAR*."

"Fear?" Joan shook her head. "I'm not *afraid of anything!*"

"Oh, you aren't?" said Ms. Bindlestiff, shaking her head. "You may not be afraid of anything you can think of, like snakes or spiders, but just as sure as rain falls down and trees grow up, you're afraid. Why else would sitting on you work?"

"I don't understand," said Joan.

"Of course you don't! That's how fear works, you don't understand. If you understood, you wouldn't be afraid. Now, I'm not sure what it is that you're so afraid of, but once I sat down on you, as big and healthy as I am, you couldn't be afraid of something you don't understand anymore, you were in *real danger*. You were afraid of me!"

"That can't be true" protested Joan. She couldn't believe that after all the years of treating her allergy that it was only in her head.

"Can you prove it?" asked Oberon.

"I cure the girl and now you want me to make her itch again?" Ms. Bindlestiff slapped her spoon down on the counter. She was growing rather annoyed with her uninvited guests. She returned to the chaise and loomed over Joan again.

"That goshawk at the window, should I invite her in?"

Neither Joan nor Oberon noticed that Persephone was watching them from outside. The window flew open without a move from Ms. Bindlestiff and Persephone flapped into the room, eager to see if Joan was in good health.

"Smart bird," said Ms. Bindlestiff. "Don't you just love how smart birds taste?"

Persephone left Joan and stood on the edge of the cauldron and looked in, controlled by the witchdoctor's strange powers.

"I was hoping for a mouse to fall in, but a hawk will do just fine."

Persephone leaned over the cauldron, her beak almost to the broth. Joan's hives returned at once, as red and irritating as ever.

"STOP!" Joan cried out, scratching herself. "Don't you dare hurt my hawk!"

Ms. Bindlestiff raised a single finger and Persephone fluttered to her shoulder.

"Have I made my point?" she asked as she stroked Persephone's beak.

Joan and Oberon did not answer. They didn't need to.

"Now, if you please..." The cottage door flung open. "I'm quite busy. Should you find yourself in so itchy a place again, remember that unless you are in real danger, you are not in any danger at all. You *will* die, I'm sure of it. Everything and everyone does, even me, so there isn't any point to getting yourself so worked up."

Tail swish, swish, swished the bone-white baton at Joan as if it was him making her red bumps go away. The room filled bright, piccolo tones as if a bird were chirping.

"You may keep the baton if you wish."

"I can?" asked Oberon.

"Not you, boy. The tail may have it. That baton has been looking for a new home for a century. I don't care much for its music, too dramatic."

Tail held the baton straight up in exclamation.

"It belonged to the conductor Nicosof Cocumelli. It is made from the horn of the unicorn whale. Incredible singers, those whales, and when you wave the baton, you can hear them singing. See for yourself. Wave it."

Tail swung the baton back and forth. Music filled the room. It was as if an entire orchestra were right there with them. The faster Tail moved the baton, the faster the music played.

“Fantastic!” said Oberon. Tail handed it to Joan to examine.

“How does it work?” Joan asked.

“Vibrations in the air. And magic, of course. That’s all that music is anyway. The Maestro received it as a gift from the Glacier Queen, who he loved deeply. As the Arctic Court Musician, he composed many operas in her honor. The Queen was married to the Glacier King, of course, so their love could not be. She gave the Maestro the baton and sent him away. He lived out his days in the ice canyon where the North Wind originates, so whenever the Queen heard the wind, she would hear his music. Operas mostly, and all of them quite tragic.”

“How did you come to possess it?” asked Joan as she played a sweet, sad aria by softly threading the baton in front of her. A single tear ran down Ms. Bindlestiff’s cheek.

“No more sad music! Now take it and go, before I change my mind!”

Joan returned the baton to Tail who happily whipped up a staccato jig to lighten the mood.

“That’s enough, Tail,” said Oberon. Tail stuck the baton into the back of Oberon’s shimmering blue vest.

“Thank you, doctor.” said Joan in earnest to Ms. Bindlestiff.

“Witchdoctor. And may that be a lesson to you. Usually the best thing to do with a problem is sit on it.” She returned to stirring her soup. “Goodbye hawk. If you tire of her company, feel free to return.”

Persephone screeched in thanks and flew out the open cottage door.

“Now go, I have weeks of soup work to make up for!” Ms. Bindlestiff shouted.

Once they set a foot outside the cottage, the door slammed behind them.

After wandering down from the mountains, the Nahal River thinned to a rapid and cut through dense woods before cascading over a waterfall into the Fairy Swamp below. There, above the falls, the Wizard Randor watched from an old stone bridge as water pooled behind the recently relocated beaver dam. As with his magic tricks, his success was accidental.

With no knowledge of the engineering required to dam a river, the Wizard turned to the only known experts in the field: beavers. With little care for the beavers or their wishes, the Wizard's plan was to destroy an extensive network of beaver dams and drive the rodents downstream. Upriver, Meroweck oversaw the destruction of decades of beaver work and engineering.

Trappers, claiming to be experts in beavers, lead the failed demolition. Knowing nothing of the beaver's ingenuity, they believed the dams were anchored to one spot on the river. They were wrong. When the Meroweck and the trappers arrived, smashing their homes and threatening their kits, the beavers detached their dams from the shore

and floated them downstream, navigating the rapids with ease.

Merowech and the trappers kept pace with the beavers, running downstream along the river with long sticks to prevent them from anchoring again. Hours later, they arrived at the waterfall. The beavers, numbering in the hundreds, broke the water before sunset. Working through the night the beavers leveled the surrounding forest with such efficiency that the explosive felling of trees was confused with an approaching thunderstorm.

The dam was completed when King Camilo and Dr. Jal'al arrived early the next morning. The spout of the waterfall was closed save a small stream the beavers controlled from within their dam. The flood waters created heavy mud and the beavers used it to anchor sharply pointed spears in all directions. The message was clear: they would not be uprooted again.

"I've never seen such an undertaking" marveled King Camilo. "They've done in a day what would've taken these soldiers years. If they could have managed it all."

"The Wizard is a clever man, but this was not his plan." Dr. Jal'al shook his head. He wondered what the unintended consequences of such tampering would be. Affronts to nature rarely turn out well.

"How long until the swamp is drained?" asked the King.

"No one knows, for none of us has seen Mercya itself. The water is said to be the city's lifeblood, so for the sake of negotiations, we can assume the effects will be known immediately."

"Negotiations?"

"For the hostage, your Highness. The Princess."

"A negotiation would mean that we have exchanged terms with an opposing side. We have done nothing of the sort. The fairies did not take the princess hostage, the prince did. We

are not negotiating with him for her safe return, are we? We are only threatening the fairies. All of them. The fairies must suffer for a crime they did not commit?"

"Perhaps it will resolve itself quickly and the Princess will be returned."

Merowech joined the Wizard on the stone bridge where they watched the beavers complete their fortifications. Noting King Camilo's presence, they both smiled and waved. They were very pleased with themselves.

"And when the Princess is not returned? What then?" asked the King.

Dr. Jal'al did not answer the King.

The canals of Mercya were running at half their normal height by noon. The bellhop roused Joan and Oberon from their rooms upon the command of Titania who was holding court in front of a sea of panicked, angry fairies.

Since there was such a commotion, and her small wings could not hold her aloft for the entire day, Titania rode Buttons through the pavilion, pacing through the fairies in the manner of an inspecting general. The fairies shouted at Titania in deep and high pitched voices. Those that could fly buzzed around her like bees and those that hopped bumped alongside her like angry toads.

Titania saw the tip of Tail's bristle on the edge of the crowd and called for silence. Then the only sound in the courtyard was the deep clip-clop of Buttons' hooves as she trotted happily to her friends. She nuzzled Oberon. If not for Tail, Buttons' affection would have knocked the prince off his feet.

"Well look who's here! I trust you slept well?" Titania bellowed over the crowd.

“Thank you for the kind accommodations, but much of our night was spent with the witchdoctor.” Oberon hoped to gain some sympathy from the fairies.

“Your Highness...” Oberon bowed deeply. Joan did the same. It had the desired effect.

“*Your* brother,” she pointed at Oberon, “*Your* fiancé,” she pointed at Joan, “went and dammed the river! Stopped the whole thing up way back at the falls. As you can see we have quite the dam problem! We’ll be bone dry by tomorrow.”

A cacophony of protest rose up from the fairies. There wasn’t a single fairy that did not depend upon the water for food, transportation, washing, drinking, and everything else. They made their deep and high pitched voices heard again. Titania listened to each and every one of them, though most said the same thing: “Why should the fairies suffer for this princess?”

“Mercya!” Titania’s shout lifted Buttons onto her hind legs. Her hooves pawed at the air. “Mercya!” she cried out again and Button’s hooves slammed down. She walked Titania through the crowd as her deep baritone filled the pavilion.

“I hear y’all! I know y’all’s hearts! But remember, ain’t one of you who came here any different than these two. If we hand’em over we ain’t any better than those fools who stopped up the water.” Titania looked over the crowd of silent fairies, their eyes fixed upon her every move.

“Now, far as I see it, we’ve got the advantage. We’ve got flying fairies, jumping fairies, swimming fairies, tall, short, lean and fat fairies. Every kind of fairy under the sun! What do they got? Hands, feet. and swords?”

“The beavers?” said a lone voice in the crowd.

“Nobody got nothing against the beavers, but we can’t wait for them to tear that dam down, can we?”

The fairies all shook their heads.

“So what’ll we do? We gonna tear down that dam?”

The fairies cheered in unison.

“We gonna get our water back?”

The fairies cheered again, louder than before.

“Now, who’s gonna volunteer to bust that dam?!”

The pavilion was silent. The flying fairies fell back to the ground, fearing that a beat of a wing might nominate them to the task.

“No one? None of y’all are willing to fight for our water?”

The only person with the courage to volunteer in all of Mercya, the great fairy city, was not a fairy at all.

“I’ll go,” Joan said loud enough for all the fairies to hear her.

The collective gasp that rose up in the pavilion was louder than the previous cheers. Oberon was as surprised as everyone else, knowing nothing of Joan’s military ambitions. She had practiced her call to arms a million times in her head. In her imagination, she rode a white horse before an army of archers, foot soldiers, and heavy cavalry before a great battle. The time to use her call to arms had finally come.

“Who’s with me?!” she shouted at the fairies. There was no answer.

Persephone, circling above, volunteered with an ear-splitting cry, but as Joan looked over the crowd of fairies, there were no hands to count. There was, however, a tail. Tail, as upright as possible, waved back and forth at Joan, ignoring Oberon’s attempts to restrain him.

“Oberon?”

“We’ll go, I guess” Oberon raised his hand. “This is our fault, isn’t it?”

“The two of you?” Titania shook her head. Persephone screeched and Tail waved. “The four of you? That doesn’t make the most sense, does it? Why don’t you just hand yourself over? Save us all some trouble.”

“Because it won’t do any good. If I turn myself over, what

do you think they will do? Do you think they'll destroy the dam? No. Do you think the beavers will take the dam apart? No."

"Merowech wants a war and he won't stop until he has one" said Oberon of his brother. "He hates fairies. He blames you for our parents' death. He hates me, his own brother. It is not a *good* reason for war, but from what I've read, wars usually start for stupid reasons and most commonly, because someone stupid wants to go to war."

Joan looked down at her boots. For as long as she remembered, Joan longed to distinguish herself in battle. In that way, she and Merowech were the same.

"Oberon and I will go to the dam. There is no other way."

"No other way? Y'all won't even make it there! The swamp'll kill you before that army does. Only thing more dangerous than a swamp is a dry swamp!"

"Jacquimo'll go!"

The fairies parted way to reveal the swamp man on the far side of the pavilion. He was reclining in a tent made of his jacket and banjo.

"The swamp is Jacquimo 'n Jacquimo is the swamp. Ain't one without the other. And Jacquimo shook loose a dam or two or threeeeeeeeeee! HaHAAAA! Always fish near a dam. Good fishing there. Jacquimo brought them princes and princesses to Mercya and Jacquimo'll take'm back."

"It'll be dangerous, swamp man," said Titania.

"Ain't nothing but death that's dangerous and death ain't found me yet! Don't even know where to look! HaHAAAA!" Jacquimo slapped his knee and stood straight up into the jacket, the tent disappearing onto his back.

"Won't be alone, neither. You never alone if you got music!" Jacquimo picked a swinging little tune on his banjo and walked out the pavilion with a grin so wide that every

fairy in Mercya thought he was either insane or keeping some great secret.

“Y’all best follow him!” Titania waved them off to follow Jacquimo. “I’ll take good care of this here horse.”

The journey back up what was left of the Nahal River was more difficult than the sleepy drift downstream. Each step in the deep, drying mud took the toll of ten. Bugs swarmed and circled and a rank smell hung between the trees that made it hard to breathe. If it weren't for the music, Oberon would not have made it all.

Jacquimo hadn't stopped plucking his banjo since they left Mercya. As the bright, sorrowful notes rang through the swamp they attracted other musicians. Each swamp man and swamp woman arrived with a different instrument but the same leafy overcoat, producing innumerable, mysterious items from their pockets.

The first to join them was a heavy woman with an accordion. Her calliope accompaniment arrived long before she did, perfectly in sync with Jacquimo's banjo. Without a word of introduction, she took up a place behind Oberon and Joan, reusing their mud holes and occasionally yelling up to Jacquimo to pick up the pace, which he did even faster banjo picking.

An elderly man with a wide straw hat and a raspy, airy

trumpet joined next, then a wire-thin young woman with a clarinet, then a midget with a tambourine. The midget jumped between the mud holes with both feet, clapping and banging the tambourine with every step.

So it went for the rest of the journey. The marching column became a marching band of twenty-two players, twenty-three if you counted Persephone. Her wings made for an easy journey, leaving plenty of air to squeak, squawk, and screech to the music.

As the sun set the musicians slowed in tempo and drifted to silence as the elderly man playing trumpet whispered them out. The players set down their instruments and made camp beside what was left of the Nahal River in a dense grove of trees. From the camp they could see upward to the dammed waterfall but could not be seen themselves.

Opening their leaf jackets, the swamp band produced a shocking array of food and equipment, the envy of any military outfit. Even their instruments were put to good use, particularly the kettle drum that served as their kettle.

Over a hot, smokeless fire, the kettle boiled water dug from a shallow well. The swamp band opened their coats and added handfuls of rice and barley, shrimp, whole fish, sausages, and herbs and spices of every kind to the kettle. There were many items that Oberon could not identify thrown in as well, including what looked like an old boot, but he thought it impolite to ask as he contributed nothing himself.

While Oberon studied the swamp band's cooking, Joan climbed the tallest of the trees to its very top to get a better view of the dam and devise a plan for its destruction. It was, by any estimation, a marvel of engineering. The beavers, true to their nature, were busy reinforcing their new home with a keen eye towards its defense.

Not wishing to repeat the trauma of the previous day, and

with nowhere to travel but over the falls, the beavers made clear to all in view that there would be no further tampering with their home. They gnawed the tip of every branch to a fine point and where the dam met the river, the beavers baffled an impassible thicket of thicket of throned bushes. The largest of their number, both males and females, patrolled the wall in shifts in groups of ten or more adding mud, sticks, and thorns as they watched.

From below, Joan could not see the river backing up behind the dam, but the rising waterline drove Merowech and the assembled troops far back into the woods, soaking the path that led to the stone bridge. By days end the pond was a lake.

Joan looked up the sheer rock face of the waterfall in dismay. It was taller than any castle wall and better defended. Oberon was clever, but could not fight, the swamp musicians were resourceful, but they had instruments, not weapons. They were no match for the Kalifian and Albion soldiers. She was, she thought, without a way forward and quite alone.

“Ain’t so alone...” said Jacquimo, as if he heard the thoughts between her ears. He was perched atop the tree next to her, swaying it back and forth. “Ain’t never alone when Jacquimo’s here! And you ain’t alone with that bright hawk either! HaHaa!”

Persephone circled above the dam. She was so high up in the darkness that she could only be spotted crossing in front of the moon.

“Ain’t nothing bad as it looks either.” Jacquimo swayed his tree towards Joan’s and jumped from one to the other, perching on a branch beside her as lightly as a robin.

“You’s got you thinking that there ain’t no way out of this. They’s up there and we’s down here. They’s big and we’s small and so on and so on and so on and so on. Well, Jacquimo’ll

tell you, a dam's just like a man. Ain't but one point holding it all together."

He crossed his two green, dirt scaled fingers together. "Two sticks and a third and so on and so on and so on and so on. Ain't nothing but that one spot."

As he spoke, Jacquimo added finger after finger, making a small dome with his fingers with his thumbs wiggling around beneath them as beavers.

"Pull one or the other out and that whole thing crash down."

"Like a keystone?" Joan could tell that Jacquimo was unaware of what a keystone was or did.

"A beaver dam. Or you. Or even Jacquimo. Ain't but one or two things that keep you standing, pull on one too hard, whole thing crash down."

Jacquimo patted Joan on the back. "Ain't no reason to worry. Jacquimo'll show you." He stepped from the tree and down into the canopy. He fell past twenty or more branches before grabbing one to slow his descent. He was on the forest floor faster than a falling pinecone.

Joan took a last look at the dam and then started her long climb down. her nostrils filled with the wild scents boiling up from the kettle.

Merowech and twenty members of the Albion Guard arrived in Mercya's fountain pavilion to find it empty. Ephi, the guide Merowech bribed to take them through the swamp, delivered them to the outskirts of Mercya, but did not bring them in undetected.

Born normal to fairy parents in Mercya, Ephi left the city as a boy and found work shoeing horses in the Albion army. Ephi loved regular horses that required regular shoes, for the horses of his childhood were anything but. They were always winged, invisible, unicorns, or some combination therein. He dreamed of owning his own stable, and upon learning that Ephi was from Mercya, that is what Merowech promised him.

Merowech claimed their mission to be one of peace, to negotiate the return of his Princess from her captor and he promised that no harm would come to the fairies, but as Ephi lead Merowech and the Albion Guard through the secret vine bridges that connected Mercya to Albion he realized his error. Merowech was not going to Mercya in search of his beloved, he did not care for his fiancé at all. When Ephi

slowed, Merowech pushed him forward with the point of his sword.

Ephi whispered warning of their approach to a macaw. The bright blue and red bird flew straight to Mercya and spread the word quickly among the fairies. When Ephi refused to lead them any further, Merowech drove his sword through Ephi's back. The flight of the bird was enough for Merowech to find the city.

Merowech and the Albion Guard arrived in Mercya's muddy canals to find every window boarded and every door locked. The normally jubilant, bustling city was a ghost town. Since Merowech watched his little brother ride off with his bride he had not seen a single fairy.

"I, Merowech, Crown Prince of Albion, demand the return of my betrothed, Jarocasta of Kalif and my fugitive brother, Oberon... the FAIRY!" Merowech stomped about the Pavilion, muddying the white marble with his dirty boots. "Heed these words and you shall be spared. Heed them not and you shall face the consequences!"

Merowech searched the faces of the Albion Guard. They nodded in false approval.

"They're not here" squawked an invisible voice. "They left. Go away."

"Who said that?! Show yourself, damned fairy!"

"I am *not* a fairy, and you watch your tongue. You are the idiots that dammed the river!"

"What magic is this?" bellowed Merowech. "Guards, find this invisible man!"

The guards paced to and fro, poking the air with swords and lances. They were unable to strike anything, and only nearly missed hurting each other.

"Invisible man?" the voice laughed, "I'm certainly neither a man nor invisible, you ninny."

"I swear to thee, devil, I will cut you from your cloven

hooves!” screamed Merowech, as it seemed the voice was ringing within his helmet.

“No, no. No hooves either. You are a *terrible* guesser!” said the voice.

“Sire!” shouted one of the guards, “on your head! A bird!”

Perched atop Merowech’s head was the old fairy’s green parrot, smiling as much as a beak can smile. Merowech unsheathed his sword and swung it inches above his helmet. The parrot ducked the blade without incident.

“You are terrible with a sword as well! Some king you’ll make!” taunted the parrot. He very much enjoyed taunting.

“Guards! Smite this bewitched fowl!” Merowech ordered.

The guards closed in around the prince, poking with their lances and swinging their swords, being careful not to behead Merowech.

“I see why your bride ran away! Your stupidity looks contagious! Be careful gentlemen, there’s no antidote to stupidity.” The parrot dodged a lance and then clamped one of his talons on it, pulling it away from the guard. When the guard pulled back the parrot released bringing great force forward on its point. The lance struck Merowech in the helmet.

Merowech tumbled to the ground and his helmet rolled away. Once the guards helped him to his feet Merowech chased the parrot with full vigor, all the while the parrot taunted the prince with more and more vulgarity.

“ENOUGH!” Titania’s voice echoed in the Pavilion, bringing the commotion to a stop as she rode Buttons out to meet the prince.

Merowech shook with fear, as did the Albion Guard. Few of them had ever seen a fairy, and those who had could never imagine one so large, purple, and winged. Upon Buttons she towered over them, the tallest guard only reaching to her knee.

“So you’re Merowech and y’all are the Albion Guard? I had a bad feeling y’all would end up here. Ain’t got nothing for you. The Prince and Princess left. Went upriver to destroy that dam. So do yourselves a favor, turn yourself around and go on home now. We got a bird that’ll show you out.”

“Who are you? What authority do you have here?” asked Merowech. As he said this, he recognized Buttons, Albion’s mill horse.

“I’m Titania, of course. Y’all can call me *queen*, if you like, but it is more of an honorary title than anything. We fairies ain’t got no need for ordering folks around like y’all do. ”

“You are an abomination on a stolen horse! Return my bride, the fugitive Oberon, and that stolen horse or you *shall face my blade!*”

“I don’t know who y’all think y’all are storming up here and waving your swords around, but we’ve got *manners* in Mercya. And this ain’t no stolen horse, are ya’ Buttons?” Buttons shook her head with a mighty neigh. “Ain’t one living thing that belongs to any other, so Buttons, that’s this beautiful mare’s name, can make up her *own* mind.”

Button raised her head with great pride and snorted at Merowech, indicating that she was quite happy where she was, thank you.

“And since you weren’t listening the first time, your brother and the Princess *AIN’T HERE*. They gone. Now you be gone too!”

“Why should I believe you, fairy?” Merowech leveled the point of his sword at her. This provocation gave Titania a stir. She rose off of Buttons back with a million flaps of her tiny green wings.

“You know what, honey? You’ve got a whole lot of issues and trust ain’t one. First, *you don’t listen*. Maybe if you spent a little less time chasing that tail around and more time looking in the mirror your bride wouldn’t have run off. She wasn’t no

hostage. She left! And I don't blame her. You're just a spoiled little boy waving his sword at everyone. Who'd want to marry you? You ain't the least bit civilized. Now, like I said, GET GONE. I've got all kinds of things to do relating to your stupidity and the water not running."

Merowech's cheeks were bright red. As with King Camilo, he wasn't used to being talked to in this way.

"And don't you go chasing that parrot, either. He's mouthy, but y'all never gone catch him and I don't want your blood on my nice marble." Titania turned Buttons and trotted away.

Merowech thought he heard the guards giggling behind him. There he was, the Crown Prince of Albion, being taken to task by a fairy. He was so angry that he shook in his boots. His eyes squinted until only the dark centers remained.

"You stupid *fairy freak*. Don't you know who I am? I am Merowech, soon-to-be King of Albion. You killed my parents with your disease, you are holding my bride hostage and harboring my fugitive brother. Your day of reckoning has arrived. I will set fire to every fairy and every fairy house. I will cleanse this city of its freaks and its flu with fire."

The Albion Guard did not know what to do. The battle-hardened soldiers were frightened of their prince and his command.

"BURN IT!" Merowech screamed, "BURN IT TO THE GROUND!"

And so they did. Dry for days, Mercya went up like a book of matches.

From the flooded northern banks, King Camilo of Kalif looked across the dammed waters of the Nahal River at his kingdom. For centuries the Albions had crossed the river to attack Kalif and the Kalifians had done the same.

Countless soldiers died in countless, pointless battles. They turned the river red with blood. He never imagine a time when the two kingdoms would put down their arms, yet here they were, standing together, watching the waters rise. But what were they standing against?

Even with the loss of his three sons, Camilo held no ill will against the fairies. The Fairy Flu was not a choice they made nor an action taken. For all of Kalif's history, the fairies lived in secret as Oberon had in his tower. When they did reveal themselves it was only for the common good. Winged fairies rescued children in peril, small fairies freed trapped miners, and water fairies saved drowning fishermen. Instead of being awarded medals for their valor, once the fairies made themselves known, they were forced to abandon their lives and homes for their own safety.

The King once hoped to change their fate by royal decree but was advised against it. The fear and hatred of fairies was so strong that his generals feared a decree of tolerance would spark open revolt. They argued that fairies were safer in hiding. King Camilo weighed the lives and freedom of the fairies against the violence of a mob.

He never envisioned a future where compassion won the day. The day the river was dammed was certainly not that day and King Camilo feared the worst.

Then he saw Persephone.

High above him, cutting the fog with sharp wings, Persephone's silhouette crossed in front of the moon. He knew at once that his daughter was near. For a moment he put away his misgivings. Perhaps by some miracle they might find peace.

King Camilo walked through boot-high water to the stone bridge and looked over the dam to woods below. He scanned the trees for Joan, looking all the way to the horizon. It was there, in the distance, that he saw the flames.

The fire was a lone candle in the back of a dark church, but within moments it burned so brightly that it seemed as if the sun had returned from setting.

Mercya was burning.

Tail was an excellent climber. Oberon was not. Save looking out the window of the Northwest Tower, Oberon was not exposed to heights. He never climbed trees, mountains, or even a ladders. He only ever climbed into bed, so it was no surprise that halfway up the rocky face of the waterfall he made the mistake of looking down.

“Don’t do *that*, *don’t ever do that*,” Joan called down to him, “we’re climbing *UP!*”

Her words were little comfort. Oberon clung to the rock with his fingertips and felt them tremble. If his knees were not stretched so far apart they would have knocked together. His legs shook so quickly that only a skilled dancer could keep their pace.

“Falling’s a silly way a dying, Tailprince!” Climbing, of course, was very easy for Jacquimo. “Mouth of beast, livin’ five hundred years, dueling for love, them’s the real ways to go! Not slippin’ ’n a’ falling! HaHAAAA!!! Jus’ keep on climbin’! Follow on that Tail o’ yours!”

Tail wedged himself into narrow crack above Oberon's head, anchoring them to the narrow face of the cliff. A sheet of water fell alongside, just an arm's length to left, and on the right was a thick rug of slippery moss. Oberon squeezed his eyes closed, hoping that some courage might be found in the darkness.

"Like goin' to heaven! Ain't but one way up!" Jacquimo was dangling from one arm, waving Oberon upwards with the other.

First with his right foot, then his left hand, Oberon pushed himself up the cliff after Joan. The tangled web of wood that made up the beaver dam came closer with each grasp and step. His fear gave way to aching fatigue. His muscles clenched. There was no room for any thought other than "up."

When Oberon reached the ledge below the dam Joan offered him a hand. Tail's soft bristles wove between their fingers and with their strength, Tail's and Joan's, Oberon rocketed past her, plopping down onto his exhausted backside.

"HaHAA! That was a mighty-fine climb, wasn't it? Getsa blood *moving*! Look how far down them rocks are!" Jacquimo produced a jar from his pocket and handed it to Oberon who took a swig. It smelled of hot coals and tasted like burning nails.

"Juice o' the devil's club. Keeps ya' sharp. Keeps ya' strong!"

Strength rushed back into Oberon's fingers and toes and air filled his lungs. He passed the jar to Joan. She took a sip and then sucked her lips into her mouth with such force that they disappeared from her face.

"Good, no?" Jacquimo took the jar back from her, whispered a quiet prayer, took a sip, then returned it to his jacket. He tip-toed the edge of the cliff, looking back over the

swamp.

“Ain’t nothing beautiful as my swamp. From above, from below. Ain’t *nothing*.”

The waving trees were a deep green sea rippling in the moonlight. A crease ran through the trees where the river ran to the delta. On any other night, they would have seen the glow of the fairy city. But on that night, that terrible night, Mercya was on fire.

Oberon knew that Merowech set fire to the city. Who else could do such a thing? Only the Wizard Randor, but Oberon knew that he was a coward and, more importantly, not very good at starting fires. The thought of his brother torching the fairy city brought him to tears. Joan was crying as well. Jacquimo shook his head, but did not cry, he was busy breaking into the dam.

“Gotta hurry now. No water ‘n it burns. City burns, swamp burns. Swamp is me, through and through.”

Jacquimo produced a pearl-string of sharp stones from his coat that was twice as long as he was tall. He threw the tail end of the string into the base of the dam. Looping over a heavy branch, he held either end of the string pulled it back and forth. With every pass, the small stones cut the wood. Dust fell down around him like a snowstorm. He was through the first timber before Oberon could dry the tears on his cheek and had cut three before Joan saw what he was doing.

Once he opened a large enough hole, Jacquimo jumped up into the dam. His legs dangled down for a moment before he disappeared completely into the tangle of branches. There were sounds of sawing and breaking and then Jacquimo popped his head back out of the hole.

“Come on now! We find the branch. We yank the branch. Woosh-woosh, water everywhere.” He offered a hand each to Joan and Oberon. “Ain’t no wastin’ time!”

Oberon looked up into the darkness of the dam and froze,

but before he could give the matter a second thought Tail took Jacquimo's hand and they disappeared up into the darkness.

The inside of the beaver dam was pitch black save the jar of glow bugs that Jacquimo carried in front of them. The maze of tunnels was narrow and they crawled single file. Oberon was last, with nothing to look at but the heels of Joan's boots and, when the glow light peeked through, her backside.

With nothing to do but crawl in the darkness and fear for his life, Oberon's thoughts turned to all the people like Joan who did not have tails. How on earth did they balance themselves? Was it uncomfortable for them to sit down? Did they ever feel a phantom tail swaying behind like soldiers who longed to scratch amputated limbs? Was there once a time when everyone had tails? Would there come a day when there were no tails at all?

Oberon heard a noise at the end of the hallway. A beaver was approaching. Jacquimo tucked the jar of glow bugs into his jacket, leaving them in total darkness. He shushed them with a quick hiss and laid flat, hoping the beaver would pass without noticing. They were not so lucky. The beaver turned

the corner, smelled Joan and Oberon, and scurried away chirping an intruder alert.

“Gotta hurry now!” Jacquimo doubled his crawling pace. “Ain’t got a minute.”

Joan and Oberon couldn’t keep up with Jacquimo as he cut hard and fast turns throughout the dam. Above and below them the beavers pounded the alarm with their broad tails. On every side, Oberon heard the beavers’ sharp claws scurrying and scratching in the adjacent tunnels.

They went left and then right and then left again. They turned so quickly and so often that Oberon was sure they were crawling in circles. After what felt like an hour of crawling, and he wished he had a clock to measure, they arrived at the dam’s central chamber.

Every tunnel in the dam met in the domed lodge. The lodge was warm and damp with piles of delicious bark for the beavers to consume in each other’s good company. Each beaver family had a spot of its own where the adults oversaw the adolescents and they, in turn, looked after the kits. With the adults out guarding and maintaining the recently relocated dams, the adolescents retreated immediately to guard the kits once they saw the intruders.

“That’s it! Thassa a stick!” Jacquimo pointed to the center of the dome. There was a single key stick, as thick as a finger and as long as an arm, that held the entire dam together.

“You climb up now! Quick, quick!”

Jacquimo got on all fours, making himself a stool for Joan to stand on. With one boot between his shoulders and one on his hips, her head was halfway to the key stick.

“Hurry Oberon!” she said, waving with urgency.

Oberon could feel the eyes of the young beavers upon him. They were scared and vulnerable. Together, if they rushed, they could subdue the invaders, but few of them had ever seen a person, let alone a fairy, and they were paralyzed.

Climbing onto Joan's shoulders Oberon could not reach the key stick with his hands. It was up to Tail. Stretching up, up, up, Tail wrapped his bristles around the stick. Tail jiggled the stick and every timber in the dam shook with it.

"Pull it down, Tail!" shouted Joan, struggling to hold Oberon as he swayed.

Tail wavered. Tail and Oberon shared a set of eyes and neither could stand to pull the lodge down around the beavers. This was their home. They did nothing to deserve such destruction.

The adult beavers stormed in with speed and ferocity, gnashing their teeth and showing their claws. Tail let go of the stick and the tower of intruders toppled to the ground.

The beavers did not attack. They didn't need to. Joan, Oberon, and Jacquimo surrendered immediately.

The Wizard Randor was all too pleased to see Joan and Oberon lead across the top of the dam as Mercya burned in the distance.

In his heart, the Wizard leaped and danced, sure that fate was shining down on him like never before. Soon Kalif and Albion would be joined in peace and the fairies, though they could never be fully exterminated, would be crippled in body and spirit.

Still, there was the question of what to do with Oberon. The Wizard watched as Tail swayed back and forth in the darkness. The sight of it wiped the joy clean from his heart. Oberon could not be executed, he was royalty after all, and he only kidnapped the Princess, not killed her. Some other justice would be necessary to bring comfort to the newly joined kingdom.

“We must amputate the tail for the sake of both of our countries,” he said to King Camilo and Dr. Jal’al, but loud enough for all to hear. “It must be public. How else can we make peace?”

King Camilo knew this was coming and that it was

wrong. Watching his daughter, his strong, beautiful Jarocasta marched like a convict by the beavers brought him close to tears. He bit down on the inside of his cheek, holding back the tears as the dam held the waters of the Nahal.

“In all my years, I’ve never seen peace made with a sword. Not on the battlefield and not on the executioner’s block. When Merowech and Jarocasta wed the boy will be my family, Wizard, not yours. I will love him as he is. In Kalif, that is what *family* means.”

The King’s words wounded the Wizard Randor deeply. After raising the two princes since their parent’s death he felt suddenly replaceable, good for prognostications and parlor tricks but nothing more. He had no royal blood, no kingdom of his own, only a place behind the Throne Tree to whisper in Merowech’s ear.

It was not until Joan and Oberon reached the torchlight that their faces could be seen and Jacquimo’s could not be seen even then. The vigilant beavers saw their prisoners to the bank of the Nahal, handed them over to the Albion Guard, then fortified their position with more sharpened sticks.

Joan wanted to run to her father, hug him with all her might, and return home to Kalif. She could see in his eyes and the tears behind them that they weren’t going home. She stood her ground, holding Oberon and Jacquimo behind her.

“Step away from the criminals, Princess!” the Wizard yelled, breaking the tense silence.

“Ain’t that the crow callin’ the raven black!” said Jacquimo.

“The only criminals are those who stopped the flow of this river and set fire to the Fairy City” Joan replied.

“You’re mistaken and confused by your captors. All of this was for you and for your safe recovery, your Highness” said the Wizard.

“HaHAAAAAAAA!” Jacquimo laughed. “I see nows why yous left.”

“Please, Princess, come with us. Meroweck will forgive you and you will be wed as planned” said the Wizard.

“Forgive me? Me?” Joan shook her head. “Father?”

King Camilo, in all of his wisdom, did not know what to do next. These were dangerous times.

“Do you not see that this is wrong, father? The fairies have done nothing! Their city is burning!” She pointed at the city in the distance. “Father, help them!”

“I’m sorry, Jarcosta.”

Joan’s throat tightened. The itchy bumps crawled up her chest and onto her neck. Her knees knocked together.

“Set my friends free and open the water. Do that and I will come with you. I will even marry the prince,” said Joan through her tightening throat.

“Your friends?” said the Wizard. “She is not in her right mind. Guards, secure the Princess!”

Before the Albion Guard reached her, King Camilo ran to his daughter, catching her only a moment before she collapsed from her allergy.

“Dr. Jal’al!”

The doctor ran to his aide as Oberon and Jacquimo backed away, surrounded by soldiers.

“The Fairy Flu! She was in the city! She may have the flu!” shouted one of the guards, alarming all around her. The Albion Guard and the Kalifian soldiers stepped back and then stepped back again, some even running away at full speed. The Fairy Flu was thought to be as contagious as it was deadly.

“She has no flu, she’s just scared!” said Oberon. No one listened.

“Guards, seize that fairy!” commanded the Wizard.

“Destroy the dam. You must destroy it. Father...” Joan whispered to her father before collapsing from the exertion.

The blades of swords and points of spears closed in around Oberon and Jacquimo.

“Ain’t no jails for Jacquimo...” He produced a jar of wasps, shook it violently and then spiked it on the ground, shattering the glass. The wasps buzzed and bit everyone in sight as Jacquimo hid beneath his coat.

After Tail was bitten for the second time and Oberon the fifth, Tail reached beneath the vest for the baton. Tail waved and slashing at the wasps with little success in hitting them, but a cold, musical wind whipped in at once, scattering the wasp and churning the waters.

As Tail found a rhythm, the music of the wind rose to such a crescendo that the guards could not hold their weapons or secure their armor to their bodies. The Wizard’s beard blew up over his eyes and ripped his staff from his hand. His cloak flipped over his head revealing his dirty undergarments, but it was too windy for anyone to see or laugh.

The music was deep and powerful. The Maestro’s overture to the Glacial Queen was full of the passion and conflict of unrequited love. The gale was strong enough to tear the timbers from beaver dam and send waves of water splashing up over its edge.

From the seam of his coat Jacquimo saw all around him blowing in the wind while Oberon and Tail remained unmoved. He was at the eye of the storm. Jacquimo crawled to the Prince and stood next to him, watching as Tail whipped the wind up around them.

“That’s some instrument! Keep on with the music!” he shouted, pulling Oberon towards the dam. The thick mud and heavy tree trunks were breaking apart and blowing over the falls as the beavers retreated within.

Joan broke free of her fear for a moment and grabbed her father's shirt, pulling him close.

"Help them. Please."

King Camilo looked down at his daughter, her eyes blood-shot and nearly closed. Around them swirled magic, music, and chaos beyond any the King ever saw.

"I love you, Jarocasta." He squeezed her hand and held it to her chest, pulling her close. Releasing her, King Camilo rose to his feet and stumbled through the maelstrom after Oberon and Jacquimo, reaching them as they stepped out onto the dam.

Weaving through the sharpened sticks the King, the Prince, and swamp man left the Albion Guard on the shore. In the center of the dam, they could see down into the domed beaver lodge where the key stick still held the dam together. It was the only piece of wood not shaking in the wind and music.

"Gotta pull that key stick or ain't no Mercya! Ain't no swamp!" yelled Jacquimo into the wind, shielding them from the spray and debris with his coat.

"I'll go," said the King.

"But, King, you'll..." Oberon protested.

"Whoever goes down there isn't coming back. I can't navigate that swamp. You go. Get to safety. And promise me, Prince! Promise me you'll take care of my daughter!" the King shouted into the wind.

"I promise."

"...and be a good king."

King Camilo plunged headfirst into the thicket of mud and branches, pulling himself down towards the key stick. He worked his way down and down, first touching it with his fingers and then grasping it in his hand. Below him, on the floor of the lodge, the beavers saw him, knowing at once the fate of their beloved dam was sealed.

“I’m so sorry!” the King shouted to the beavers. “Save yourselves!”

The beavers fled upwards towards the banks and out to the river through underwater tunnels. The kits clung to their mothers as the males lead the adolescents towards the surface.

When the lodge was clear the King, with all of his strength, yanked the key stick free. The Nahal River, held too long against its will, scattered the beaver lodge as if it were a box of toothpicks. Mud and timber exploded and cascaded over the falls.

Wrapping Oberon beneath his coat, Jacquimo relaxed his body and spoke his most powerful, secret prayer as the dam collapsed beneath them. Tail wove his way around the swamp man’s waist and pulled him tight as the wave of wood and water lifted them from their feet, throwing them with full force into the churning water below.

Oberon awoke to the strong smell of swamp air and spicy soup. The trees drank deeply of the restored water and the soup was reduced to a thick tar in the bottom of the kettle drum. It was an odor that could wake the dead, which was a very good thing because Oberon was as close to the dark door as he could be. Once his eyes came into focus he made out the wooden spoon in front of him and Jacquimo's muddy green face and bright eyes just beyond.

Jacquimo held the soup to his lips. As the soup dripped over his tongue and into his stomach it lit a fire that warmed his entire body. Oberon did not feel well, but he felt alive, which is the best feeling there is. Tail waved as the soup coursed all the way down to his bristles, then returned to the ground in sleepy exhaustion.

Oberon sat up and took another sip of soup. Everywhere around him was the scattered wreckage of the dam. Clumps of wood and earth littered the ground and hung high in the branches of trees. The Nahal River was restored to strength

and the deep puddles of the swam were as murky and muddy as ever.

High above him at the edge of the falls, the beavers were dragging what was left of their dam back upstream, an impossible task that would take an army many years, but the beavers would manage it in weeks. They would build a new dam of such size and defenses that it would never be disturbed again.

The swamp men and women broke camp faster than they made it, splitting the fallen dam timbers to make skinny canoes to carry them downstream. With the waters full and running they made good time towards Mercya, but with each and every stroke of their makeshift paddles, another smell grew in their noses. Around the green moss, underneath the broken dam timbers, and stronger even than the soup, was the unmistakable odor of hot, wet ash. That smell was all that was left of Mercya.

The swamp men and women did not split off to return to their homes, nor did they play their instruments until they reached sight of the city. Upon seeing the destruction they could not express their sadness but with song. The tune was in a minor key, peaceful and slow. It brought little comfort to the musicians and the fairies as they floated into the city, but it was the lone comfort they could share.

What was built of wood was burned and what was stone was smoked black. The water that flooded down from the broken dam smashed their boats to pieces, threw barges onto roofs, and left a high water mark on the ruined second stories. Everything above the line still smoked, everything below it was wet and ruined. Clothes and housewares were scattered everywhere. Wardrobes, chairs, tables, beds, and pianos floated haphazardly in the canals.

The fairies, fairy children and fairy parents, fairy friends and neighbors, fairy shopkeepers and trade fairies, fairy aunts

and uncles, fairy pets and feral fairy felines and fidos fought back fairy tears and fairy heartbreak as they cared for their fairy injured and brought forth their fairy dead.

The fairies laid the dead together in the pavilion, each with a piece of fruit or vegetable laid upon their chest for the journey onward. The dead were of every shape and age, with tails, wings, hooves, fur, and in every color, but all were burned, many so badly that they could not be recognized at all.

Titania did not withhold her tears as she looked over the pavilion. She let them wash down over her cheeks and onto the ground in great sobs, holding each and every living fairy in arms reach close to her breast in a deep embrace. Once all had gathered together, she led them in a funeral song:

*No, the dead ain't gone,
They live on in our song.
Death ain't no ones choice,
So raise up that singing voice!*

*Every fairy song we sing
Flies on up with holy wings.
Can't see God or love or air
Dead are with us everywhere.*

OVER AND OVER THE FAIRIES SANG THIS REFRAIN. THEIR voices rose and fell in great bursts of emotion, first with tears and then with laughter. As the song grew in tempo and volume the fairies danced between the bodies as if the

stomping and waving could wake the dead from their sleep. They were so loud and exuberant that Oberon and Tail could not help but join them, singing and dancing with more joy and sadness that they ever felt before.

Oberon thought of all the poor fairies, but also of his parents, of Joan's brothers, and poor King Camilo who gave his life to save them. He thought of everyone who had ever died or would die, which included everyone dancing there in the pavilion and himself and Tail too.

The fairies were right, the dead were all around them.

The Governess Luperca was bringing in the waist of the Princess' wedding dress at a sewing table on the far side of the room. The stress of Joan's ordeal and strange swamp food took an inch from her already trim waist, making the dress look less than perfect. After all that transpired, the Governess would not allow a single stitch to be out of place. More importantly, the needlework distracted her from her grief.

The Governess never imagined losing the King before her own passing. He was the most youthful, vivacious man she ever met, the sort that lived well past one hundred years pinching nurses all the while. His steady hand and calm wisdom guided Kalif through so many difficult times. Now he was gone.

In Kalif, the heralds were told to spread the news of the King's death only in the context of rescuing his daughter and, whenever possible, to blame the fairies. Even without the truth, the Kalifians blamed the Albions, if only out of habit. Rumors spread from the guards to the cavalry and then all across the kingdom. Allegations that the King was murdered

could not be contained. Only Joan's marriage to Merowech would quiet the rumors and silence the drums of war.

Joan sat at the open window watching Persephone circle the Throne Grove, hunting the flycatchers that darted between the trees. The loss of her father was too much to bear, so she buried it deep within herself, entombed with her brothers.

She looked up at the Northwest Tower and imagined her friend Oberon sitting in the window. She picture him waving to her and Tail waving too. She wondered if they were alive and if she would ever see them again. Since he was her first friend, besides Persephone, she was missing a friend for the first time.

"I know you hate me, Jarocasta," said the Governess. She did not look up from her needlework. "You've always hated me. You screamed yourself blue the first time I held you. You screamed when I changed your diapers. You screamed when I woke you in the morning and you screamed when I put you to bed. You screamed when I taught you to read and how to count on your fingers. You screamed at me when we buried your brothers, who I loved as my own."

Joan turned from the window to look at the Governess. She could not remember a time when she smiled, so it was difficult to interpret her sadness. She was a great cloaked mountain weathering eons of storms.

"This may be the longest you've gone *without* screaming at me" she added.

"What's the point?" said the Princess.

"I've been asking you that for years. But 'Jarocasta only answers no...' Isn't that right?"

"Not to the wedding. I can't say no to that."

"You already did, my dear. You may have fooled these brutish Albions. They are all men and thus easily deceived. There isn't a warrior in the known world, not even a fairy,

that could hold a knife to *your* throat.” The Governess pulled her needle high and tapped the vein of her neck. “What did you think would happen? Did you think they would just let you go? That you and the prince could just live out your lives with the fairies?”

“What do you know about our plans?”

“I know that you didn’t have one. The boy didn’t. To think of it, the two of you, *royalty*, thinking you could run away from home like little children. Did you think no one would come after you?”

“I don’t need to hear this from you. Not now.”

“Yes, you do. What’s more, you must hear the truth: you brought destruction to the fairy city.”

“I did not light the torches. I didn’t set Mercya on fire!”

“A princess can place blame, a queen cannot. *Everything* is your responsibility. And unless some daring knight comes to challenge for your hand, and I highly doubt that considering your *unladylike behavior*, you will be QUEEN of the great, united kingdom, of Kalif and Albion both.”

The Governess shook her head at the thought. She detested the idea of sharing a kingdom with the uncivilized northerners. Let alone having so brutish a queen and all the more because that queen was *her* responsibility. She was an embarrassment to the proud lineage of Wolfmothers, if they would even have her anymore.

When the Governess looked up from sewing she found Joan standing at the sewing table before her.

“What do you mean, ‘challenge for my hand?’”

“Oh... never mind. I was just...”

“Tell me, Governess.”

“It is an Albion custom and stupid one at that. If one of their brides loves another, he may challenge the groom for her hand. Something to do with their *Albion the Great*.” She said the hero’s name with disdain. “Legend has it that he chal-

lenged for his bride's hand before becoming king of this wretched forest. Rather violent and pointless, but what can you expect from such people? Marriage is not about love and it never has been."

Joan headed for the door. Noting that she was no longer sitting at the window, Persephone swept in with a screech and followed Joan out, clipping the Governess Luperca's head as flew by.

"Where do you think *you're* going?!" yelled the Governess, unable to get out of her seat without tearing her stitches and the wedding dress.

"To get my father's sword."

Joan burst through the Feasting Hall doors with her father's sword before her and Persephone swooping in behind. Merowech dropped the turkey leg he was eating but continued to chew with his mouth open as his bride marched to the head table.

"I, Jarocasta of Kalif, hereby challenge you, Merowech of Albion for my own hand in marriage."

"You want to marry yourself?" he said, mouth full of food. "That's impossible."

"No, but I do not wish to marry you, who I do not love. Since there is none other to challenge for my hand, I will do it myself in accordance with the laws of Albion."

Merowech was confused. He turned to the Wizard who was sitting beside him as always. "Can she do that?"

"No, your Highness. That's not how it works."

"You can't do that." The Prince picked up his turkey and continued eating.

"Of course I can. I am skilled with a sword and have never been bested."

"Except by my brother."

“That doesn’t count. Face me, if not for my hand, then for your own honor.”

“What honor is there in beating a girl?” laughed Merowech.

“Come now, Princess,” interjected the Wizard, “you are still confused by your ordeal. Perhaps you should rest. You are to be wed tomorrow!”

Joan knocked the turkey leg from Merowech’s mouth with a dash of her sword.

“Face me Merowech, or know thyself forever as a coward, not only to me, your wife but to every man you suppose to rule. *Especially in Kalif.*”

“Be careful, your Highness.” The Wizard was very concerned, not only for their marriage but for the future of both kingdoms. “If you lose...”

“Lose?! Ha! You think I may lose?” Merowech stood up from the table, knocking his chair over backward.

“If you face me and win, then you will have proven yourself worthy of my hand. Should I win, I will return to Kalif to consider marriage to you at a later time, with the knowledge that you were man enough to face me.”

“Man enough to beat a *girl*? In single combat? How ridiculous!”

“I am a *woman* and a warrior.”

Whispers rippled through the Feasting Hall. It did not matter who whispered or what they whispered, Merowech heard the worst of it. His subjects thought him weak, and what was worse, not fit to be king.

“Do not fall for her tricks, Merowech” advised the Wizard. “Women are full of tricks. This is not a fight you can win.”

“Can’t win? Can’t win?” said Merowech in disbelief.

“Of course you can win, your Highness, but in this case winning will not be winning.”

“Winning is always winning and I always win!” said Merowech, ignorant of the countless times he did not win, forgetting even Angus, the shepherd boy who he could not beat just days before.

“If you always win, what are you waiting for?” Joan could see that Merowech was close, but if he refused her, her cause would be lost.

For the sake of her kingdom, to save them all from war, she would marry the buffoon, but if she could get him to fight her, she might return to Kalif a champion without spilling a drop of blood. Except for Merowech’s blood, which she was happy to spill. She needed to send him over the edge.

“Oberon would face me.”

Merowech’s blood boiled. “Oberon? My fairy brother?”

“Yes. Oberon. The Fairy Prince is far more man than *you*.” Joan pointed her sword at Merowech’s heart.

His eyes shook with rage and his every muscle tensed. This *girl* needed to be taught a lesson, not only about her place in this kingdom but about the *man* she was marrying.

“Let us go to the arena to settle this.”

Joan bowed deeply. “After you, your Highness.”

The arena in Castle Albion never saw such a crowd. Word of Joan's challenge traveled faster than even her goshawk could fly. Every servant, guard, knight, maid, noble, musician, magician, and fool pressed themselves against the rails to watch the fight. From the sound of the cheers, it was unclear who the crowd was rooting for: Joan or their own prince. Dr. Jal'al and the Wizard stood at ground level, restraining the Governess Luperca, who screamed herself hoarse within minutes.

Joan did not take her eyes off the Prince from the moment she confronted him in the Feasting Hall. She focused on every nuance of his body. His throat was bare and he held his chin high. The length of his arms gave him an advantage in reach, but he stood with his feet flat and too close together. His hands were large, but soft and without scars. The way he smiled at the cheering crowd indicated that he would not take her seriously, and with that, she would defeat him.

"Chose your weapons. Anything you want." Merowech pointed at the rack. There was all manner of blades, from

daggers to broadswords, as well as shields, a mace, a scythe, and all manners of pointy, sharp, and dangerous things.

“Chose your weapon, *your Highness*” she corrected him. “My father’s sword will be just fine.”

“As you wish. Would you like armor or a shield, *your Highness*? I would hate for you to be disfigured the day before our wedding.”

“My sword will be protection enough.” She rolled the blade from hand to hand, eliciting applause from the growing crowd.

Merowech stood before the weapons rack long enough to create the appearance that he was making an artful decision, when in fact, all attending knew that he would select the broadsword.

After allowing his hand to hover he grasped the sword by its hilt and held it high in the air. When the crowd did not cheer sufficiently he tossed it into the air and caught it by the hilt on the way down. All but Joan were impressed. She was busy focusing on his grip, noting how deep he held the sword in his hand and where the blade would be most easily parried.

“Shall we begin?” said Merowech.

“You honor me with your urgency, your highness.”

“What rules should we fight by, Princess? When will I have bested you?”

“What does *your* Albion custom dictate to fight for my hand in marriage?”

“To the death. All else would merely be sport. But if I kill you, and surely I would, what would be my prize? You are no good to marry dead.”

“I am the sole living sovereign of Kalif,” said the Princess as she walked around Merowech, “should you best me, and I perish, all that I have is yours.”

“Don’t I get that anyway? When we marry?”

“I have nothing else to give but my life and my kingdom.”

“If it comes to a final blow, I may kill you” joked Merowech, dragging the tip of his broadsword in front of him.

“I can promise the same,” said Joan with deadly seriousness.

“SHALL I FIGHT HER?!” The Prince asked the crowd. They cheered their approval. “Well then, *en garde!*”

Merowech took a wide stance and cocked his sword back with both hands. Joan watched him carefully from a safe range, lightly swinging her sword until the blade felt like an extension of her arm. She drew a line in the dirt and bowed to Merowech, the custom of Kalifian swordsmen. Merowech did not return the courtesy.

As everyone expected, Merowech charged Joan at a full run, hoping to strike her down with a single blow. His speed surprised her, though the tactic did not. Joan stepped toward his blade, ducked beneath it, and slashed at Merowech’s hands with the blade of her sword.

Merowech’s momentum carried him into a spin that would have sent him all the way around if Joan had not kicked him in the back, returning the Prince to where he started. He was then aware that he misjudged his opponent. Joan was no flower of the court, she was a coiled dragon on the attack.

Joan paced forward with her sword low and behind her hip, a style Merowech never saw from peasant trainers. She moved from side to side as she approached, drawing his nervous, swaying sword back and forth in front of his chest. He shuffled his feet, unsure of where to place them.

The crowd, once unclear of who to support, was now silent, afraid that they were witnesses, if not accomplices, in the death of their prince.

Joan attacked with a lunge and then cut Merowech’s exposed left knee, before dodging the slow counter that

followed. His pant leg opened with blood. Merowech held Joan at bay with the outstretched point of his sword.

“You’re a feisty one!” he said, trying to calm his nerves.

Joan did not accept his compliment. She swiped at his broadsword from both sides, knocking it to and fro. Merowech took another wild swing that missed Joan by only an inch. The sound of the sword passing her ear whispered a reminder: she too had never been in *true* combat. At once she could feel the itchy bumps below her shirt and her throat tightening.

“*Not now... Not now!*” she said aloud to herself, “I am *not* afraid.”

“Well, you should be!” Merowech believed her words were for him and that such bluster was a part of all sword fights. It certainly was in the knight stories the Wizard read to him as a boy. He thought of what a valiant knight might say.

“Now! Taste my blade!”

He charged again. Joan evaded him, but with less skill and ease. Her sword hung limply in her hand so she took it with both, holding it upright before her in a style that she never practiced. The tip of the sword waved in slow circles.

Joan knew that her future and the future of her kingdom lie in her next attack. Soon her allergy will overtake her. Her fear *of fear*, of the allergy itself, was the greatest fear of all.

Joan closed the distance between them in a rushed step and drove at Merowech’s heart with the point of her blade. If she were at full strength, with all the force of her being, the Crown Prince would have died with iron in his heart, but Joan’s fear left her wide the distance of a finger. The tip of her blade stuck into the shirt beneath Merowech’s armpit.

Merowech, by surprise and accident alone, closed his arm on the sword, tripped, and stumbled away from Joan, ripping the sword from her weakened hands. The crowd was shocked, though not as much as Merowech, to find the Princess

disarmed. Her face was red with hives. Her heart palpitations and closed throat brought her to her knees.

Before Meroweck could level his sword at the Princess, Dr. Jal'al came to her defense, throwing himself upon the Princess.

"Enough! Victory is yours" he said, pulling Joan's clothes loose so that she could breathe.

"Well... Of course it is! I *always* win!" Meroweck thrust his sword skyward to claim the soft praise of his subjects. The conflict resolved in such a strange manner that most believed that Joan was poisoned or bewitched by the Wizard. Rumors to this effect would live on in rumors indefinitely.

Joan, gathering her breath, wept on Dr. Jal'al's shoulder as he led her out of the arena. She buried her head in his cloak, hiding not from the Albions, but from the sight of her father and brothers. She knew their eyes were upon her and that she had failed them.

Persephone watched her master disappear into the castle from a perch in the eaves of the arena. She watched Joan carefully, for she knew broken spirits well. She remembered the wild birds who took too quickly to their hoods, those that were happy to take food from a hand, forever free from the endless hunting of survival. They sat calmly as new, savage hunters beat their wings bloody beside them, trying to break free of their chains.

Joan, though beaten at that moment, was not one of those birds. She and Persephone shared a single spirit and what was wild within them would never be tamed, not by a Prince of Albion, not by marriage, and not even by death.

Persephone screeched, loud enough for Joan to hear her through the stone walls of Castle Albion, and Joan did hear, and then the great grey goshawk took to wing, southbound to Mercya.

The fairies wasted no time in rebuilding Mercya. Every fairy did all he or she could for their fellow fairy. That was the fairy way. As they worked they promised to each other, over and over, that Mercya would be more beautiful than it ever was. They would always remember when it burned and why, but in the future when strangers arrived seeking refuge, they would never know that the city was built upon wreckage.

The oldest fairies, who lived in the city for three hundred years or more, saw Mercya burn in their lifetimes, only to be rebuilt and burned again. As long as hatred for the strange and different lived in the human heart, the fairy city would never be safe. But as long as there were fairies, Mercya would remain.

Oberon constructed a crane with a set of pulleys that enabled him to clear debris many times his own weight. The crane did the work of countless strong fairies and brought him renowned as a tinkerer. The praise and warm greetings showered upon him meant the world to Oberon. He was rightly afraid that the fairies would blame him for the

destruction that Merowech visited upon the city, but the fairies were kind and wise and did not blame him for his brother's evil.

At the end of a long day of labor, Oberon, Tail, Jacquimo, Buttons, and Titania sat at a cooking fire in the pavilion. They were satisfied with their progress rebuilding the city, but aching from tip to toe. All were hungry for the fish Jacquimo was cooking and spicing.

"Even with these wings my feet are a-SCREAMIN'!" said Titania. "Someone ought to rub 'em for me!" There were no volunteers. "Ain't no point in being queen if I can't get my feets rubbed. Ain't no point at all."

Buttons nuzzled her feet with her enormous head, which was a kind gesture but did little to relieve Titania's aching feet.

Earlier in the day Tail came across a piece of chalk and after not drawing for some time, he busied himself with a picture of Castle Albion on the ground beside Oberon. The firelight danced across the drawing, making the castle look alive with the tall throne trees swaying at its center.

"That's where you's from?" asked Jacquimo.

Oberon pointed to the tall Northwest Tower. "We lived up there. All the way at the top."

"And what's that?" Jacquimo asked, pointing at the clock that Oberon never hung, but Tail drew with perfect accuracy.

"Oh, that's a clock."

"What's it do?"

"It tells you what time it is."

"Oooooo..." Jacquimo was impressed. "Breakfast times, lunch times, dinner times... That's good!" He thought it over a second longer, turning the fish over the fire.

"So you's wanting everyone to have 'm at the same times? Ain't fair if you ask Jacquimo. If I's up early and I catch a fish, big fish, why shouldn't I eats that fish right aways if I's want?"

Why's I gotta wait for someone else's breakfast time? I could end up waitin' all the day long for them to catch a fish!"

Oberon smiled. "It's more precise than that. It doesn't just tell you that it's breakfast time, it tells you what time it is. There are twenty-four hours in a day, an hour is sixty minutes, and each minute is sixty seconds. Seconds last as long as they take to count. One, two, three, four, and so on, all the way to sixty."

"Hahaaaa! Counting every second? Why?"

"With a clock, you would know when you caught your fish, say seven thirty in the morning, and then when you ate it for breakfast at nine."

"Nine where?"

Oberon sighed. It seemed impossible to explain.

"Maybe it's a dumb idea. But there isn't much else to do when you are locked up in a tower." Tail dusted Oberon's face with chalk in protest. "Sorry, Tail. Not *alone*, but just the two of us."

"Who locked you up in that tower? Ain't no kinda thing to do to a boy!" Jacquimo had never heard of the fairy prince in the tower. Such things were of little concern to the swamp people.

Oberon looked at the picture of the castle and his beloved Tail. For so long he blamed the Wizard, his brother, and all of Albion for being shut up in the tower. But that wasn't the truth, was it?

Oberon could leave when he wanted, and sometimes he did late at night. The door wasn't locked and the tower wasn't guarded. He believed that all the people in Albion hated him and fairies, but how could he know? He'd never met them. Before taking the Princess hostage he'd never been further than he could see from the tower.

"I did. I locked myself in the tower" Oberon said, with a tear in his eye. Titania put her big, heavy, purple arm around

him and pulled him close. "I could have left, but I didn't. I was afraid."

A puff of wind blew the chalk dust off of the castle drawing, leaving the picture bright and clear. Tail perked up in exclamation, noticing that there was no wind at all.

It was Persephone. The grey goshawk fluttered and flopped on the drawing, screeching and squawking with crazed vigor and smudging Tail's chalk.

"Could y'all *please* fetch the parrot? This hawk is giving me an earache!" ordered Titania. The parrot, his green feathers still covered in soot, arrived immediately with the strange, hairy little man that carried him.

The parrot faithfully translated Persephone's tale of Joan's defeat and told them that the Princess would be married the next day. Persephone, unaccustomed to having a translator, went on at great length about the caging of wild birds, Joan's noble spirit, and how she had, in fact, freed Oberon.

"Only thing I hate more than people not marrying the ones they love is marrying someone they hate," said Titania.

They agreed that Joan would have to be rescued. Rescuing princesses was at the very heart of fairy culture. But how? The castle was filled with Albions best knights and soldiers as well as the Kalifian Royal Guard. There would be Albion nobility as well. The fairies were brave and held great power, but were deeply damaged by the fire.

Oberon stared at the picture of Castle Albion, searching for a plan. As he watched Tail redraw the clock on the Northwest tower bells went off in his head, the kind of bells that might one day ring when the clock struck a certain time.

Joan did not wear white before her wedding day. Not a single time. White clothes soiled easily and were too visible in anything but a snowstorm. When it snowed in Kalif, and that was only once a decade, the kingdom celebrated with a day of quiet reflection. Albion was the opposite that day: green, warm, and noisy with crowds.

Joan watched the nobles gathering in the Throne Grove from her window. They stood beneath the trees of their ancestors if they had them, or those they most revered if they did not. With her in her suite was the olive tree her father chose for her. As a part of the wedding ceremony, the tree would be planted beside Merowech's to forever grow in its shadow.

It was a fine Kalifian olive tree. As tall as the Princess and equal her width in the branches, the trunk split three ways at her waist into equal branches with green and silver leaves and white flowers from its first fruiting. The earthenware pot was decorated with a scene from the Kalifian countryside depicting vaqueros on mustangs chasing a mammoth.

Joan did not go with her father to pick out the tree. She

resisted every element of the wedding proceedings, especially those pertaining to Albion culture. She couldn't remember what she did instead of visiting the olive orchard with him, but she knew her excuse was a lie and she regretted that.

The presence of the tree was strange. It was all too alive for the dark room and to seemed that the other furniture envied it. The olive tree was strong, beautiful, and proud. Planted in the right spot with full exposure it could live and flower for a thousand years. It would never become furniture.

Joan wondered if Throne Grove was even suitable for olive trees. The Albions claimed the earth was holy and good for all vegetation, but how could that be? When trees failed, and they surely did, they did not leave them on display. There were no stumps in the Throne Grove. There was no reason to believe a Kalifian olive tree would survive in Albion any longer than she would.

Sitting on the edge of the olive tree pot Joan caught her reflection across the room in a full-length mirror and did not recognize herself. She never wore white and she didn't wear dresses. This was not her room. The tree was the only thing that gave her any comfort. It was out of place and so was she. Joan put her hand on the tree and ran her fingers along the branches, comforting the tree in the way she wished to be comforted.

As Joan's fingers dragged along the branches she felt a set of ridges beneath her fingertips that she knew were out of place. They were too straight to be natural. Circling the tree she found carvings in each of the tree's three branches. Carved in block letters on each of the branches were the names of her brothers: Camilo, Mateo, and Domingo. Her father carved their names there for her to find.

Once the footmen took the tree down to the Throne Grove for the wedding ceremony, the only thing out of place in the room was the woman in the white dress.

“Once I am married, I will be king” Merowech said to himself standing before a mirror as valets clothed him Albion blue and white.

“Yes, your Highness, that is the law. None may ascend to the throne of Albion until they are rightfully wed” said the Wizard, dressed for the wedding in his most elegant robes.

“It’s a stupid law. I don’t need a queen to be king.”

“No, but you do need a *wife*, Merowech. Albion the Great would not sit on the Throne Tree until he married. It was his wife’s voice that whispered to him through the tree.”

“I’m not having that *Kalifian* give *me* any council. She hates me! She’d suggest that I leap off a cliff.”

“There is a rough road for you to travel with the Princess, I’m sure, but Jarocasta is a prudent woman and a good match. You have many similar interests: fighting, riding, hunting. In time you may grow to love each other. More important is that you respect each other.”

“I certainly don’t respect her with a sword. She is a coward.” Merowech knew this was not true, a coward would

not have challenged him, but he knew no other way to speak of his bride.

The valets finished dressing the Prince by placing a crown made of alder wood upon his head and secured his father's sword around his waist.

"You look quite regal, Merowech." The Wizard swelled with pride. Despite his shortcomings in manners, grace, diction, charity, morality, honesty, self-control, and basic decency, Merowech was as close to a son as the Wizard would ever know.

"Did you ever marry, Wizard?" Merowech realized that he knew next to nothing about the reason. It was for good reason, to ensure a mystical air the Wizard kept his history to himself.

"I did, your highness."

"...and?"

"We parted soon after."

"Such a thing is allowed?" asked Merowech, hoping that a quick divorce could apply to his own marriage.

"All things are either coming together or moving apart. It is the way of nature. We married in secret and our separation was a private matter."

"A secret? What kind of secret?" Merowech loved secrets, especially telling them to anyone who would listen.

"I was not a prince, like you. I was far from my place of birth and knew no one, so there was no one to attend the wedding on my behalf. My bride... her people forbade the union."

"On what grounds? You are the great Wizard Randor!"

The Wizard laughed. "I have not *always* been great and not always a wizard." He straightened Merowech's coat, eye-to-eye with the Prince who once stood at his knees. "I was an actor and hopeful musician in those times. Touring 'round

with the companies that would have me, but it never took them long to cast me off.”

“Because of your magic? Did you cast spells on the audience?”

“No, no” laughed the Wizard. “I just wasn’t very good. In fact, I stunk. She didn’t care though and she was a star! Her entire troupe was famous and she was the lead. They brought great joy during the sad times of war with Kalif.”

“Was she beautiful?”

“The most beautiful woman in the world.”

“Well, what did she look like? Tell me.”

“To start with, she was *purple*.”

“*PURPLE!*” screamed Merowech.

“Yes, she was purple. She was giant and purple with tiny green wings. She was a fairy, Merowech. Titania, the most magnificent fairy in the whole world and I loved her.”

Merowech pushed the Wizard away from him with both hands. The betrayal made his stomach boil.

“YOU?! Wizard! Of all people... A *fairy lover*? And *HER*? That... *THING?*” Merowech hated fairies more than anything in the world and those that loved fairies second.

“They were different times, your highness. Once the flu began to spread we could not be together. The fairies were hunted and went into hiding or escaped to the swamp. Those of us that knew a fairy, or in my case loved one, were in as much danger as they were.”

The Wizard watched as Merowech fell to pieces in front of him. The Wizard had not lied outright, but the love between them was gone in an instant. Merowech sat on his bed to brace himself from falling.

“And my father, did he know? Or did you hide it from him too? And what of my mother? Did she know that the stink of those *things* was on you? As they took their last breathes did they know that you, *you*, who was supposed to be attending

them, very well brought the disease upon them? Was it you that cursed my brother?" Merowech destroyed the room in a rage.

"The fairy flu only affects those with fairy blood."

"What are you saying, you charlatan?"

"Your mother, your father, your brother, everyone in your family has fairy blood! Every Albion who has reigned in this castle was part fairy!"

"I am not a FAIRY!" Merowech screamed at the top of his lungs.

"You are, my Prince, and there is nothing wrong with that. I promise you."

"Wait," Merowech took a moment, breathing heavily, "the Princess, Jarocasta, her brothers died of the flu. I will not marry a woman with one drop of fairy blood! *ONE DROP!*"

"You have no choice, and neither does she. Don't you see? This is the only way to peace. For Albion, for Kalif, *and* for the fairies."

"Peace?" Merowech shook his head. "There will be no *peace*. You dirty fairy lover. You filth. I will marry the princess, and once I am king, every fairy, every person who has ever *seen* a fairy, will die by my hand. You, the Princess, my brother, every single one of you will face my sword until no one remembers or even *believes* that fairies existed at all."

No one knew Castle Albion as well as Oberon. Oberon and Tail snuck through every hallway, folded themselves into the clothes of every closet, and tucked themselves beneath every bed. Sneaking out of the castle at night, Oberon learned that there were many more ways through the walls than the front gate. There were cisterns and sewage pipes, servants entrances and secret passage for defense. Looking out from hills opposite Castle Albion he could picture them all.

Fearing reprisal from the fairies for the burning of Mercya, Meroweck ordered all of Albions troops to the castle's defense. The troops were happy to oblige as the royal wedding boasted finer food and drink than they would see again in their lifetimes.

There were delicacies from every corner of the kingdom and the Kalifians, under the Governess' orders, matched the effort. The soldiers ate and drank, missed their posts, drank and ate some more, onward until they were fat, drunk, and asleep in their boots.

Oberon listened as the castle trumpets rang across the

valley. It was the moment he was waiting for. He held up two identical, circular metal contraptions, showing them to Titania, Buttons, Jacquimo, and the swamp musicians - the entirety of their raiding party.

“First, I’m going to wind the top button on both,” he did so, “then I’m going to press both buttons at the same time. See? As the springs inside release, the arms will turn on both clocks, pointing to these numbers on the outside. When the long arm points straight down, it’s time to start playing.”

“*Time...*” Jacquimo looked at the odd little mechanical disks with their thin arms and numbers. The swamp musicians nodded in agreement, though there was little cause to believe they understood how the devices worked.

With the help of Tail and three tiny fairies Oberon made two little clocks. They were small replications of the tower clock that could only be constructed by tiny fairy hands.

“How will we know again?” Titania asked from astride Buttons, leaving nothing to chance.

“*Watch* it. You *watch* the clock. Both clocks are the same. See? He held them up together. “One day everyone will have clocks and they’ll all show the same time.”

“Why have more than one?” Titania wondered.

“Because when mine is pointing like *this*,” he showed them with his arms, “so will yours! That’s when you start playing.”

“What we gon’ play?” asked Jacquimo on behalf of the musicians.

“Anything you want, as long as it is loud. Hopefully it will be enough of a distraction for the princess and I to escape.”

“How loud’s loud?”

“How loud can you play?”

“Loud enough to shake your bones. Loud enough to uproot them trees. Loud enough to bring down them castle walls. Loud enough to wake the dead that be hanging all round here thick as that settlin’ fog.”

Oberon looked across the valley. A storm was settling in and every blade of grass stood up to meet it. The air was heavy and quiet until thunder rumbled in the distance.

“All them dead is here, Prince. I feel ‘em. You do too. They listenin’. They waiting. *Your* dead. *Our* dead. All them fairies and all the regular folk too. They be listen’ right now! HaHAAAA!!!! They gon’ wake up and dance, aren’t they? We gon’ play that wakin’ up song! ‘No one dead or livin’ gonna sleep when this ole swamp band starts rockin’! Hahaha!”

The swamp musicians nodded, smiling. They held their instruments with such confidence that Oberon knew it to be true.

Titania’s tiny green wings lifted her off of Buttons and set her down in front of Oberon. She straightened his shimmering blue vest with a tug and then ran her purple index finger along the etchings of Albion history on the chest.

“He’s right, Oberon. They’re all here with you. All them that came before. They were just like you, maybe more like you than even you know.”

Titania could see the fear in his eyes, the sweat on his brow, and she could feel his heart pumping beneath his vest. She drew Tail along in her hand. “Now you be careful in there. When you can’t be careful no more, be brave. Be so brave that everyone gotta be careful of *you!*”

Oberon nodded and took a big breath. “When the long hand points to the bottom, that’s when you start playing. Wish me luck?”

“Long as you got this Tail, you don’t need luck.” Titania smiled, patting Tail’s bristled tip. Tail stood up tall and gave them all a proud salute.

With that Oberon was off. He ran down through the Western Wood out of sight of the watchman on the castle walls. The woods were too thick to patrol and he was not

spotted by anyone but Persephone, who dipped and darted above him, keeping a careful lookout for the Prince.

Oberon emerged from the wood at the one part of Castle Albion that he knew was never guarded, the one part that no man had ever dared to scale: the Northwest Tower.

But Oberon was no man, for men did not have Tail and Tail was an excellent climber. So up they went. Brick by brick, they climbed the cool grey stone, never looking down for fear they might waiver, all the way to the very tip-top of the Northwest Tower, where there once lived a very lonely prince with a fairy tail.

Joan was more nervous than the last time she walked the long aisle of the Throne Grove. As she took Dr. Jal'al's arm instead of her father's, her anticipation mixed with despair and she could not hold back her tears. They soaked her veil and it clung to her face.

"Be strong, Jarocasta. For your kingdom. For your father." Dr. Jal'al led her forward, his bare feet silent in the soft dirt. He wore King Camilo's sword to honor him, but it fit poorly. It was the first time the doctor carried a sword and it showed by banging against his leg as he walked.

Joan did not walk the length of the aisle, she floated it. Her allergies did not claim her body because she did not fear. Fear is a feeling and Joan felt nothing, not even her feet upon the ground.

As Dr. Jal'al pulled her towards the Throne Tree with the olive tree behind them, Joan senses heightened. She heard every whisper of praise or judgment from the nobles. She looked at every face, hoping to find one that could rescue her from her fate. She only saw strangers.

In front of the Throne Tree were the Wizard, who was presiding over the wedding, the Governess Luperca to the side, and Merowech. Merowech was the only person in the grove who looked as unhappy as she did. His unhappiness was the only comfort Joan could find.

Arriving at the Throne Tree, Dr. Ja'al presented the princess to Merowech. Merowech lifted her veil and the two faced each other, not as a loving bride and groom, but as prizefighters committed to death as their final bell. They touched each other for the first time with the palms of their hands as the Wizard bound them together with a flowering vine, an Albion custom.

Joan did not listen to a single word the Wizard Randor spoke. What did he know of love? What authority did he have to preside over such an ill-fated union, no matter how historic it may be? The Wizard went on for so long that Joan's knees weakened and her thoughts wandered, arriving at Merowech's sword just below her vine-tied hand. How she wished to reach across herself, loose the sword, and strike Merowech down.

Joan felt Merowech's hand in her own. His palm was sweating, both of theirs were. Merowech's hand shook slightly and Joan squeezed it to make him stop. He squeezed back, hard. Joan returned, her thin fingers pressing into the webbing of his hand. Beneath the flowering green vine, their knuckles turned white from the tension.

Joan was so distracted by this bit of combat that she did not notice the Wizard addressing her.

"Princess?"

Merowech released her hand and she came to attention.

"Princess, do you take this man as your husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and health, no matter what comes, for as long as you both shall live?"

Joan looked at the Wizard, then at Merowech, then at her bound hand and the sword beyond it. She had to marry Merowech, didn't she? If not, Kalif and Albion would return to war. She looked back over her shoulder at Dr. Jal'al standing in for her father, and the Governess Luperca next to him. Neither of them were able to offer any consolation.

"Princess?" asked the Wizard again. Every eye in the Throne Grove was upon her, though few could see as a thick fog settled into the Throne Grove.

Finally, all at once, Joan could feel the red, itchy bumps of her allergy upon her. For the first time, she welcomed the reaction. It pulled her back into her skin. There was nowhere to turn and nowhere to run. She had nothing left to do but say "I do" and commit herself to the beast she was lashed to.

As her throat closed and the air left her lungs, Joan committed herself, not to Merowech, but to the fear that tormented her for so long. She felt Dr. Jal'al's hand on her back, bolstering her as she swooned. Taking her last breath, Joan gave herself over, tipping her head back and looking at the sky and witnessed a miracle.

Circling the top of the Northwest Tower was Joan's beloved goshawk. She had not seen Persephone for days and knew at once where Persephone went and why she returned. Help was on the way.

But from where? And when? There was no time left for Joan.

THERE WAS NO TIME LEFT ON OBERON'S LITTLE CLOCK either.

Standing in the window of the Northwest Tower, Oberon watched as the long hand of the clock reached the bottom. In the fields beyond the castle walls, Titania's clock did the same, at the exact same time, just as he planned.

The swamp musicians began to play. Their song rode across the valley, leapt over the wall, and stormed into the castle. When the first notes reached Oberon's ears he dove from the tower window towards the wedding below with nothing but the trees and Tail to catch him.

For the sake of legend, Joan answered the Wizard “no” as she always did. But even if Joan said “I do,” no one heard the words. Not Merowech beside her or the Wizard in front of her. Not even a sharp-eared dog hidden beneath her dress would have a word over the swamp musician’s song.

The music was sweet, slow, and loud. The bass drum beat like the heart of a giant and the snare drum could keep time for the last marching soldier in the last war. When the cymbals crashed they shook the earth. The horns were the envy of angels and the fiddles bested the pride of devils. The musicians without an instrument to their lips raised their voice to the heavens and as they sang the sky opened and it began to rain.

These were their words:

Come up, come up!
Come up out the ground!
Rise up, rise up!

Rise up and gather 'round!

*We're the ones that sing the songs,
We're the ones that right the wrongs.
The dead will dance tonight!
The dead can dance tonight!*

THEIR REFRAIN WAS SO LOUD WITHIN THE CASTLE WALLS that no one could tell where it was coming from. As the trees were swayed the nobles believed it was the trees themselves were singing. Since the castle shook, the soldiers manning the walls thought the stone was singing. No matter what they believed, every person in the Throne Grove was sure of one thing: the dead danced among them.

Hearing that great, magical music, the ghosts of Albion's dead rose from their graves beneath the trees and danced through the foggy Throne Grove. Attending a magnificent ball between heaven and earth, the dead were dressed in their finest.

Kings and queens waltzed together in love. Brave knights with deadly wounds held jilted ladies with broken hearts, dipping and spinning them among through the living. Confessors danced with fools as the poets danced all by themselves. Even Albion the First, the legendary hero, took the hand of his queen and lead her in a step that was so ancient and graceful that if any present were brave enough to watch they may never have danced again.

Merowech tore at the vine that bound him to Joan. Once free, he drew his sword and slashed at Albion the Great and his queen. The joyful specters danced through the sword and

then the prince himself, never noticing his folly. Merowech spun and pursued them, swinging his sword at every phantom and many of the wedding guests, believing it all to be dark magic.

Joan knew better. She knew where the music came from and who played it. It was for her rescue. Still in the grip of her allergy, she searched the crowd for Oberon. Staying low to see the clear ground beneath the mist, she found him.

Oberon survived his jump from the tower. Tail, as strong and sure as ever, caught a sturdy branch in the canopy that sagged with their weight, released it, then caught another, then another, in a rapid descent that finally set the prince down in front of his very own tree. There he stood before the smallest, most fragile tree in the grove, watching his parents dance.

The rain fell swift and diagonal between them and the haze made his parents appear a translucent grey and white, but young, happy, and full of love. Oberon reached out to them, but just like his brother's sword, they danced through him, hearing only the music.

If they could have seen their son, the brave Fairy Prince of Albion, they would have warned him as Joan did, that his brother stood behind him, sword aloft, ready to cut Oberon from his tail.

It was Tail that saved them both. Drawing the conductor's baton from behind the shimmering blue vest, Tail parried Merowech's striking blow, sending the tip of his blade to the ground. Oberon turned to see Merowech raising the sword again.

"Merowech! No! We are *brothers!*" cried Oberon.

"This, this dark magic, it is your *tail's* fault. Turn and let me end this once and for all!"

"We are one, can't you see that?" Oberon pointed to Tail, who held the baton before him in a defensive position. "I am a fairy, Merowech, but I am still your brother. Put down the sword!" he pleaded, trying to reach his brother over the music.

"That *thing* has made you crazy. If you will not be free of it, I will kill you both." Merowech paced forward, lifting his sword as he approached.

"I am your brother, Merowech!" Oberon stumbled backward as his brother charged.

"I have no brother!"

What followed was the most famous sword fight in

Albion's history, not between the two brothers, but between Merowech and Tail. So swift was Tail with the baton that fencers would claim the style as their own for generations. In tournaments, experts would say: "that's a Tail of a *riposte*." When a defender attacked after parrying, and then struck again they would say: "only Tail had such a *remise*."

Tail's defense was offense and his offense required no defense. If Merowech were wise, and not given himself over to anger, he would have noticed Tail's skill and laid down his sword. If Merowech begged for mercy, Tail would have released him and two brothers could have pursued peace together. Merowech was not wise and not brave enough to admit his error, so as always, he fought to exhaustion, all the while looking at his brother's back.

The swishing and swiping of the baton again brought gusts of arctic winds that carried the Maestro's music. Beyond the walls, the swamp musicians felt the wind, heard the music, and matched its volume and tempo as the celestial downpour continued.

Merowech's blind attacks forced Tail and Oberon to the nave of the Throne Grove. All those who came to witness the royal wedding were gone, escaping into the castle or out the front gate, even the Wizard who disappeared to his quarters.

"You wish to sit upon the throne, Oberon? *You?* A freak! A *fairy!*" Merowech barked at him between attacks.

"I don't want to be king, Merowech! Just let me live in peace!" Oberon was cornered, his back to the Throne Tree.

"*LIAR!*" screamed Merowech, summoning his strength to make a final thrust, not at Tail, but at his brother's heart. Missing, his sword stuck deep into the Throne Tree.

Oberon dashed to the side as Merowech yanked at his stuck sword. Tail, a moment behind, slashed at Merowech's exposed, protruding backside, splitting his pants clear past his undergarments to the flesh below.

That is when Oberon saw *it*.
A TAIL. Merowech had a tail.

IT WAS NOT A LONG, LUSTROUS, BUSHY ENDED TAIL LIKE HIS little brother's, for Oberon's Tail was loved and fostered in the open air. Merowech's tail was dark, prickly, and no bigger than a thumb. Hidden, neglected, hated and abused, Merowech's tail never saw sunlight or fresh air. It was covered in green spikes and purple warts, like a poisonous cactus whose very nature is to ward off contact.

Oberon was so stunned at the sight that he fell backward onto the ground. Tail dropped the Maestro's baton. When the wind music stopped, so did the swamp musicians. A deathly silence fell over the grove.

Merowech freed his sword from the Throne Tree without noticing that his pants were split. He turned to find his brother defenseless on the ground.

"Arm yourself! Arm yourself or die!" Merowech, full of rage, was confused by the look of sadness and pity on Oberon's face.

"What? Do you think I will not kill you? I'm going to be king! I will do as I please."

"You have a Tail, *brother*." Tail took up the baton as Oberon scurried to his feet.

A what?" Merowech still did not see the tear in his pants.

"A tail. You have a TAIL. A tiny, purple, warted, spiky tail. As plain as the nose on your face."

Merowech first looked over his shoulder, but could not see his backside, then under his arm where he could. There he saw his tail.

Merowech had not seen his tail for years. He rarely changed clothes and never bathed. He never spoke to his tail, touched his tail, or loved it all. Buried and ignored, his tail

gathered all the pain and hate of Merowech's life and turned itself into a frightful aberration. It was the ugliest, most dangerous tail in the world.

A crazed look came over Merowech. He spun his sword in circles looking for somewhere, anywhere to bury his blade. When Merowech found no one to blame for his tail, he turned the blade on himself.

“**M**erowech. Put down your sword” Oberon said as he approached his brother.

Merowech looked at Oberon and especially Tail. Backing up, Merowech sat down on the very front edge of the Throne Tree’s seat. He laid the blade flat against the front of the arms, his tail sitting below the downward edge of a guillotine.

“Merowech, you don’t have to do this! Don’t cut off your tail!”

“I should have done it a long time ago” Merowech answered.

“There is nothing wrong with a fairy tail!” Oberon said, weeping.

“I am *NOT* a fairy!”

Merowech slammed down on the sword with both hands, dropping the blade on the tail with all of his weight. It was a clean cut.

Merowech collapsed forward onto the ground, twitching, as blood soaked the back and legs of his wedding garments.

Oberon ran to Merowech, trying to stop the bleeding

with his own shirt, but he could not tend to the prince for more than a moment.

Merowech's severed tail was GROWING.

The tail, that cut bit of flesh, squirmed and twitched on the seat of the Throne Tree. In two breaths it grew from the size of a thumb to the size of a hand. In another two it was as big as a man. The green prickly hairs sprouted forth as legs and the cut center became a mouth of a thousand teeth. The tip of tail as bent and sharpened like a scorpion, flailing and striking at everything near it.

Merowech's tail was full of dark, terrible magic. Before Oberon and Tail could strike it down the tail monster was larger than a war elephant. Then doubled in size again. Oberon and Tail could do nothing but run for cover. They found Joan hiding behind the earthenware pot of her olive tree.

When the tail monster struck the Throne Tree, it fell. The root ball lifted up from the ground leaving a deep crater below. When it breathed, fire poured forth from its teeth-bowl mouth. After standing for more than a thousand years all of the Throne Grove was in flames.

Outside the gates Titania watched the fire rise and the trees topple. Beside her, Buttons pawed at the ground as Titania pulled back on her mane.

“Prince and Princess in there. We let it burn, we no better than them that burn Mercya” said Jacquimo. “Ain’t worth us all burning. Y’all did enough” he waved at the other Swamp Musicians. “But Queen can fly, the horse can run, and Jacquimo, well, I died a thousand times and ain’t one stuck yet!”

He let out another deep belly laugh “HaHaaaa!” then jumped onto Button’s back in a single bound. “You’ll be comin’ Queen. Ain’t a rescue without’cha!”

“If nothing else,” she tossed her bright pink hair, “they should see what a true queen acts like.”

Fluttering into the air, Titania landed on Button’s back behind Jacquimo, dwarfing him in her arms. She took the noble stead by the mane and rode like a crack of lightning into the castle, weaving upstream through the fleeing nobles.

Inside the gates, they saw the Tail Monster toppling and burning the trees. Buttons reared onto her hind legs in

retreat, only Titania's steady hands upon her mane kept her steady.

The ancient trees burned hot and the grove was full of wet smoke, cleared only by the strikes of the Tail Monster's stinger. Round and round the demon spun, striking, clawing and burning. It was searching for something. It was searching for Oberon.

From the crater left from the Throne Tree's roots, Oberon and Joan listened to the Tail Monster laying waste to the grove. Choked and itching from her allergy, Joan was paralyzed. Oberon grabbed her by the sleeves of her wedding gown with both hands, pulling their eyes together.

"Joan! JOAN! You can't do this now. We can't die. We are all that's left, Joan! If you want to live you have to say 'NO,' Joan. Only 'NO!' You have to say 'NO' to your fear, Joan! I didn't come back here to die. You have to say 'NO!' JOAN! Say 'NO' to your fear, Joan. NO! NO! NO!"

Oberon screamed at her with his voice, his hands, and his eyes as Tail cradled the back of her head. He stared into her heart and screamed "NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!" until he could see that she was screaming too, first with her mind, then aloud.

Because it was her favorite thing to say, and since she had so much practice saying it, Joan turned the sword within herself with skill and malice. She said "NO" as clear and forceful as she ever did before and the allergy ran from her flesh faster than it arrived. Jarocasta only answered 'no' to her fear and fear became afraid of her.

"Oberon, we're getting out of here" she said, as she poked her head around the root ball. Through the fire and smoke, she saw the monster's tail. It was facing away from them. At that moment Persephone swept down over them, darting to a still-standing oak tree and landing in its branches.

"There!" She pointed at the oak tree. They ran to it,

following the goshawk, and hid behind the trunk. They looked for more cover, working their way toward the castle gate..

“What about the monster? We can’t leave it here!” said Oberon.

“It will kill us if we stay.” The Princess kept a careful eye on the Tail Monster’s movement, all the while yelling ‘NO’ into her heart.

“This is my home.”

“You hated it here!”

Persephone flew to an elm tree closer to the gate. Joan grabbed Oberon and pulled him to it. Persephone screeched as she saw Buttons break through the smoke.

“BUTTONS! HERE!” Joan cried out.

Buttons turned towards them, her hooves stomping the earth with such thunder that it drew the monster’s attention.

The Tail Monster leaped the length of the grove like a flea, landing between them. Persephone fluttered skyward.

The burning bowl of teeth faced Oberon and Joan and the tail swung and struck at Buttons. It took all of Buttons speed and agility to keep from being crushed, whipping Jacquimo to and fro as he clung to her tail and Titania’s tiny wings fluttered harder than ever to lift them over the low-swinging passes. The Tail Monster wheezed and blew fire into the elm that concealed Joan and Oberon, setting every leaf aflame.

Backed into the southern corner of the grove’s courtyard, there was nowhere for them to run. As the tree burned ever hotter Oberon realized his fate.

“I hated it here because I locked myself in that tower. Because *I* was afraid. That monster doesn’t want you, it wants me. It wants Tail. It hates Tail because it hates itself, just like my brother.”

Tail drew the baton from the shimmering vest, ready to face the beast.

“I promised your father I would take care of you, that I would be a good king. Go, Joan. Save yourself and make a better world.”

“Oberon, it *will* kill you!”

“I am Oberon of Albion, the Prince with the Fairy Tail and Castle Albion is *our* home and we are going to defend it.”

He took Tail in his hand as Tail held the baton high. “I love you, Tail.”

Tail tapped Oberon on each shoulder, knighting him. Joan squeezed them both in a deep embrace.

Tail swished and whipped the baton in a fervent crescendo. The arctic wind carried a new song. It was fast and flamboyant, with rich staccato beats and soaring strings. It was the climax of the opera that the Maestro wrote for his true love and if the Tail Monster could hear, it would have stopped to listen as the flames blew ever higher.

Oberon ran back through the grove as fast as his skinny legs could carry him. If there were any chance of defeating the monster, it was not in the Throne Grove where the monster could move, strike, and burn.

Oberon ran from tree to burning tree, all the way to the part of Castle Albion he knew best. He ran to the Northwest Tower.

The Tail Monster's many legs would have caught Oberon the second he stepped out from behind the tree if not for the bravery of his friends. As soon as the monster abandoned its attack on Buttons, the horse gave chase with Titania and Jacquimo on her back.

Only a lifetime at a grinding wheel could make a horse fast and strong enough to match that monster's speed, but with the weight of her riders, she could not catch the beast.

"Is your stop, *Queen!*" said Jacquimo as he laid back on Button's neck and pushed off of Titania with both feet. She fluttered her wings and floated to safety, returning to find the princess.

Free of Titania's weight, Buttons ran with renewed energy. When she reached the tail monster, Buttons flung Jacquimo forward with a mighty whip of her neck, launching the nimble swamp man up onto its scorpion tail.

Climbing from spike to spike on its back, Jacquimo worked his way to the lip of the monster's mouth and looked down into the hollow of razor-sharp teeth. Deep in the center where the gaseous fire first sparked was a tiny black heart. It

beat as a normal heart beats, but much faster and with hatred for blood.

Gripping a tooth with one hand, Jacquimo dug through his leaf coat of many pockets, throwing jar after jar at the heart in the monster's mouth. There were potions and poisons, spices for every kind of fish, tools, instruments, and insects. None made a bit of difference save distracting the monster. It bucked like a bronco until it eventually threw the pesky swamp man off.

Jacquimo failed to kill the beast, but he succeeded in distracting the monster long enough for Oberon to reach the tower.

As Oberon ran up the spiral staircase the sharp, jagged legs of the monster pierced the stone beside and behind him, all the way to his room at the very top.

Once in his room, Oberon ran to the window and looked down at the monster. It clung to the wall below, spitting fire upwards into the roof. It whipped its stinger upward, exploding the stone around the Prince and sending Tail's colorful drawings downward through the smoke and fog.

Below, Titania and Joan dodged stone after stone to rescue Jacquimo. They pulled him to safety as a wall as wide as four men crashed down where he lay.

"Issa heart... Issa black heart in the bottom. Tell'em. Tell a prince." he murmured before collapsing.

Titania flapped her tiny wings and flew upward to the tower, dodging the strikes of the monster as she came near. She yelled to Oberon over the Maestro's music and crashing of stones.

"The heart! Oberon! The black heart within the tail!"

Oberon looked down into the Tail Monster's mouth. Between the bursts of flame, and past the rows of teeth, he saw it. It was as big and wrinkled as an old prune, pulsing with a lifetime of hatred and fear.

Oberon threw everything he could find in the tower at the black heart until he was left with nothing but his clock. Together, Tail and Oberon dragged it to the edge, waited for a break in flames, then shoved it over. The Tail Monster devoured the clock with a mighty crunch. The gears and springs, wheels and arms, rained down onto the ground below.

The Tail Monster destroyed the last of the stone that encircled the tower with a tail strike, sending the roof crashing down. Tail and Oberon stood alone atop the pillar of stone with nothing left to throw at the monster and no one left but each other.

All was lost.

“I don’t think we’re going to live, Tail. I’m so sorry.”

Tail whipped to the baton to a stop, silencing the orchestra of the arctic wind with a mighty cymbal crash. Tail set down the baton, shook twice for “no,” then pointed the baton over the edge at the monster.

Oberon knew what Tail meant. Oberon always knew what Tail meant because Tail and Oberon were one. Oberon pet Tail a final time, all the way from his base to the very end, rustled his fuzzy tip and handed Tail the baton. Tail softly waved the baton in front of his friend, conjuring forth a song that only they could hear.

Listening to the music of a single violin, Oberon took a running start and, for a second time that day, leaped from the tower, head first, holding Tail and the baton above him with both hands.

Down, down, down they dove, past the rows of teeth and into the center of Merowech’s tail, stabbing at its black, hate-filled heart with all of their might.

Oberon’s last thought, and there was a lifetime’s worth on the way down, was of his deep love for his Tail. Tail was always there and always would be, for better or worse. Tail

was a *good* Tail. There was no time left for regrets, but if he could have changed anything, he wouldn't have stayed cooped up in that tower for so long.

There was no reason for either of them to hide. There was a great and magical world to explore with all kinds of strange and wonderful people in it. Some were fairies and some weren't. Some had tails and some didn't. But if they could do it all over again, and that was a big *if*, they'd never be afraid of anyone or anything ever again.

OBERON AND TAIL STRUCK THE DARK HEART OF THE TAIL Monster with all the force of their love for each other. The baton stuck the heart and it shattered into dust. With no hatred to feed it, the Tail Monster wilted and the great mass of sharp, spiked flesh came crashing to the ground.

Joan searched everywhere for a sword before Dr. Jal'al handed her the one that belonged to her father. The Wizard had shepherded he and Governess to safety, only to reappear once the monster was slain.

Joan cut deep into the scaled flesh of the monster with her father's sword, digging deeper and deeper until she reached the center. With a deep breath, she reaching down into the hot, gooey, purple flesh until she was covered all the way to her feet. It took all present, even Buttons, to pull the Oberon free from the monster's corpse.

Dr. Jal'al checked Oberon's vitals and declared him dead. Since this was the time of mystery and magic, Titania suggested that Joan kiss him, as that sort of thing tended to work in situations like these.

She did kiss him, of course. Just a modest peck, not the true love sort that so often written about, and the young prince and his fairy tail came right back to life. Everyone was quite impressed except for Jacquimo who had cheated death so many times before, but he was still very happy to see his friend among the living.

Merowech's body was never found. The Wizard suggested that it burned in the fire, but everyone knew better. Merowech was alive, somewhere, they were sure of it. Wherever he was, he still longed to be king. That honor, if it even was one, fell to Oberon now. Whether he liked it or not.

Since there was an entire wedding feast left in the castle, Dr. Jal'al suggested they do what King Camilo would have done, and eat it. Trumpets blew and the heralds called everyone who could hear back to the Feasting Hall. It was the first time that Albions, Kalifians, Fairies, and Swamp people ever dined together. There was food and music, tears and laughter, and as he sat next to his friend Joan at the head table, Oberon wished it would never end.

The Throne Grove burned for a month until nothing was left but stumps and ash. The Throne Tree of Albion the Great was dead, but the seat remained, a hardened black chair that would never disguise a whisper again.

Sitting upon what was left of the Throne Tree, Oberon wondered if it would now be called the "Throne Stump." It was not a very pleasant name and didn't sound regal at all. They would need to think of something better. Still, there was room for Tail to move about and at that moment, he was weaving a crown of broken twigs.

When Tail placed the crown upon Oberon's head Joan couldn't help but laugh.

Oberon knew so little of how to rule. He could not fight, he knew nothing of politics or life at court. Though he was clever and had a good heart and perhaps he might one day be a good king as her father wished, he looked too small, too young, and according to Albion law, must marry before being coronated.

Certainly now, perhaps more than before, there would be pressure for Joan to marry the Albion prince, but that was a question for another time and she possessed the skill, and

now the authority, to answer "no." She was happy for the moment to be alive and that her first friend was alive too.

Tail pulled the twig crown down around Oberon's neck and shook him back and forth, making Joan laugh so hard that she woke Persephone who was sleeping under her leather hood. Joan removed it and fed her a piece of chicken liver.

"You missed the coronation, old girl!" Joan said to her goshawk.

Persephone ruffled her feathers and looked at the twig crown. She hadn't missed anything at all. With a screech she took to wing, rising high above where once stood the Throne Grove. On a warm updraft Persephone soared ever higher in wide circles to the Northwest Tower where, as a part of its being rebuilt, Oberon hung the first clock.

"It's so easy," Joan said, referring to Persephone's flight.

Oberon turned, the crown still around his neck, to see the two arms of the clock at a right angle.

"It is! It's three on the clock! Very easy indeed. Three on the clock! We all know what the time is!" Oberon was very excited.

"Three on the clock?" She shook her head. "I don't think it will catch on."

"Just you wait. Somewhere, some *time*, everyone is going to say it just like that: 'three on the clock.' 'I'll meet you for tea at three on the clock!'"

Tail, bored of clock talk, made tiny circles beside Oberon's head, showing the princess how looney he thought Oberon was.

"Three on the clock? If you say so..." Joan said with a smile.

With a great deal of effort, Oberon pulled the twig crown off his head and took a long look at the interwoven branches. Tail was very talented.

"Do you think there was ever a *time* when there were no

CHRISTOPHER GODFREY

fairies?” he asked Joan in seriousness. “When there was no Kalif or Albion? No enormous horses or musical wind batons? No swamp people? A time when there was no magic at all?”

“If there were, I certainly wouldn’t want to know what *time* it was.”

Tail, thinking it was only fitting that whoever sat on the Throne Stump have a crown, wrapped Oberon’s head in a halo of fur.

“Me neither,” said Oberon. “Well, maybe once. Once upon a time...”

THE END

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

BY READING THIS STORY YOU MADE MY DREAM A REALITY.
If you enjoyed it, please pass it along to anyone and everyone that loves a good story.

WITH ETERNAL GRATITUDE,

-CHRISTOPHER-

CHRISTOPHERGODFREY12@ME.COM