


A SEVEN KINGDOMS FAIRY TALE

TROUBLE



with

PARSNIPS



PREVIEW

LAUREL DECHER

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PARSNIPS**

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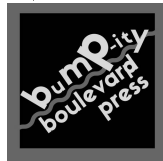


TROUBLE WITH PARSNIPS



Laurel Decher

A Seven Kingdoms Fairy Tale



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Characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author. Cochem Castle was inspired by rooks flying above the Reichsburg Cochem, not by dungeon workshops for inventors, croquet fever, or moats. The Pfalz (Burg Pfalzgrafenstein), on an island in the middle of the Rhine River, inspired the Blackfly Kingdom. Its dungeon is just as Nero describes, but no one plays croquet there. My wonderful Toastmasters International club in Burlington, Vermont sparked the Vintner's Ventriloquism League but all VVL speakers and speeches are fiction.

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For Jan, who makes my life shiny.



CHAPTER ONE

A Delayed Party

INSIDE COCHEM CASTLE, the nameless princess ducked underneath the head table to her self-appointed station. Her place of honor at the table was too far away. She'd waited ten years for this party and couldn't risk it going off the rails. Sitting on the rushes, with King Oliver's feet on one side and Queen Sibyl's on the other, the princess could hear everything.

Above her head, the shiny Golden Parsnip—the badge of his kingly power—hung from her father's belt.

The princess patted the hidden pocket of her gown. The drawing of her secret weapon, the Cloud of Defense, crinkled reassuringly. Along the back wall, the Cochem archers stood ready for King Oliver's command.

King Oliver “whispered” in Queen Sibyl's ear, and the princess smiled. Neither of her parents was any good at whispering. She made out the words with no trouble. King Oliver had to shout to be heard over the courtiers and guests.

“You're sure about which one needs a name?” King Oliver's best dancing shoes pivoted towards Queen Sibyl.

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Wary of getting pinched, the princess kept an eye on the King's shoes and reminded herself that parents forgot things. Especially parents with fifteen children and a kingdom to govern. It wasn't personal. Besides, people without names were hard to remember.

Queen Sibyl stamped her small foot, and her silk skirts rustled. "Yes, of course. She's the one that put all those goldfish in the moat."

Mamma had noticed! Training five hundred brilliant-orange goldfish to spell out "NAME ME" had been worth it.

Confident that her parents were on board, the princess slipped under the dessert sluice to check a leaking seam. Keeping things dry was a full-time job with an artificial creek running through the hall. She didn't mind. As soon as she'd seen a diagram for a gold-panning sluice in a library book, she'd wanted to build one. Gold wasn't a big deal in Cochem, so they used it for dessert instead.

No one would notice if the guest of honor slipped away for a moment. Her parents had enough to do. The Kingdom's business took most of their attention, and educating the older Cochem children—the ones who might actually rule one day—took the rest. No one kept track of the youngest child in the family. A long time ago, the princess had decided to make the most of it. Sometimes, it made up for being called "Fifteenth."

"—a moment ago."

Even with the Seven Kingdoms partying it up, the end of Queen Sibyl's sentence carried down to the princess, whose head was now under the other end of the dessert sluice.

"She knows how to take care of herself," King Oliver's voice rumbled on. "Handy around the castle too."

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The princess, fishing a wrench out of her hall toolbox, wondered who they were talking about. King Oliver's sister, Queen Ash? "Handy" didn't seem right, but the Blackfly Queen definitely took care of herself. The princess frowned. Her favorite wrench for this job was in her workshop in Cochem's unused dungeon. She'd have to make do with this one.

"I thought the boy with the hair did the goldfish thing." King Oliver always made a swishing motion over his head to show the boy's pompadour hairstyle. "You know, Harold number three. But wait—goldfish are quite slippery for a baby, aren't they? Did the others do such things before they were christened?"

The princess didn't interrupt. She wanted to know what else they knew about her. Listening was always more useful than talking.

The king and queen tried to sort out their offspring. They got muddled after the seventh and came to a complete stop at number fourteen.

"Let's start again. We've got seven girls," King Oliver said.

Eight, thought the princess, but she tightened a bolt on the dessert sluice and gave her parents a moment more.

"And seven Harolds," Queen Sibyl said. "So she must be the fourteenth. But that doesn't seem right. Oh, how silly! The girl without a name is why we're here. So what number child does that make her?"

Speaking into the pipe, the nameless princess prompted, "The Fifteenth Child of our house."

King Oliver said, "What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything—" Queen Sibyl dropped her voice to a confidential tone, no quieter than King Oliver's "—you see, the problem is, we forgot about christening this one. Things

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kept coming up, and now she's ten.”

“Is that so?” King Oliver got to his feet, and the thump he gave the table made it tremble. He'd never called the hall to order for her before. The nameless princess smiled down at her christening gown. Queen Sibyl knew she was ten years old. This was going better than she'd hoped.

A tiny piece of paper on the rushes caught the princess's attention. She picked it up and read, “Twyla.”

The other side was blank. She didn't know anyone called Twyla, but she pocketed the paper for her name collection. Writing “Fifteenth” at the top of school papers got old in a hurry.

“Rose, Marigold, Magenta, Saffron, Indigo . . .” King Oliver ran through the kingdoms present in the hall and sat down again. “The Blackflies aren't here.” He exhaled in a way that made the princess worry he was finished. “Having the feast before the christening is a good idea. It should give them, maybe five extra hours. That should be enough, even for them, don't you think?”

At Sibyl number seven's christening, the Blackfly Kingdom was seven hours late. When the nameless princess heard that story, she adjusted the schedule for her own. She had a lot of practice adjusting things. Taking a better grip on her wrench, she tightened the next bolt.

“If we wait too long, the other guests will leave, and we still won't have a christening.” Queen Sibyl coughed. “If Cook would at least send up the peppermint tea. My throat is a little dry. And you sound like you might be getting a cold. Are you feeling well enough for a bit of croquet after dinner?”

Croquet? The nameless princess froze, wrench in mid-air. It couldn't be croquet fever. This year, the whole family

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had gotten their shots.

“Now there’s an idea.” King Oliver’s heel bounced on the rushes covering the hall’s stone floor. “I’m always well enough for that. We could try the vineyard behind the castle. If the archers stand at the bottom of the rows, they can bowl the balls back up again. While I’m thinking about it, we’re still missing black mallets and croquet balls. We have all the other kingdoms’ colors.”

Not today. The nameless princess set down her wrench and whipped through the crowd towards her royal parents. This couldn’t happen. If the royal guests started knocking balls through wickets, they’d be scattered throughout the Seven Kingdoms before you knew it. It would be the end of the christening.

Her royal parents were losing focus. The princess dove back under the head table to keep tabs on things.

King Oliver called the steward over and ordered some mallets and balls painted black.

“Good idea! The Blackfly family got so annoyed last time when we didn’t have their color.” The hem of Queen Sibyl’s dress went up and down in agreement. She was a vigorous nodder. The feather on top of her dozen-eggs hairstyle must be making a breeze. “Queen Ash is always so quick to feel slighted.”

“It’s their plague-y blackflies, you know. She can’t stand ’em.” King Oliver always made excuses for his sister. “I mean—what if blackflies followed you everywhere you went?”

Queen Sibyl shuddered all the way down to her silvery hem. “Dreadful. I’d much rather talk about croquet. How about a quick game with the appetizers?”

Oh no. If only the Blackfly family would show up,

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blackflies and all. A royal christening couldn't start until all Seven Kingdoms had arrived.

The princess had to do something. But what?

At that moment, the headwaiter brought the banquet menu for final approval. Queen Sibyl wasn't wearing her glasses for the party, so King Oliver had to put on his reading glasses. Once they were on his nose, he winced. "With these darn things, I can't see past the end of my ... croquet mallet."

Considering one desperate plan after another, the princess made her way down the head table to the door. As she passed Harold number one, he bumped her fist with his. "Don't forget—if you run into your fairy godmother, be cool."

Sibyl number one called from the middle of the table, "Whatever you do, don't tell her what to give you."

"Yeah, just look at Queen Ash," Harold number three said in the princess's ear. "We don't need blackflies in Cochem."

"No matter what else you have to do, don't walk away." Sibyl number six had been caught by her fairy godmother on the way to the royal privy and knew what she was talking about.

Fourteen siblings meant you knew what to expect. The princess was glad she wasn't an only child, like the Blackfly Prince.

Reaching the hall door, she went out to the stables. The party could start if people thought the Blackfly Kingdom had arrived. She couldn't pretend to be Queen Ash or King Schwartz, so she'd have to pretend to be Prince Nero. He was about her age. She'd put on black clothes, and no one would know the difference. By now, the guests were too hungry to ask questions.

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Once all Seven Kingdoms were present—or appeared to be present—food would be served, and everyone would be happy. The princess couldn't risk an impromptu croquet tournament. Even if this wasn't the fever.

She wasn't much bigger than Harold number seven, the brother closest in age to the princess. No Blackfly horses had arrived in the stables, so the princess tucked up her brocade skirt, put on an old pair of Harold number seven's black riding pants, and blacked her white Icelandic pony, Númi, with a pot of shoe-polish.

Wrapping herself in black saddle blankets, she tied a black knitted scarf over her light brown hair. She tiptoed barefoot up the spiral stairs to the gallery over the hall, to see if she really had to go through with this.

The silver Cochem banners on the walls gleamed in the torchlight. At her family's table on the dais, the princess's fourteen siblings played table hockey with the salt cellar. King Oliver had pushed his chair back as if the feast were over. His reading glasses still rested on his nose. Queen Sibyl swept up salt from the silver-linen tablecloth with her tiny, silver-handled brush and dustpan.

On the main floor of the hall, the seven remaining tables were arranged around the hearth fire like the slanted spokes of a wheel. The christening guests wore the showy colors of their kingdoms so that the hall looked like a silver-striped lollipop. Raspberry-scented Roses, perfumed Daffodils, spicy Marigolds, fluffy Fuchsia, Siberian Iris, and rare black Tulips made a gorgeous, fragrant pinwheel.

Only the dimly lit black Tulips table had no guests. The Blackfly royal family still hadn't arrived. The princess straightened. If she wanted a name, it was time for action.

On the way down to the hall and the door out to the

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stables, she tried a new name aloud at each step:

Twyla.

Cecily.

Sylvia.

Yolanda.

Calypso.

Amberly.

Gwendolyn.

Anything but Sibyl.

All seven of her sisters were named Sibyl. She'd never stand out in that crowd.

A few moments later, she whispered to the royal steward at the door so he'd announce her properly. A Blackfly banner would have helped. Then she mounted Númi, rode through the open portcullis into the feasting hall, and made her pony paw his hooves in the air.

To the assembled crowd, the royal steward roared, "Prince Nero of the Blackfly Kingdom pays his respects to the youngest princess of Cochem."

The Marigold Kingdom guests clapped their hands onto their ears and shook their heads, frowning. They were jumpy about loud voices.

"Good boy," the princess added under her breath to Númi. That book about the Spanish Riding School had been worth it. She dismounted, tossed the reins to a waiting stableboy, and accepted a swig of peppermint tea.

The guests from the Magenta Kingdom murmured to each other. "Finally. Now we can eat."

The Saffron Kingdom crown princess looked up from the saffron booties she was knitting. "Funny. Not as many blackflies as usual. Did they drain their swamp?"

Worrying about the lack of a Blackfly banner, the

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princess had forgotten about the blackflies. She flashed a disdainful look at the Saffron Kingdom table—as if she really were a Blackfly royal—and held her breath.

At the head table, her parents rose.

“They sent him all alone,” murmured Queen Sibyl, squinting. “How did he ever find us? I heard he has a terrible sense of direction, poor thing.”

“Welcome, Prince Nero!” King Oliver smoothed his thick mustache and beard in a considering way. He took off his reading glasses, and his eyes rested her face.

Uh, oh. She'd been sure he would forget about his reading glasses. He'd recognize her, and the christening would come to an unpleasant end.

But King Oliver unbuckled the Golden Parsnip, held it up high, and called out, “The Seven Kingdoms are here! Let the festivities begin!”

Suddenly dizzy, the princess gripped the nearest table edge. He hadn't recognized her. Why did she feel so hollow?

She should be happy. He wasn't supposed to tell the difference between the Blackfly prince and his own daughter. It would have ruined everything. She put up a proud chin, forced a brittle smile and strode off towards the black Tulips.

Queen Sibyl announced the program for the day. “We hope you'll enjoy the feast. There are seventeen courses, one for each member of the royal family.” The hall exploded into applause, and the queen smiled shyly. She was the only other one in the family who didn't care for speeches. “Afterwards, there will be the christening—”

The princess was relieved to hear it.

“Then we'll have jousting, footraces, and that game with the spinning tops. I can never remember what it's called—”

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she looked at King Oliver.

His whisper carried throughout the hall, "Carom, it's called carom."

"Thank you, dear. You all know what it's called, so there's only one more thing to say." Queen Sibyl spread out her arms. "Let the feast begin!"

The squeak of door hinges made everyone laugh. King Oliver never oiled the hinges for the doors that led to the royal kitchens. He said he wanted to prevent sneak attacks by his fifteen children, but the princess knew better. The sound was an appetizer for the feast.

Squeak, squeak. Squeak, squeak.

A long line of kitchen staff bore trays and trays of marvelous-smelling parsnip fries into the hall. The princess took advantage of the moment to slip under the black Tulips table. Sheltered by the table linen, she unwound herself from the black saddle blankets, wriggled out of Harold number seven's old riding pants, and took the black knitted scarf off her head. Her brocade skirt was a little crushed, but she was going to get a name.

The princess went the long way around and took her place at the bottom of the head table. She crunched a parsnip fry between her teeth and grinned at her seven sisters, dressed in matching brocade gowns, all talking at top speed.

The four oldest were comparing the fine points of all the Seven Kingdoms' princes and the three youngest the fine points of desserts to come. Nobody had missed her.

Her favorite course was the first. The parsnips were the perfect reddish-brownish-goldish color and tasted a little sweet and a little salty.

She couldn't enjoy the other courses properly. Now that

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she'd gotten away with impersonating the Blackfly prince, she was having second thoughts. What would happen when the real Blackfly prince arrived?

Even though she knew the kitchen doors were the only squeaky ones, she checked the hall entrance every time.

The Blackfly family didn't show up for the field lettuce salad with toasted walnuts, the crispy potato pancakes with applesauce, the green asparagus with toasted pine nuts and a sprinkling of salt, the fresh spinach salad with strawberries, the buttermilk soup with snippets of chives, or the artichokes you ate by dipping each tiny leaf in lemony-garlic sauce and nibbling off the tender inner edge.

They missed the crispy fried fish, the radish roses in all colors, the potato croquettes with ketchup, the tiny cooking pans for melting Swiss cheese, the cauliflower "trees" with hot, buttered breadcrumbs, the thinly sliced lean roast pork with dumplings and gravy, the baby peas in the pod with tureens to cook them, and the fruit platters glowing with rubies that were really pomegranate seeds.

They didn't even show up for the tiny cheese wheels covered in red wax.

The feast's sparkling finale was the princess's second favorite course. Water wheels and jets propelled miniature boats along sluices all around the hall. Each boat carried one serving of dessert. No one ever remembered she'd made the dessert sluice, but everyone enjoyed it.

When a guest pointed to a cake, pie, torte, or tart they liked, a footman fished out the little boat, blotted off the bottom, and gave it to the guest with a bow. The princess, and her fourteen brothers and sisters, preferred helping themselves.

She had just plucked a kayak with a chocolate cream puff

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out of the gurgling stream when King Oliver said, “Prince Nero's not old enough to sign the christening certificate, is he?”

“He was born about the same time as Harold number seven.” Queen Sibyl counted on her fingers. “That makes him eleven, so no, he's not. Do you think Ash isn't coming then?”

The princess froze. She knew all Seven Kingdoms had to be present for the christening, but she hadn't realized they had to sign off. The kayak dropped from her hand back into the sluice, making waves that shipwrecked a dozen cakes. Her fourteen royal brothers and sisters protested, but she paid no attention.

Her boat floated down the sluice, out of reach.

CRAAACK!

The princess spun around. The front doors of the banquet hall banged open, revealing the portcullis, smashed in two. Oops. She should have told the stableboy to leave it open. A cloud of blackflies blew in.

CHAPTER TWO

Too Late for Parsnips

THE BLACKFLY RULERS, King Schwartz and the frowning Queen Ash, swept into the hall. The real Crown Prince Nero followed. Their black-clad archers brought up the rear in two long, scowling lines, carrying all their Blackfly Kingdom banners. As if Queen Ash wanted to make sure everyone knew who she was.

The princess glanced uneasily at her parents. Prince Nero looked taller than Harold number seven.

“Oh dear,” King Oliver said, under his breath.

It was her christening. Time to step up. She wished her gown was a little less crumpled and hoped some special treatment would sweeten Queen Ash’s temper. The princess got a footman to fill two welcome cups—one with fresh grape juice and one with fresh peppermint tea because you never knew what people liked—and carried them to the newcomers.

And stood there without words until her arms shook.

Queen Ash made no move to take a cup. King Schwartz was looking at the dessert sluice with an expression of longing. Prince Nero stood a little behind them, at

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attention. The princess stood up a little straighter and became uncomfortably aware of a voice just beyond her elbow, at the Siberian Iris table.

“First, he rode in here on his pony, and now he’s brought his parents. Did he lose them on the way?” The Indigo prince took a noisy slurp.

Next to him, an Indigo princess said, “This prince looks shorter. Maybe he’s the younger brother.”

The princess’s smile hardened. If she didn’t think of something to say, the Indigo Kingdom was going to figure out what she’d done. Unfortunately, she wasn’t good at things to say. No surprise—fourteen older siblings covered it the rest of the time.

The noisy slurper said, “No, no. There’s only one Blackfly prince. The pony made him look taller. And the thing-a-ma-bob on his head.”

Prince Nero looked like he was trying not to smile, and a tiny wrinkle formed between his black eyebrows. The princess’s face got warm. If she said something, maybe the Indigo Kingdom would stop speculating. She cleared her throat.

“Uh.” She wagged the welcome cups. “Welcome.”

Queen Ash’s gaze was fixed on a point somewhere above the princess’s head. King Schwartz had sidled towards the desert sluice. Without breaking protocol, Prince Nero stepped to the side of his parents and bowed his head as if she were more than the nameless fifteenth royal child of Cochem. He looked her in the eye. “Your Highness. Best wishes on your christening day.”

He was good at formal stuff. The princess curtsied.

Queen Ash glowered but relented enough to take a cup. King Schwartz took one too. They both drank deep, and the

whole hall held its breath, ready to cheer.

“Ow!” Queen Ash slapped at a black spot on her neck. Her fingers left a red splotch.

In spite of herself, the princess was interested. It was true then—a fairy godmother gift could bite you. The princess wondered if the queen had ever tried bug spray.

Queen Ash stomped over to King Oliver and Queen Sibyl, picked up an empty parsnip platter from the head table, and shook it. Salt flew over the tablecloth. “You ate the feast without us—”

“Well now, Prince Nero came hours ago. How were we to know you were still coming?” King Oliver tugged at his beard.

Oh no. Hoping to change the subject, the princess dashed around the hall with an empty platter, rounding up leftover parsnip fries from every table. She brought the sorry little heap to Prince Nero, standing by the head table. “Sorry.”

His mouth quirked, but he took the platter.

“That’s outrageous!” Queen Ash took a slightly burnt parsnip fry from Prince Nero and held it up.

“I don’t know why we bother.” Queen Ash gave King Oliver a withering look. “I wait months to taste the food of my childhood, but when we finally get here, the portcullis is closed in our faces, and you’ve already eaten. Well, now you’re getting what’s coming to you: We challenge you to the Duel of the Halls!”

Sibyl number seven said, “Not again—we always lose.”

The princess groaned. *Double-whammy*. The Duel was only half of the package. It tested the Seven Kingdoms’ defense.

The InterKingdom Speech Tournament was the other half. It tested the Seven Kingdoms’ young people.

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Harold number three closed his eyes and fell forward in defeat. His forehead hit the head table with a clunk. He got it.

“It doesn’t matter about the Duel.” Sibyl number one sat up taller in her chair. “This time we’ll finally have a chance at the Speech Tournament.”

Sibyl number two smiled and nodded. They were the two best speakers in the family.

Needless to say, the nameless princess wasn’t. Speakers without names were impossible to introduce, and it got worse from there. She stuck to tinkering with hot air balloons and cable ferries.

The sick feeling in her stomach got worse. Unless Cochem scored a quick win, a contest where one kingdom tried to skewer the other kingdom’s banners with arrows meant the end of her christening party.

The Cochem banners were mounted on the stone walls all around the hall which meant arrows flying high in the air, in every direction. The Blackfly banners, in the princess’s experience, could be anywhere at all, depending on where their queen put the archers who held them. Queen Ash had a flexible view of rules.

Arms outstretched, Queen Ash swept a circle all the way around the hall. Blackflies swarmed out of her long black sleeves. Her fairy godmother gift was nasty.

Royal guests shouted and swatted.

“Gotcha!”

“Eeeek!”

“I hate these things!”

“Hold still—” King Oliver swatted a blackfly on Queen Sibyl’s arm, apologized for the swat, and straightened to address the hall. “I’d much rather play a game or two of

croquet.”

“Couldn’t we eat something first?” The Blackfly King Schwartz took one look at his queen’s rigid face and sighed. “Queen Ash doesn’t care for croquet—”

“I said the Duel of the Halls.” Queen Ash waved her arms in a wild swatting motion, knocking over the huge bouquet of Siberian Iris and spilling water into the laps of the Indigo Kingdom royal family.

More blackflies poured out of her sleeves. Various Indigo princes and princesses jumped up and mopped with their napkins. It was like a dance.

Swat. Blot. Swat. Wipe. Swat.

King Oliver sighed. “Very well, if you insist.”

The nameless princess grabbed a bale of napkins from the nearest footman and took them to the far end of the Indigo table. She blinked her blurry eyes so she wouldn’t trip.

She hiccupped—the kind that hurt—and pressed it with her hand. A Tournament would distract her royal parents for months.

Pointlessly. Prince Nero was the only young person in the Blackfly Kingdom, but he always won the Speech Tournament. Queen Ash saw to that.

Basically, Cochem had to win the Duel to keep the Tournament from happening. But how? Would the princess’s secret weapon be enough?

“Where are my archers?” King Oliver called out.

The Cochem archers filed into the hall and presented their bows. “Here, sire.”

“The Kingdom of Cochem accepts your challenge! Who will referee?” King Oliver’s gaze swept the hall, and the princess had a moment of hope.

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If no referee could be found, the Duel could be postponed.

But the guests at the Magenta Kingdom table immediately waved their arms.

“We accept the Magenta Kingdom as referee,” Queen Ash said.

“Thank you, King Pink.” King Oliver acknowledged the referee with a bow. The princess wished the Magenta Kingdom was a little less helpful.

The Magenta Kingdom guests clattered up the spiral stair to the gallery overlooking the hall. The princess didn’t blame them. The latticework kept most of the stray arrows out. Harold number three had told her the Magenta Kingdom wasn’t known for bravery under fire.

“Ready!” King Pink called.

“Draw!” Queen Ash commanded.

Twenty-four Blackfly archers drew, aiming at Cochem banners on every wall in the hall.

“Fire at will!”

The archers loosed their arrows. Their bowstrings twanged like the strings of a badly tuned harp. Arrows filled the air.

The Saffron Kingdom party dove under their table as one. Daffodils waved back and forth in their vases like anxious ducks. Quivering bouquets on the remaining tables showed that the other kingdoms had followed Saffron’s lead.

Most arrows skittered harmlessly from the stone walls, but one skewered a Cochem banner over the princess’s head. She took refuge behind the dessert fountain. An arrow struck the Marigold Kingdom’s bouquet, and spicy orange petals exploded into the air.

A low arrow skimmed the sluice beside the princess, and

lodged itself in a chocolate cream puff. The princess was pierced with a pang. A Duel of the Halls on her christening day!

From the gallery, King Pink counted aloud. “One, Two, Three for the Blackfly Kingdom.”

That was terrible. Three Cochem banners already skewered and only four untouched. If the Blackfly kept it up, they’d win in the very next round. A victory for Queen Ash meant millions of blackflies, fleeing guests, and a deserted Cochem.

Cochem’s excellent archers were next. The princess went still: hitting the target wasn’t the problem. Queen Ash’s rule-bending was.

Faint clapping came from the Saffron Kingdom, back under the table.

Taking advantage of the lull, King Schwartz fished out the cream puff by its arrow and licked chocolate cream off his fingers.

The Blackfly archers lowered their banners and formed a tight circle. The princess’s eyebrows went up. A circle was cheating. Banners were supposed to be mounted in the wall brackets or, worst case, held up in a straight line, well above the archers’ heads. If an arrow struck an archer instead of a banner, your kingdom was disqualified.

But King Oliver never shot at archers in a Duel, and Queen Ash knew it.

Queen Ash tapped her foot. “Kingdom of Cochem—Do you yield?”

The princess had to remind King Oliver about their secret weapon. The Cloud of Defense could capture banners without hitting anyone. She yanked her drawing out of her pocket, folded it into a paper airplane, aimed at

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King Oliver, and let fly.

Tink!

The tiny airplane struck the ceremonial ribbons on King Oliver's chest and fell onto the head table.

"What's this?" The King brushed off his ribbons and picked up the paper.

From the other side of the hall, the princess willed him to open it. It was so hard to get people to understand what you meant. A drawing was better, but people actually had to look at it.

He unfolded the airplane and studied the paper. Borrowing Queen Sibyl's magnifying glass, he adjusted it and moved the paper back and forth a few times. Finally, he stopped. His eyebrows knit together, and his mouth pursed.

Would he try it?

"Yield?" King Oliver focused the magnifying glass towards Queen Ash. His eye was giant behind the lens. "In our own hall?" He turned to his archers and made a jabbing motion at the ceiling.

The signal.

He'd remembered. The princess's heart skipped a beat. Maybe there was still hope for the christening.

The head archer shot his silver arrow straight up into the air. A fine cord trailing from the arrow was attached to the center of a round silver parachute emblazoned with the Cochem standard. The Cloud of Defense.

Thunk.

Directly above the Blackfly archers, the arrowhead bit into the ceiling beam. The feathered shaft quivered, but the arrow held.

A split second later, the other Cochem archers loosed their arrows, all attached by shorter cords to the

parachute's edge.

The princess held her breath. Would it work properly inside the crowded hall?

Launched into the air, the silk billowed and filled. The Cloud hovered for a millisecond and sank down over the horrified Blackfly archers, neatly covering all their black banners with Cochem's huge silver one. Not a scrap of black showed.

Thud, snap, thud, thud, thud, snap, thud, thud, snap, thud.

The arrows pinned the shorter cords to the earthen floor.

The princess jumped up and down, clapping. All seven Blackfly banners at once! Queen Ash had to sit down and behave herself now. The christening was on.

Harold number three made a megaphone out of his hands. "And Cochem bags the win!"

"Cochem! Cochem! Cochem!" The other Harolds and the Sibyls chanted and clapped until the hall rang with sound. Cochem had never won a Duel of the Hall before.

The Saffron Kingdom came out from under their table and joined in.

Queen Ash had already lost, but she was still shouting commands. "If that old trick beats you, you should be ashamed of yourselves. Lean over! Dump that silly thing off your heads!"

Her archers writhed with their heavy banners under the silk parachute, but some leaned to one side, and some leaned to another. The archers managed to slip out from underneath the Cloud. But when they tried to get their banners out, they tripped over each other and fell onto the rushes.

Four Blackfly banners fell into the glowing hearth and burst into flames.

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Uh, oh. The princess had to get to the emergency sluice levers. They were built into the wall next to the empty Magenta Kingdom table. The only way through the commotion was . . . underneath! Ducking under tables and sprinting in between, she crossed the hall: Rose, Saffron—still crowded under there—Marigold, and Magenta Kingdoms.

“One-Two-Three-Four for Cochem!” shouted King Pink from behind the latticework.

Cochem had won the first match. But unless they got this fire out, they’d have to forfeit to save the castle. The princess yanked on the lever that drained the dessert sluices of water.

Uh! It was stuck. The heat must have warped it out of shape.

Ouch. Swat. Ouch.

Now that she was standing still, the blackflies bit her hands again and again. Honestly. Who needed fairy godmother gifts like these? Her own fairy godmother hadn’t shown up. The princess hoped she never would. A name would be enough, thank you.

On the other side of the hall, the frantic Blackfly archers yanked on the snarled poles and banners, puffing up the Cloud of Defense, which fanned the hearth like giant bellows.

Whoosh, Whoosh . . . Poof!

The rushes nearest the hearth caught fire, and smoke plumed in every direction. There was no time to lose. Coughing, the princess wiggled the emergency sluice lever gently back and forth. Something was blocking the lever.

“Let fly!” Queen Ash commanded her archers, even though thick smoke filled the hall.

Too Late for Parsnips

Always a thoughtful host, King Oliver bawled, “Cochem forfeits! Eeeeeeeee-verybody out!”

Guests, hosts, archers, and referees fled, still swatting blackflies. With her pocketknife, the princess pried a tiny piece of rush out of the mechanism. She pulled the lever.

Water doused the burning rushes and boiled on the hot stones with a loud zissssch.

Steam filled the hall.

The Black Tulip table settings were untouched. The perfectly folded napkins waited for her christening to begin. Choking, the still nameless princess made her way out. She couldn't blame King Oliver. A good King protected his guests. If he hadn't forfeited the Duel, Queen Ash would have skewered them all.

But the Speech Tournament was going to make a name impossible. The princess sagged in the doorframe.

Nothing had gone the way she'd hoped, but it hadn't all been for nothing. Had it?

She told herself it could have been worse. The royal family could have come down with croquet fever. The Tournament could have required every royal child to give a speech. She shuddered. A fate worse than death.

Squaring her shoulders, she went out to survey the damage. If she wanted to feel any better, she needed to do some work with her hands.



With a loud roar, the roof over one of the Tower windows burst into flame, lighting up the night sky. The princess ran down below the castle to join the royal firefighters at the pump.

The fire had gotten so big so fast. Hadn't her emergency sluice worked at all?

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Shale from the roof exploded into a hundred fragments. The princess covered her head with her arms and ran for shelter. Royal firefighters leaped out of the way of falling timber.

“Back!” The Fire Chief ordered. “Get that pump going!”

Then, the roof fell in. Smoke poured out of the windows like a never ending line of ghosts leaving the royal portrait gallery.

For fifteen terrible long minutes, no water came out of the hoses. The princess must have gotten something wrong. Firefighters blocked her from the pump, so she went over the design in her mind, searching for a mistake. It all checked.

Then she followed the hoses along the ground. A big stone block from the castle had fallen onto the hoses and pinched them shut. She yanked the block, but it was too heavy to move. If she could lift this end up even a tiny bit, the force of the water might straighten the hoses all by itself.

The other firefighters had thrown the useless hoses to one side and were chopping away at a burning section of the castle, too busy to stop and help, even if she could tell them what she needed.

Heat from the fire burned her hands and face. She had to hurry. Taking a crowbar from a massive firefighter’s toolbox, she eased it under the edge of the block and pushed down on the crowbar with all her weight.

The block came up a tiny bit, and water pushed in the hoses under the block, taking some pressure off the crowbar. She threw herself down on the crowbar, and the block came up a little more, letting more water in the hose.

The water pushed up against the block which tilted and

crashed on its side, settling with a thud and freeing the hoses. They filled and fattened like snakes and water gushed out of the nozzles, spraying the firefighters.

“Hey!” The firefighter wiped the water off his face in one quick motion, picked up the hoses, and got to work on the splintered wood.

Hoorah! The princess did a cartwheel right there on the grass.

For several hours afterwards, the firefighters pumped water from the river and sprayed the steaming stone walls of the castle. The princess ran around everywhere, helping wherever she saw something to do.

It was well after midnight before the fire was out, and everyone could go to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

The Fairy Godmother Takes Her Time

WHEN THE PRINCESS woke the next morning, she was alone in her dungeon workshop. It was hard to tell time because no light came in from outside, but she must have overslept. Fourteen cast-off sleeping bags littered the floor. Her brothers and sisters were already gone. She got up, stretched out the kinks from sleeping on the workbench, and hurried out of the dungeon, up the spiral stairs, and into the vineyards.

Drawing in big gulps of well-washed air, she followed the road out the castle gate. It was already the middle of the morning. Wind whipped her christening gown, smudged a bit from last night's firefighting.

Pennants waved above the colorful tents in the royal campground. The Seven Kingdoms were all still here. With an out-of-doors christening, the princess could still get a name. A robin burst into song. The princess sang right along with it.

Tying her hair to keep it out of her eyes, she took out her

pocket spyglass and hunted for any sign of her family.

There! Next to the five rows of uprooted grapevines. That clump of black must be the Blackfly family creeping down towards a larger clump, of silver. Her own family. The princess ran straight down the steep aisle between the nearest two rows of grapevines and skidded to a stop, bumping King Oliver and grabbing Queen Sibyl by the sleeve to stop her fall.

“Ho, there!” King Oliver said, catching her.

The princess jumped on the moment. “Papa, the christening. Can we, *uh*, can we have it now?”

King Oliver blinked. “Right. Christening. Sibbie, do you see the Bishop anywhere?”

The princess froze.

“The Bishop?” Queen Sibyl had a fresh feather in her hat. She covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh dear! I’m not sure we invited him.”

This couldn’t be happening. This was just a nightmare brought on by too much smoke. The princess pinched herself.

Ouch. She’d been so sure the Blackfly family was the final required ingredient. None of her fourteen royal brothers and sisters had mentioned the Bishop. They’d been too busy telling her horror stories about fairy godmothers.

She studied King Oliver’s face, hoping there was some way around the Bishop.

But King Oliver let go of her hand and sat down on a stone wall. Passing a shaky hand over his forehead, he asked, “Sibbie, when you close your eyes, do you see croquet wickets?”

Uh oh.

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Queen Sibyl patted King Oliver's hand, but the next moment she was supporting herself with both hands on the stone wall. Gingerly, she sat down next to him. "But we got shots." It was almost a wail.

Croquet fever. The princess swallowed hard.

White and sweaty, Harold number one dashed up with an arm draped in wickets, like a cross between a medieval knight and a waiter. "Where should we set up the course?"

Every one of her brothers and sisters had a glazed look. Most held croquet equipment. Mallets swayed back and forth, croquet balls clonked together, metal wickets chimed, and it all added up to a croquet orchestra with 16 players.

An epidemic.

The more croquet they played, the faster they'd all recover, but the christening was done for. It could be two weeks before they were themselves again, and the Seven Kingdoms' guests would be long gone.

Huh. So far, the princess didn't feel the least urge to pick up a mallet. Her shot seemed to be working. But then, the Royal Physician had opened a new, 16-dose vial of vaccine just for her. When he had complained about the waste, the princess had suggested he use up the rest on the members of the castle staff. She hoped he had. With almost the whole royal family down with fever, a few vaccinated people would be a great help.

At that moment, the Blackfly family reached the terrace. Queen Ash went over to King Oliver and pushed his head back with a long, bony finger. "I'd say you were Unfit."

Noooo. The princess knew what Queen Ash was thinking. If King Oliver's family was Unfit, they needed a regent to rule until they were better.

The princess opened her mouth to object, but Queen Ash beat her to it. “Give ME the Golden Parsnip, Oliver. I’ll take care of everything until you’re better.”

Uh. Queen Ash—in perfect health—was ten times more Unfit than King Oliver with croquet fever. She’d only been in Cochem for one day, and look at the castle! The princess imagined blackfly-maddened players tripping over wickets, the Royal Physician wrapping various arms and legs in plaster, and Queen Ash whacking balls of every color off to distant Coventry. Cackling. While the Cochem Kingdom went to rack and ruin.

By now, Queen Sibyl was tracing imaginary croquet courses with her silver fork all over her silver linen napkin in desperate haste. With an admirable force of will, she stabbed her fork into the napkin to hold it still long enough to gasp out to King Oliver, “Let. Her. Plan. The. Tournament.”

The princess smacked her own forehead. Not croquet—speeches. She’d been thinking about the christening, the Duel, the castle fire, and croquet fever, and forgotten all about the Tournament.

King Oliver’s free hand hovered over the wickets on Harold number one’s arm, but, at Queen Sibyl’s words, he yanked his hand back. “But Sibbie, you always told me—”

The princess knew what King Oliver was about to say: Queen Ash should never rule the Cochem Kingdom. That was true. But his inability to whisper was about to cause another InterKingdom incident. Gripped by fever and madly tracing, Queen Sibyl couldn’t stop him.

The princess’s siblings and the Blackfly Crown Prince were knocking croquet balls up and down the rows of vines. King Schwartz was evidently keeping score.

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This called for desperate measures. The princess stomped on King Oliver's toes.

"Yeowp!" King Oliver's fingers gripped the wickets on Harold number one's arm.

Queen Ash snickered.

King Oliver's eyes watered and the princess felt terrible. His eyebrows made a threatening hedge over his eyes, but then he seemed to catch himself. "Sibbie?" he said.

Still feverishly scribbling, Queen Sibyl gave a tiny shake of her head and closed her eyes. "I can't. I mean, look at me." She waved her fork and napkin.

His mouth drooped, but he nodded. "This should make you feel better." He gave her a handful of Harold's wickets.

The princess didn't have the least desire to grab one for herself. Proof that her shot must be working.

"Hand over the Golden Parsnip before chaos breaks out," Queen Ash snapped, stepping in front of the princess, who was wondering what Queen Ash's version of chaos was. "Your whole family is Unfit."

The princess had a soft voice, but she wasn't Unfit. Her hand shot up, waving back and forth.

Queen Ash took a step closer to King Oliver. "Come ON, Oliver. You never let me do anything BIG."

The princess jumped up on the stone wall and waved her hand above Queen Ash's shoulder. *Take me instead.* Calling out to King Oliver wouldn't work unless he was looking straight at her.

Tossing a croquet ball helplessly in the air and catching it, King Oliver didn't or couldn't look up. After all, the princess wasn't that tall, even on top of a wall.

With his free hand, King Oliver unclasped the Golden Parsnip from his belt and held it out to Queen Ash. He

rasped out, “Will you rule Cochem Fair and True?”

“Wait!” the princess said, but, as usual, her voice didn’t carry. King Oliver didn’t react. She bounced up and down on tip-toes, arm still in the air. She hadn’t been brought up to rule a kingdom, but anything was better than handing Cochem over to the Blackflies.

“Of course,” Queen Ash cooed to her brother and crossed her fingers behind her back.

The princess pointed at Queen Ash’s crossed fingers and bawled out, “Hey!”

At least she felt like she’d bawled it out, but Queen Ash shushed her without looking, and no one else reacted. The fever had them all in a daze.

“Take the 15th.” King Oliver mopped his brow with his silver handkerchief. “We should be well by then.”

The princess wanted to ask for a later date. The fever would make her parents forget about her name, and the InterKingdom Speech Tournament would finish off the job. Seven Kingdoms’ worth of people giving speeches meant a lot of tired listeners.

Then she had a terrible thought. What if she were the only one of her siblings healthy enough to give a speech at the Tournament? *Ew*. No one could make her give a speech, could they? Of course, Hugh would try. Just thinking about how that conversation would go made the princess queasy. King Oliver should make the Tournament a week later, just in case.

But when she looked up, King Oliver was shaking and pale. It wasn’t the time to ask for personal favors. Her christening would have to wait a little longer. That was just how it was.

Two or three more years without her own library card.

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Life stretched out like a desert. No books.

She swallowed her disappointment.

“Next year, get your shot, Oliver.” Queen Ash kissed the Golden Parsnip and hung it on the chain she always wore around her neck. She dismissed the Cochem family with a wave and a mocking laugh. “Let’s find you a nice, out-of-the-way place to play—”

The princess wanted to know what the problem was with the shots, but Queen Ash was right about the fever playing itself out. There was no cure.

“Ooooooh. I know the perfect place to keep you out of the way until I’m finished here.” Shading her eyes, Queen Ash watched as her husband knocked King Oliver’s ball into the Mosel River. “Well done, Schwartz!”

To King Oliver, she added, “On second thought, I’ll take you myself. Just to be sure you . . . arrive. It’s the perfect place to . . . recover.”

The princess didn’t like the sound of that. Queen Ash probably wanted solitude to toast giant marshmallows over Cochem’s burning castle.

Queen Ash snatched a croquet ball and mallet, dropped the ball on the uneven ground of the vineyard and whacked it in the direction of the Blackfly Kingdom. “Your turn.”

Queen Ash’s “perfect place” must be her castle, the one on a rock in the middle of the Rhine River.

“Thank you, Ash. This fever is a little disorienting.” King Oliver helped the shivering Queen Sibyl to her feet, and they swayed and chimed towards the croquet game already in progress.

“Fore!” King Oliver shouted and whacked a croquet ball. The silver ball flew up into the sky, made a graceful arc over the grapevines, and dropped into the middle of the game.

“Papa?” the princess called out, “Mamma?”

But they disappeared behind the hill. The princess longed to follow them, but until the fever played out, she was the only one who wasn’t Unfit. She had a duty to Cochem.

Reluctantly, she turned away and headed back up to the sodden castle. Cochem needed defenses or they’d all be homeless later. Who knew what Queen Ash would try when she came back with the Golden Parsnip?

Something tickled the back of the princess’s hand, and she tried to brush it off.

“Careful there!”

A voice? The princess stopped short. Who was still here? She spun around to see who hadn’t followed the croquet game.

No one.

Something tickled her hand again, and she heard a distinct chuckle. She looked down at her hand.

A laughing damselfly?

She brought her hand up to eye-level. A tiny person with damselfly wings and flowing black, micro-braids stood on the princess’s hand.

Smoke must make you see things. The princess blinked, rubbed her eyes with the other hand and looked again.

Miniature elephants marched around the hem of the creature’s long tie-dye dress. The princess had always thought fairy godmothers would look more . . . dangerous.

“Don’t tell me—I went right outta your head.” The fairy reached out a tiny hand and pretended to pull something out of the princess’s head. Her voice was surprisingly low and sweet for such a small creature. Not shrill at all. But she was frowning quite ferociously.

The princess struggled to come up with a diplomatic way

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of saying the party was already over, and the christening hadn't happened.

"Hello?" The fairy nudged the princess's hand with a tiny red sneaker.

"Uh. Can I set you down somewhere?" The princess looked around for an appropriate spot. "I have to go."

"Can you set me . . . can you what!?" The fairy put her hands on her hips. "You do know who I am?"

The princess's brothers and sisters had been very clear. Don't make magical godparents mad, or bad things happened to your whole family.

"Fairy godmother, ma'am, there was a castle fire last night." The princess stretched out her arm to make sure the fairy could see.

"No wonder there was such a racket. I thought you were shooting off the fireworks early." The fairy shook her braids and dusted her hands together. "It's a good thing I got here when I did. We'd better go around back. And you can call me Kizzy." She flew off, and the princess followed, feeling almost hopeful. If the fairy could magically defend the castle, the princess could set out after her family and bring them home to recover.

But in the shelter of Queen Sibyl's flower garden, Kizzy settled herself on a full-blown peony and propped her red sneakers up on its white petals, as if she had all the time in the world. "Let's give you your gift for governing the kingdom before it's too late."

Uh. Nothing with uncontrollable insects. Or rare fevers.

The princess had always thought you needed a name before you got a gift, but this wasn't the time for questions. With Queen Ash holding the Golden Parsnip, the princess needed all the help she could get. "That's very kind."

Kizzy took *Magical Gifts for Royal Christenings, Volume 1* out of her bag and opened it on her lap.

“Is it okay if I look over your shoulder?”

Kizzy’s laugh was like gurgling water. “You’re welcome to try.”

The princess fished her spyglass out of her pocket, flipping it around to magnify the tiny letters inside the book. Kizzy gave her a nod of grudging approval.

“Can I cure croquet fever with magic?”

“Are you making fun of me?” Kizzy gave her a dirty look. “This isn’t about superpowers.”

“Uh. No.” A superpower was what she needed, even if she wasn’t supposed to ask for it. If she couldn’t cure croquet fever, she’d take the power to defend the kingdom while Queen Ash relived her Cochem childhood, or the power to keep peace at the Speech Tournament.

She didn’t know how to make Kizzy understand the situation. “Uh, I have to . . .” She pointed her index finger in the direction her family had taken and then jerked her thumb at the blackened castle, but Kizzy didn’t take her eyes from the princess’s face.

“Can’t quite tell me, can you? Just what I suspected.” Kizzy narrowed her eyes. “I’ve got the perfect gift for you.”

The princess had a moment of pure fear. What if Kizzy gave her a gift even worse than Queen Ash’s blackflies? Then her whole family would go from forgetting her to hating her.

If Cochem wasn’t in crisis, the princess would ask for the power make her parents remember her long enough to give her a name. But that was wasteful. If she had a name, her family would remember about her without magic. Cochem was in a crisis, so this wasn’t the time to think about

herself.

She wanted to tell Kizzy to take her time, choose carefully, or don't do anything rash, but Kizzy had already run her finger down the index and found her entry while the princess was still deciding what to say.

"Here it is." Kizzy turned to a page in the main part of the book. "*Hiding in plain sight*. Let me look up the footnote."

Uh. This wasn't the time for footnotes. What was *hiding in plain sight* supposed to mean? If superpowers weren't available, how about the ability to calculate numbers without mistakes? Or the newest model of cable ferry. Then she could whisk her family home from the Blackfly Kingdom. Even a good book about how to build one would be welcome.

But you didn't tell fairy godmothers what to give you. So the princess stood there, mute, while her home was in shambles, and her feverish family wandered the Seven Kingdoms.

Kizzy leafed through endless pages of microscopic print. "Here—I have to read you this part, it's in the rules, so listen up: 'To lose this gift, you must persuade a person of a truth they don't want to hear.'"

Rules? There was no time for all of this.

Oblivious to the princess's distress, Kizzy said, "The warnings section is much longer than usual, almost half a page."

The princess glanced down, and Kizzy pointed at yellow-highlighted lines that could have been ant footprints.

The princess's inverted spyglass was useless so she couldn't skip ahead. Ever since that unexpected explosion in her workshop, she read warning labels. "What does it say?"

Kizzy wiggled her sneakers. “Something spilled.”

Normally, the princess would feel sympathetic. Accidents happened. Hugh Ancry—the ancient librarian of the Palace Agricultural Library—was the one who dressed people down for spills in books. But safety mattered. Warning labels needed to be readable. “You should be more careful.”

Kizzy gave her a frosty look. “Life’s not all about you godchildren, you know.”

Since her godmother was ten years and a day too late, that wasn’t exactly news. The princess tapped the page with a finger. “Could we, *uh*, get on with this . . . gift?”

“Very well.” Kizzy shook out her dragonfly wings, raised her wand, and assumed a professional air. “This won’t take a moment. Please stand a little closer.”

A fine mist rained down the front of the littlest princess’s christening gown. “Lovely, now turn around.” The fine mist came again and tickled the back of the princess’s neck.

“Enjoy! I have a few years before the next christening. Have to use my time wisely.” Her fairy godmother plumped herself down on the peony and took out *Volume 2*. “Why don’t you go tell some other people what you need?” She made an almost snorting noise, but her tiny handkerchief was over her face so fast, the princess couldn’t tell.

Since the day was half over, she didn’t stop to find out.

After a curtsied good-bye-and-thank-you, she set out to conquer her To-Do List:

1. Get ready to defend the castle against Queen Ash and the Golden Parsnip.

2. Bring the Cochem family back as soon as one or more of them were healthy. (See number 1.)

3. Get a name before the InterKingdom Tournament made the princess’s parents forget all about her again.

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The last one wasn't royally important, like the first two, but it had to stay on her list. It wasn't on anyone else's.

CHAPTER FOUR

Out of the Dishwater and Into the Storm

BY THE TIME the princess left Queen Sibyl's flower garden, the morning's shadows were gone. Fairy godmother stuff took a while. She checked the trails in the distance for any signs of the returning Blackfly Queen. Nothing yet. But she'd be here soon enough. The princess took a shortcut through the ruined hall and came out the front of the castle.

The first rule of defending a castle was to prepare for a siege. Between Queen Ash's late entry to the feast and the entire Seven Kingdoms escaping in a rush after the fire, there wasn't much left of the portcullis or the heavy wooden doors. That had to be fixed right away. Fortunately, the royal carpenters were already at work.

On the other hand, the Head Gardener and a dozen under-gardeners in sturdy gray coveralls were moving rose bushes from one bed to another.

Someone had to tell them defenses took priority. As the only member of the family in Cochem, the princess made

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the attempt.

“Uh—”

“What are you standing around for?” The Head Gardener put down his bushel basket of flower bulbs and looked the princess up and down. “Pick up a shovel. Just look at this black ash everywhere—all those roses have to be moved before they die. The firefighters soaked the ground for us, people. Let’s get these bulbs in.”

Huh. The Head Gardener could have been more polite, but a castle fire was a stressful time, so the princess made allowances.

It was no time for a royal fuss.

“It’s nice to save water, and those roses are beautiful, but . . .” She pointed up at the Tower. As soon as Queen Ash came back, they had to hold the castle against her and the Golden Parsnip. Those rose bushes would have to be bigger and nastier to slow her down at all.

A Sleeping Beauty hedge would be perfect. “Do you have some tall, thorny roses?”

“Tall, thorny roses?” The Head Gardener’s lip curled. “*Bah!* These are the finest French roses, in honor of the christening of the youngest Cochem princess.” His voice dropped to a tone of reverence. “They are called ‘*Le Bon Mot.*’ The name means ‘the perfect word.’”

This particular rose seemed a little silly since the princess never had the words she needed. For instance right now. But he’d gone to all this trouble.

The princess tried again. “A row of nice thorny, blackberry bushes in front . . . *uh*, here . . . would keep Queen Ash from . . . *um*, walking on—”

“Blackberries? This is a rose garden. Enough backtalk!”

The Head Gardener shoved her towards a dozen under-gardeners.

“Aaaaah!” The princess lost her balance on the slippery ground and fell onto her hands. Her palms sank into the mud, and her face burned. No one had ever treated her like this before.

She went to wipe the mud off, remembered her brocade gown in the nick of time, and froze with her muddy hands in the air. Her gown was gone. She was wearing a gray coverall.

A shovel struck the ground next to her and bounced. Its handle smacked her in the head.

Ouch. She rubbed her head with the cleanest part of her arm. The mud might have been an accident, but the tool-throwing wasn't.

She wished her brothers and sisters were here. The Head Gardener needed a talking to. But he had already walked away.

Huh. As far as the princess knew, Cochem mud wasn't magical, so this must be *hiding in plain sight*. So far, her gift was convenient for wiping muddy hands, but likely to get you hit in the head. She wasn't impressed.

The under-gardener closest to the princess picked up her shovel and handed it to her. “You okay?”

Still recovering from the shock, the princess nodded and took the shovel. Nice to know under-gardeners took care of each other. Using one foot, she stepped her shovel into the ground and tossed a shovelful of dirt onto the pile.

Now that she thought about it, an extended moat wasn't the worst idea. Queen Ash wouldn't expect one over here.

One of the under-gardeners coughed, and the princess looked over.

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Crossing his arms on top of his shovel, the second undergardener was inspecting her. “You know that bunch of evil blackberries? Down by the royal campgrounds?”

The princess nodded again. She’d helped Harold number three get his kite out of them once. But the Head Gardener didn’t want blackberries.

“My wife makes jam every year,” the first undergardener called over. “I say we do it. The Head Gardener doesn’t have to know everything.”

The second undergardener finished his section, but before he moved on to the next, he said, “We’ll get ’em when we’re done. But I’m getting my heavy-duty gloves first.”

These people understood things without too many words. She took a shuddery breath. They didn’t know who she was, but they were helping her anyway. It made her proud of Cochem. They dug for a while in companionable silence.

From what the princess could see, the trench curved away from the castle. Taking her shovel, she followed the white line the under-gardeners were digging along as if she were looking for a new place to work. The line drew a perfect circle. She smacked her head with a muddy palm. Okay for a flowerbed, but useless as a moat.

Ever so casually, the princess picked up the lime bucket and brush and painted a straight line from the flowerbed to the existing moat. That should help.

The Head Gardener was laying out a complicated design in flower bulbs that seemed to be taking all his attention. The princess scraped out the old, curved line with her shovel and dug along her new line.

After a couple of hours, her palms burned and she had to stop. The shovel certainly wasn’t magical. It gave wicked

blisters. And the flowerbed was still much too shallow for a moat.

With steady speed, the princess's old under-gardener friends caught up to her. She wondered how to get them to help her with this new problem.

The first under-gardener called across to the second under-gardener. "You always want blue and white gardens. What's wrong with a little color?"

The princess listened for an opening in the conversation.

"A little color, as an accent in a garden, yes. Planting rainbows of color in every bed isn't proper for a royal family." The second under-gardener punctuated his remark with a flying shovel of dirt.

"What kind of gardens do you like, then?" The first under-gardener asked the princess.

This was her chance. "Uh. Like . . . a moat?"

"A . . . what?" The second under-gardener laughed. "First blackberries and now a moat? You must have some friends you really don't want to see."

The princess choked out, "Queen Ash."

"Oh, ho! Blackfly repellent to the rescue." The first under-gardener chuckled. "A moat with lots of frogs."

Glomp! Glomp! Glomp! The second one opened and shut his mouth like a frog catching flies. "That'll manage the blackflies. I'm in."

"Me, too."

The princess wanted in too. She raised her hand. The under-gardeners gave her a high-five each and passed the word in both directions. The princess had to blink hard for a moment before she could dig again. She wasn't used to being seen. Catching sight of her gray coveralls, she reminded herself again that they didn't know who she was.

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“Head Gardener wants a water garden.” The first undergardener passed the word as if it was a real command.

“Those water lilies want it DEEP. Dig, my hearties, dig!”

“A tall cold one afterwards at the Peppermint Tea House for all of you.”

Groaning came from all sides, but the under-gardeners dug, and the shovels rang with the sound of dirt flying. Grateful for so much support, the princess dug until she couldn't lift another shovelful to save her life.

Saluting her colleagues in gray coveralls, she stepped out of the way of the professionals and went to find some firefighters. She needed water in the new moat right away. Not flowers. Queen Ash wasn't the kind to stop and smell the forget-me-nots.

In good weather, the Blackfly Kingdom was about a four-day journey from Cochem. Eight days wasn't a long time to put defenses into place. Walking up through the Tower's huge shadow, the princess worried they wouldn't finish in time. She'd already used up most of this day. Below the castle, the river valley lay half in shadow. The moat would need hours to fill. Fortunately, the princess knew where the off-duty Fire Chief spent his time. She turned the corner of the castle.

Armed with the fire hose, the Fire Chief was too busy waggling his eyebrows at Cook to pay attention to his work. Unfortunately, the water rushed right back out of the giant copper washtubs because no one had put the stoppers in. His large feet trampled the green parsnip tops into the mud.

The good news was she'd found the Fire Chief right where she thought he'd be. With Cook. That was also the bad news. How was the princess going to get him on the

moat project instead?

Before the princess could open her mouth, Cook seized her. “There you are! Do you think christening dishes wash themselves?”

“The fire hose”—the princess was going to say, was needed to fill up the new moat, but Cook didn’t wait.

“Isn’t Chief lovely to help us when the kitchen is in such a state?” Cook simpered.

The Fire Chief bowed, overshooting the washtub and blasting the shaky tower of crockery with the water’s force. He yanked the hose back, sideswiping the princess.

Splutter! She wiped the water from her face and arms. Oh well, it might help with the mud. When she looked down, the uniform she wore wasn’t muddy at all. It was . . . she wasn’t sure what it was. She turned a smidgeon towards Cook, and it came into focus as a scullery maid uniform. The princess blinked. More magic.

“Get to work there.” Cook pointed up at the tower of dishes.

First, the princess had to figure something out. She turned a fraction towards the Fire Chief and was instantly clad in a firefighter’s waterproof coat with toggles.

Eyes fixed on the Fire Chief, Cook didn’t seem to notice. Her arm still pointed uphill. “Dishes, I said.”

Funny, the princess thought the toggles on her firefighter’s coat were convincing. She’d have to test her gift the other way around. She turned to face the Fire Chief.

“Don’t you have a pump to work, firefighter?” His stern gaze swept over the princess, and he pointed towards the pump, downhill from the washtubs. “We need to get these washtubs filled.”

The princess took a step closer to Cook, and the scullery

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maid uniform took over, complete with starched apron.

“Wait—where’s my firefighter?” The Fire Chief narrowed his eyes. “A moment ago, she was standing right there.”

He twirled around, spraying water 360 degrees. When the water hit Cook’s ankles, she shrieked and jumped back, laughing.

The princess frowned and shook her head. What had her fairy godmother been thinking? How was a gift like this supposed to help govern a kingdom?

“What are you looking at?” Cook wasn’t laughing now. She pointed the scullery maid princess towards the washtubs.

“It’s the strain,” Cook said to the Fire Chief. “Even a strong man needs care once in a while. Sit yourself down, and I’ll get you something warm to drink.”

The Fire Chief sat down while keeping the hose aimed at the washtubs.

Not bad.

“We know who’s important around here.” Cook snapped a playful dishcloth at him.

At this rate, the gardeners would have the moat full of flowers before the Fire Chief got back to work. Granted, he had worked all night to put the castle fire out.

The princess would have to fix things without words, the way she always did, *hiding in plain sight* or not. She hunted around in the grass for the stoppers and put them in the washtubs.

After a few minutes, the washtubs filled.

Now for the moat. Counting on the Fire Chief only having eyes for Cook, the princess followed the hose back-a-ways, kinked it, and ran back up to the washtubs.

“Uh, no water, sir.” The princess passed her hand back

and forth in front of the nozzle.

As she'd hoped, he put the hose down to trace the problem but was held up by a few sweet nothings from Cook.

Staying well away from both, the princess swiveled the heavy pump on its stand, dragged it down the hill, and aimed the nozzle towards the new moat. Her long christening gown made it awkward. She braced herself for the water's rush and hoped no one noticed her gown.

"All clear!" the Fire Chief shouted, having apparently remembered his duty and checked the hose.

Now the hose was aimed in the right direction, but the princess couldn't stand here until the moat filled. She needed to get the Fire Chief to do it. Hopefully, the Fire Chief would feel like showing off his importance in front of Cook.

When he backed towards her, blowing farewell kisses at Cook, the princess dropped the hose and sprinted back up to him. Just as she'd hoped, her firefighter uniform came back.

Breathless, she saluted. "Sir—defenses, *uh*, are . . . the moat needs more water." She pointed towards the muddy trench along the castle. Inspired by Cook, the princess burst out with, "They, *uh*, can't do it without you."

"This is where I leave you, ma'am." The Fire Chief twirled his mustaches at Cook and went back to working the fire hose, pulling the heavy pump behind him. As soon as he moved out of range, the princess's scullery maid outfit came back.

"Where have you been?" Cook gave the princess a stern look and marched back over to the outdoor bread oven.

Princesses were expected to help in any crisis, and the

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new moat was on track. The regular scullery maid, Bridget, wasn't around. She must be helping her father in the dungeon. Hungry firefighters and gardeners needed food and dishes to eat it from. A hungry castle was a vulnerable castle. The princess put on an apron and plowed into the suds.

A pity her fairy godmother hadn't picked a more practical gift, like magical feast-making or instant dishwashing. Or a magical way to make people understand what you needed them to know. This kind of work made her fingers prune-y and the blisters from the shovel burned in the soapy water. The princess washed three washtubs full of pots and climbed half inside the last huge stockpot to scrub the burned part at the bottom.

"Am I glad to see you!" It was a girl's voice, but not one of the Sibyls.

The princess hit her head on the pot getting out. And found herself eye-to-eye with the castle scullery maid who laughed and tossed the princess a clean dishtowel. "I'm Bridget, who are you?"

Uh. Since Bridget saw her constantly—on the way to and from the dungeon workshop—this was a strange question. At a moment like this, a name would come in handy. She could at least show her library card. "*Uh.* I'm the Fifteenth Child of Cochem."

Bridget looked at her sideways. "Right, and I'm the Blackfly Queen. You don't look a thing like Fifteenth."

Fifteenth was what they called her because she didn't have a name. The princess ducked into the last pot to cover her confusion. This magical disguise hid her from people who talked to her every day? Did this mean her family wouldn't recognize her either?

Someone knocked on the side of the pot. “Helloooo?” Bridget called. “Why do you think we’re washing all these pots? By now, the Fifteenth Child of Cochem has a name. And if you don’t know what it is, you’re not her.”

Great logic. Too bad it wasn’t true. The princess backed out of the pot and rinsed it with scalding water Cook had heated over the barbeque. Maybe Bridget would blame her red face on the heat.

Bridget took the pot, dumped the last water out and whipped it dry with her towel. “So, what do your friends call you?”

The princess pulled out the washtubs’ plugs. Soapy water gurgled out onto the grass and flowed towards the vegetable garden. Fifteenth was the only “name” she’d ever had, and that wasn’t going to work.

The princess shrugged and said nothing.

“Fine. I’ll just call you Soapsuds until you tell me.”

Dusk fell before the princess took off her soggy apron and followed Bridget over to a patch of drier grass. The light in the cloudy sky was going. Bridget opened her satchel and handed the princess a piece of cinnamon-dusted crumble cake.

Left over from the christening that hadn’t happened.

Falling over on the grass, the princess ate her cake in exhausted silence. Things looked bleak. Bridget fell asleep on the grass.

In front of them, the castle dripped from every parapet. The Tower’s roof was gone. The stones under the castle windows were streaked with soot as if they’d been crying. Before they could defend the castle against Queen Ash, it had to be cleared for action.

Yawning, the princess forced her eyes to stay open.

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Hiding in plain sight was an exhausting way to look after the kingdom. She had to get help. If King Oliver and Queen Sibyl weren't well enough yet, she'd have to get whichever one of the Harolds or the Sibyls were. Even feverish, one of them could tell people what needed to be done.

In between wickets.

If they had a relapse, she could hand them a mallet. The princess told herself any one of them could take over from Queen Ash, as long as they didn't look Unfit.

They had to. It was too much for the princess.

She struggled to her hands and knees, but her eyes wouldn't stay open. She let her head rest on her hand for one moment.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Rocky Situation

THE PRINCESS WOKE up, shivering, in the kitchen garden. The washtubs had been cleared away, and someone had thrown a tablecloth over her like a blanket. In the East, pink light battled with storm clouds.

Nooo! She'd slept the night away. Jumping up, she rubbed her arms with her hands and stamped her feet. She should be on her way to the Blackfly Kingdom to get whatever member of the Cochem royal family was healthiest. It didn't look like much of a plan, but it was what she had.

In the valley below, the Mosel River reflected the stormy sky. Its waters were a sulky gray.

Light in the castle kitchen window and clattering pans meant Cook was baking rolls for breakfast. The princess's stomach growled, but with her disguise, she couldn't risk the kitchen. She'd have to go without. She had to be back from the Blackfly Kingdom before Queen Ash, who already had a day's head start.

In real fairy tales, princesses got useful gifts, like Seven League Boots. Kizzy needed to do some remedial reading. The princess would just have to walk twice as fast.

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She crossed the garden and climbed the trail that led up through the vineyards. Black storm clouds built a fortress on top of the hills, and as she climbed up, she fought against the wind.

To her delight, her christening gown returned. It wasn't practical, but it was proof the party had happened, even if the christening hadn't. She'd never gotten so close to a name before. In spite of the wind, she walked along quite cheerfully for an hour, making good progress.

Suddenly, a brilliant flash lit the Cochem valley. Thunder boomed, rolling and rumbling until her whole body vibrated. *Uh oh!* She ran along the edge of the steep vineyard, looking for a storm shelter where she could wait it out.

The loose rocks on the path tripped her, and she caught her gown more than once on the stone terraces.

White rain sheeted down and blinded her. After a few ankle-deep puddles, her gown was muddy to the knee.

She splashed on for a while, getting soaked from every side. Then the trail doubled back on itself. She stopped. The shelter should have come before the switchback. She must have missed it. She backtracked, walking into the driving rain with her head down.

When she finally found it, the doorway was missing a few stones from its arch, but she ducked inside anyway, sopping wet and breathing hard.

Rain beat against the ground as if it would never stop. At first, it was a relief. There were worse places to wait out a storm.

Trickles of water grew into rivulets. A waterfall filled the doorway, and the constant sound made it hard to tell how long she'd been there.

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She shivered in the cold, wished for Númi's horse blanket, and hoped her family had reached shelter. Croquet in this weather could be hazardous to your health. Also, the Blackfly Kingdom wasn't known for dry tents.

It must have been hours later when she went to the doorway to see if the storm was slacking off. Lightning flashed nearby, and the accompanying thunder made her wait a little longer. The rain lashed down as if someone had turned a valve all the way open.

Trying to fix the stonework of the shelter, she pushed a stone in, and two stones came loose.

Clunk, clunk!

Ohhhh. She grabbed her foot and held it against the pain. More stones fell from the arch above, pelting her head. She had to get out of here.

The rest of the doorway fell in with a crash.

"Ow!" She fell back and found herself in the pitch dark.

It couldn't be. She must have her eyes closed. She blinked. No difference. Reaching forward in the dark, she ran her hands over the stones until she found one that wiggled. She yanked with all her strength. Dirt and rocks rolled down from the inside walls of the shelter. More rocks bounced on her foot.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch." She touched the hurt place, and her hand came away sticky. *Ick.* She was bleeding and trapped.

No one knew she was here. Her whole family was in the Blackfly Kingdom and hadn't missed her. Her eyes smarted. She'd just run off into the dark as if any of her fourteen siblings were only a shout away. What had she been thinking?

Stop. She was a Cochem princess. It was her duty to go

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for help. This was a busy vineyard path. When the vintners came to prune the vines, they would walk right by. No, they wouldn't—the spring pruning was done. The vintners had groomed all the vineyards early, in honor of her christening.

She breathed in.

She breathed out.

Hugh didn't approve of panic attacks. He said, "You must think things through."

She blinked the water out of her eyes. A blueprint. As soon as she had a plan, she would know what to do.

Queen Ash had inspired the Cloud of Defense. She could inspire a few more inventions. The princess closed her eyes because that made it easier to pretend she was taking stock in her dungeon workshop.

Okay, she wasn't on her way to the Blackfly Kingdom, so the Cochem-family-replacement-for-the-Regent project was . . . stalled.

Outside, lightning flashed even through the tiny chinks, and an immediate, tremendous boom followed.

Too close.

After the lightning, it looked even darker in the shelter. She moved quickly on to the next problem: castle defenses. How were they doing so far?

Wait—the storm was filling up the new moat. Ridiculously cheered, she started a "progress" list in her head:

One A: Moat. Check.

French roses with fancy names might not like lots of rain, but the under-gardeners had promised to plant some wild blackberries. In weather like this, wild blackberries would grow thorns three inches long. Queen Ash's long black gown would catch on every branch. That should slow her down.

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One B: Sleeping beauty hedges. Check.

The defense project was in good shape.

Two A: Shelter from the storm. Check. Her breath got quivery, so she made a giant check in the air with her whole arm. Check.

Two B: Getting-to-the-Blackfly-Kingdom. No check. Keeping up morale was more important than solutions. Until the storm stopped, she was NOT going to think about being trapped in here.

That left the name problem. After ten years of trying, it seemed harder, not easier. If King Oliver and Queen Sibyl were home and healthy on the 15th, the Speech Tournament would pull them away from the princess's problem.

Some people would say the Tournament was the perfect chance to get a name. All Seven Kingdoms would already be there, trying to win the Velvet Purse. A big prize like that was worth traveling for. Once the Bishop had an invitation, the princess would be set, right?

Hugh Ancry would say, "Right." Once they got over their croquet fever, all her brothers and sisters would too.

But the princess knew better. She could raise and train twice as many goldfish. Her parents wouldn't gaze in the moat, notice a banner flying from the Tower, or stroll by a series of limericks posted in the gardens.

Queen Ash had the Golden Parsnip, but she wouldn't use it for the Tournament. At the last-minute, King Oliver and Queen Sibyl would have to make the beds, order the food, pay the bills, and build the speaking platform.

If the princess got out of here—

Stop!

Deep breath.

WHEN she got out of here, she could make beds, after

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she'd solved the defense problem and brought at least one healthy member of her family back to Cochem.

But guests from the Seven Kingdoms had all kinds of emergencies. Who knew how many of her brothers and sisters would be “on deck” to help? The sick ones couldn't.

The healthy ones would practice their speeches, adjust their outfits all over the castle, and leave trails of colorful index cards all over the place.

No—during the Tournament—the only way to get anyone's attention was to give an absolutely spell-binding, emotional, roller-coaster of a speech. Prince Nero gave one every year.

But the princess wasn't a speaker like her brothers and sisters. A speech asking her parents to give her a name?

Ha!

Once she stood up in front of people, she forgot she didn't have one.

Opening her eyes, she stared into the dark. She had to face facts. The name problem had no solution. She couldn't give a moving speech.

A sharp pinch in her stomach reminded her she hadn't eaten since the night before. Facing facts was bad for morale.

Quick—she needed something cheerful to think about. Dessert sluices. No, not food. Cable ferries?

Yes, ferries—those were cheerful. A little boat that ran from one side of the river to the other would be the perfect way to get to the Blackfly Kingdom in a hurry. If a steel cable connected one side of the Mosel River to the other, you could somehow hook a ferry onto that cable. The cable wouldn't let the ferry go downstream, so the current's strength pushed the ferry sideways. She took another deep

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breath, and it wasn't quite as shuddery as before. Ferries helped.

In January, she'd built a tiny ferry for the moat. But before King Oliver could look at it, Harold number three fell into the moat, accidentally-on-purpose, to get out of a math test. The ferry hadn't survived, and Harold number three's cold had traveled through the entire family all winter. Queen Sibyl had been anti-ferry ever since.

Not that it mattered, since the princess might be here for the rest of her life.

Stop.

The bitter taste in her mouth was only the dust. Dust meant the shelter was keeping out the rain. What else?

At least Kizzy's gift couldn't make this worse. The princess wasn't in anyone's plain sight. She couldn't be any less visible than she already was. Her fingers itched to pull the rocks out and make the wall stable, but it was too risky, dust or no dust.

In the morning, someone had to come by, and she'd make them hear, even if it took an avalanche to get their attention.



Much later, a rook's cry startled the princess awake. Her mouth tasted like the bottom of the moat but the rain must have stopped. The rock pile between her and the outside world glowed pink with the morning light.

Then she heard voices and laughter taking turns. People walking together talked like that, and they were getting louder.

The princess cleared her dusty throat, and her body, misunderstanding, stabbed her with an urgent demand for food.

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Ow! Doubling over, she grabbed her stomach, but the voices sounded so near. It was now or never. She called out, “The wall fell in, and I’m traaaapped in this shelter. Help me!”

Something was wrong with her voice.

“Did you hear that?” A man’s voice.

He’d heard. The princess’s heart beat faster. She was saved, and as soon as they got her out, she could have a drink of water. A convenient bush wouldn’t be bad either.

“Did I hear that?” A woman laughed. “You did that yourself. ‘Help me, I’m traaaapped!’ is the oldest ventriloquist’s trick in the book.”

The princess’s voice might sound a little odd, but that was just the stone all around her. She called out again. “Help!”

The man said, “Admit it, Hildy, it was you.”

Huh. The princess hopped from one foot to the other. She shouted, “I’m not aaaaa ventriloquist, I’m the Fifteenth Child of Cochem.”

Did *hiding in plain sight* mess with her voice when no one could see her? Kizzy deserved to lose her fairy godmother license.

She shrieked, “I’d reaaaaally appreciate it if you’d help me out. I need to go rescue my faaamily from the Blaaaackfly Kingdom.”

The crunching stopped. “Oh, that’s nicely done, I’ll admit it,” the man said. “The littlest princess is aaa nice touch. Everyone knows what aaa prankster she is. I knew you were good, but I never knew how good until now.”

“Don’t you dare pretend that wasn’t your voice, Darnell Brummer! Your long A’s are a dead giveaway,” Hildy said. “No royal princess speaks like a vintner, even if she is a

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prankster. They can't do it. That was you, I know it."

The princess stamped a foot in frustration. These ventriloquists were so busy impressing each other with their talking that they weren't listening at all.

The vintners started off again, their feet scuffing the trail.

"Waaaaait! Please waaaaait! I aaam aaaaa Cochem princess, and I've got to get out of here." She sounded like a vintner. Her brothers and sisters were right. Fairy godmothers were nothing but trouble.

"Okay, you've got to tell me how you're doing that," Darnell said.

Hildy's laughter faded into the distance. The princess sat down on her rocks and crossed her legs.

If she ever got out of here, she was paying a visit to the Vintner's Ventriloquism League with the entire royal family. And the royal archers. For emphasis.

For a long time afterwards, birdsong was the only sound. No one was on their way to work. A little more light filtered through the chinks. At this time, there should be much more foot traffic.

Farmers should be driving wagons into the valley to spread manure. Seed merchants should be carrying rucksacks full of parsnip, carrot, pea, bean, and cucumber seeds to sell in the valley. If King Oliver ever offered her a kingdom-wide holiday in her honor again, she would turn it down.

Desperate now, she pried a rock free, only to have more rocks shower down between her and the outside world. Coughing and choking, she wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

She'd always known she would grow up, and someday her fourteen siblings wouldn't be around to ask for help, but she'd never thought that time would come so soon. Croquet

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fever had taken her whole family away at once.

The princess crossed her legs the other way around and rocked miserably back and forth. She had to get out of here so she could see them all again.

CHAPTER SIX

A Princely Rescue

OUTSIDE, SOMEONE WAS whistling the tune to “*How can I keep from singing?*”

The princess stopped rocking. “Hello?”

The whistling stopped.

The princess called out again. “Can you hear me?” Without those extra long A’s, her voice sounded more like herself. Was it one of her siblings after all?

The gravel crunched louder and faster.

“Who’s there? In the name of Nero, Prince of the Blackfly Kingdom—”

Uh oh. The Blackflys were the wrong rescuers. The princess couldn’t believe it. How could Queen Ash be back already? She’d barely been gone two days.

“—I charge you to tell me your name!”

Explaining why the princess didn’t have one would take much too long. “Can that wait? I’ve been here all night.” She yanked a rock out of the pile and then another and another, imagining the damage Queen Ash could do in the eight days the princess needed to get her family home. For the umpteenth time, she wondered why Kizzy couldn’t have

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given her a useful gift.

A shower of rocks sent her back from the entrance, coughing and wiping her eyes. When the dust cleared, Nero's head was visible. Not bad. A cloud of blackflies flew into the shelter, confirming his identity beyond a doubt.

Nero peered in at her. "You sound so familiar."

She wished he'd focus on the rocks. "We've met." She pulled at another rock and made a new dirt waterfall. Even with both arms over her face, grit showered into her eyes.

From the sound of it, Nero had gotten back to moving rocks. After a few minutes, his hand came through the opening. "That should do it. Need a hand?"

"Uh, no, thanks." The princess hoisted herself over the rock pile into the blinding daylight. She squinted and blinked, trying to make her eyes work. Nero wore black boots, black pants, and a black traveling cloak. Two others were dressed to match. Was King Schwartz here too? Queen Ash in trousers seemed impossible.

Bobbing a curtsy, the princess noticed her gown had turned black. *Right*. Her magical disguise took its job much too seriously.

She shaded her eyes with both hands. Nero and two Blackfly archers. She spun around to make sure. "Uh—where's Queen Ash?"

"On her way to the Blackfly Kingdom, the last time I looked." Nero's smile wasn't quite a smirk.

Hopping from one foot to the other, the princess gestured towards the nearest thicket. "If you don't mind—uh, could we chat some other time?"

"Oh." He turned abruptly. "I'll be over there. Archers!" He pointed towards the stone wall that kept the next vineyard from sliding down into the valley. He and his archers

marched off together.

The princess went behind the bushes and came out a few minutes later, much relieved. Now she was only hungry, thirsty, and in need of information. She headed down to Nero.

“You don’t look so good.” He rummaged in his black backpack, pulled out a flask, and gave it to her. “Drink this. Don’t worry—I didn’t drink out of it.”

Her mouth was too dry to speak. After a drink, the information gathering was going to be much less painful. She put it to her mouth, tipped her head back, and the clean, cool, peppermint tea poured into her mouth. She swallowed a quarter of it before she could make herself stop, gasping for air. She held it out to him. “Thank you.”

“Keep it.” He rummaged again and handed her a hunk of brown bread. “Here.”

Not bread, rock-hard gingerbread. While she gnawed on it, she walked, trying to make up for lost time. Actually, this stuff wasn’t bad. King Oliver should require every shelter to have emergency gingerbread.

“What are you doing in the Cochem Kingdom all by yourself?” Nero asked.

A dumb question for a boy whose mother set Cochem Castle on fire. “Croquet fever?”

“So you thought you’d put yourself in quarantine?” Nero pointed back at the shelter.

Having seven brothers gave a girl skills. She withered him with a look.

“Sorry, sorry.” Nero threw his hands in the air. “But seriously, Blackfly princesses don’t visit the Seven Kingdoms every day. Oh.” His face cleared. “You were here for the christening?”

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A magical disguise made it complicated to talk to people. You had to keep thinking about who they thought you were. The princess nodded.

“That’s no way to treat a guest,” Nero said. “It’s a huge family. Nobody remembered you while waiting their turn? Unbelievable. What if I hadn’t gotten lost on my way back? You’d still be trapped.”

The princess’s smile evaporated. Nero was right. Even after the 500 synchronized-spelling goldfish, her family had forgotten her. She needed something bigger. The dessert fountain was bigger, but not something her family saw every day, so they forgot her in between. She blinked hard a few times.

“Did you get dirt in your eyes?” Nero offered her a handkerchief.

A pristine, black, neatly pressed handkerchief. The princess sputtered, but even that helped her hold herself together. A very effective handkerchief, in its own way. “Uh, no, thanks.”

“Next time, come straight to the Blackfly Kingdom. We take much better care of our guests.”

The princess choked. Weren’t the only “guests” in the Blackfly Kingdom the ones who hadn’t paid their tolls? Or had croquet fever?

Nero pounded her on the back, and she held up her hand for him to stop. She still needed a sibling for back-up, and she needed to know what Queen Ash was up to. Nothing had changed.

“I’ve got it—Melanie!” Nero said.

Neither of the Blackfly archers looked up, and they were the only other people on the trail.

“What?” the princess asked.

“Took me a while.” Nero smiled at her. “I knew you were my cousin from Minnesota, but I couldn’t remember your name before. Melanie is right, isn’t it?” He looked a little worried.

“Uh, no.” *Melanie*? The princess blinked. That was a new one.

“So if your name isn’t Melanie, what is it?” A challenge, not a question.

“Uh, the castle burned down before we got to the . . . name part.”

“Mmmm. Sorry to hear that.” He held up an index finger. “Look at my finger—I want to see if your pupils are the same size.” He moved his finger slowly from left to right.

Hello? The princess glared at him. She was getting tired of not being heard. Christenings with castle fires weren’t a regular thing in the Seven Kingdoms. Neither were ten-year-old nameless princesses. Her magical disguise trumped all of those “little” details, but she didn’t want it to win. “Some people call me, *uh*, . . . Fifteenth.”

“Pleased to meet you, Fifteenth.” He hadn’t missed a beat, and his eyes were distant. Almost automatic. Had he even heard her?

His gaze shifted to the top of her head. After dirt showering down all night, she didn’t want to know what was in her hair. She was on a strategic strike mission to bring back a sibling. Enough. She turned her back on him and headed down the path.

A moment later, he poked the back of her head.

“Hey!” She whirled around, but kept walking.

“Sorry.” He kept pace.

He was still looking at her like a problem to solve, so maybe her disguise wasn’t actually good enough to fool

TROUBLE WITH PARSNIPS

people who were paying attention. That would be okay with her.

Something bit her in the neck. “Ow!”

Darn that Kizzy!

Nero swatted and missed. “You even have your own blackflies. But they don’t usually bite us.” Frowning, he inspected her neck. “I know. You were on your way to visit us when you got hit in the head and forgot who you were.”

Uh, no. She knew exactly who she was. Without a name though, you had to tell people your life’s story. Introducing yourself got tiring. “I’ve lived here since I was born. I’m ten. I’m a Cochem princess—”

“Look at you—you could be my twin sister. And even if you looked like a Cochem princess, you couldn’t be one.” Nero made a sweeping gesture from her black princess pointy cone hat to her black princess shoes. “They’re all in the Blackfly Kingdom, playing croquet.”

“Wait, Queen Ash was playing too?” The princess stopped dead. Queen Ash with croquet fever would solve everything.

“Nah.” Nero wrinkled his nose. “She was putting a listing on AirCastle.”

AirCastle—whatever that was—didn’t sound weighty enough to keep Queen Ash at home. A pity she hadn’t caught croquet fever.

Nero was still raving about the Blackfly Kingdom. “You’ll love our castle. The galleries go all the way around the inner courtyard on every floor.” He sketched them in the air with his hands. “If you set up the hoops just right, a whole course fits perfectly. We have the hoops with the wooden feet that work on stone floors. They are probably playing all three levels now. When you get to the bottom, you start

over at the top.”

Ouch. Her family and three levels of never ending croquet. The princess groaned. But wait—Nero had walked away from the game. “How did you, *uh*, get over it so fast?”

“Oh, I never got it. Don’t worry, they’ll still be playing when you get there,” Nero said. “On the way there, they weren’t even slowing down.”

The rock settled back in the princess’s stomach. No one in her family was going to be able to help her. She was going to have to defend Cochem Castle all by herself.

“That’s why Queen Ash sent me back to Cochem.”

“Sent you back?” The princess hoped that meant Queen Ash would take her time. As an invader, Nero seemed less intimidating.

“The Queen commands, the Prince is her foot soldier.” He shuffled a step sideways and back, the way Harold number one did when he was trying not to show off. “Crown Prince assignment. Reporting for duty in the Cochem Kingdom.” He saluted.

“You mean she gave you the Golden Parsnip?” The princess’s hands flew to her hips.

“Hey—of course not.” Nero took a step back. “Handoffs are against the law.”

“Oh. Sorry.” The princess hadn’t known the law mattered to anyone in the Blackfly Kingdom.

The moment passed and Nero shrugged. “How could you know? You’re not from here. And your last hosts didn’t take very good care of you.”

Fine. Let him think she was some Blackfly princess. He had evidently decided to walk her back to the border. Misplaced chivalry was okay with her. The longer he spent walking away from the Cochem Kingdom, the longer the

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blackberry brambles could grow.

The Blackfly archers trailed behind. Without Queen Ash around, they seemed a lot more relaxed. One had tied a black handkerchief to the end of his bow and was catching butterflies as they went along.

They walked the whole afternoon in the sun, with a breeze blowing the grassy meadow around them, as if the storm and the castle fire had never been.

The princess mentioned hot air balloons, and Nero asked a million questions. As if she were a regular person with a name. It would have been one of the nicest afternoons in her life if she hadn't had to spend every moment figuring out how to defend her family's home until they got back.

At its highest point above the Mosel River, the trail broadened out into a road on a wide, level plain. They walked along, side-by-side, and the princess wondered if a castle swap could break up the croquet game. If paying guests came, Queen Ash might send the Cochem family home. "What's *uh*, a castle swap?"

"Castle swap? You put up a listing." Nero glanced over at her. "You know, '*Get away from it all in our family castle on the water, good hearth, minimal toll-collecting duties, on-site bakery, water dungeon, rugged landscape with showy purple thistles.*' That sort of thing."

"Showy. Purple. Thistles." The princess choked, again. "Rugged. Landscape." Blackfly Castle was a boat-shaped fortress on a pile of rocks in the middle of the river.

Nero folded his arms and looked down at her sideways. "I thought it was pretty good."

The princess wished she had the right words, but showy thistles were a challenging topic. "Won't it be hard to find

people who want to take over your toll-collecting?”

“Nah, it makes their vacation that much cheaper.”

She couldn't imagine it, but the Seven Kingdoms had all kinds of people. “So where are you going to live while the Blackfly Castle's rented out?”

“Oh, that's my assignment in Cochem,” Nero said, off-handedly. “To get it ready for the family.”

The princess couldn't have heard him right. “The Blackfly family?”

“Of course. Queen Ash promised to look after Cochem Kingdom. That's why she has the Golden Parsnip. Did you miss that part?” Nero sounded altogether too patient.

No, the princess hadn't missed that part. She'd been a bit busy. The Golden Parsnip was for planning a Tournament—not a TakeOver—but then Queen Ash had crossed her fingers behind her back.

Blackberry brambles weren't going to be enough.

So far Kizzy's gift had only caused trouble, but it was supposed to help the princess govern the kingdom. If Nero was taking over the castle, it was time to test it out. The princess took a deep breath and tried to sound unconcerned as if she really were some Melanie person from Minnesota. “Uh, so how long is a castle swap?”

“Well, once it's comfortable, we can stay as long as we like.” Nero smiled. “You're invited too.”

An invitation to stay in her own castle as a Blackfly. She'd be sleeping in her own dungeon next.

“That's funny,” Nero pointed to a trail sign marking the border of the Cochem Kingdom. “Somebody turned the sign around.”



Thank you for visiting Cochem Kingdom! Come again soon! Other than being a little too welcoming to Blackfly invaders, the sign was fine. The princess didn't get it.

One Blackfly archer snorted, and the other one coughed. The princess frowned at them for laughing at Nero's mistake.

"What?" Nero said, turning on his archers. "Okay, so which way is the Cochem Kingdom then?"

With blank faces, the Blackfly archers pointed towards Cochem, back in the direction they'd just come. The princess would have gladly pointed the other way, but Nero arriving back in the Blackfly Kingdom would mean Queen Ash in Cochem even sooner.

There was only one thing to do. The princess had to take Nero back to Cochem and get in his way as much as she could as a fake Blackfly, chatting as much as possible. A terrible plan.

Nero walked all the way around the sign. "I don't get why this happens to me."

His forehead wrinkled, and the princess suddenly understood. She felt exactly the same way about podiums at the Speech Tournament. "You probably got turned

A Princely Rescue

around when you helped me out of the shelter.”

His face cleared. “Right, that must have been it.”

“I think you can send them home now.” She looked at the archers. “It’s safe in Cochem.” As long as Queen Ash wasn’t visiting.

“They help me out when I get lost.”

The princess wasn’t convinced. “We won’t get lost.”

“If you say so.” Nero dismissed them.

Two fewer Blackfly subjects to worry about.

A few hours later, Cochem Castle was finally in sight. Cochem urgently needed a drier, easier way to get to and from the Blackfly Kingdom.

“Wouldn’t the Tower would be perfect for a hot-air balloon launch?” she asked Nero, trudging along beside her.

He hadn’t said much for the last hour, and now he only glanced in the direction she was pointing. “Might be easier if it had a roof.”

Well, whose fault was that?

The Tower would still have a roof if she hadn’t passed herself off as a Blackfly prince. Was passing herself off as a Blackfly princess really the wisest thing? Who knew what might happen?

THANKS FOR READING!

That's the end of the Preview. I hope you enjoyed it!

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



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LAUREL DECHER writes stories about all things Italian, vegetable, or musical. Beloved pets of the past include “Stretchy the Leech” and a guinea pig that unexpectedly produced twins. She’s famous for getting lost, but carries maps because people always ask her for directions.

HOW THIS STORY GOT STARTED: In school, I was the girl who didn’t sharpen her pencil because she didn’t like going up in front of the classroom. *The pencil sharpener is too noisy!* Everyone will look at me.

For years, I didn’t know what my teachers looked like, but I can still see the floors. Tile is what you notice when you look down all the time. **TROUBLE WITH PARSNIPS** is about a much braver and more inventive person, the kind of person who looks up and sees everyone. The kind I want to learn to be.

As a grown-up, I went to a club called Toastmasters that teaches people how to speak up in the right way at the right time. It’s kind of like Girl or Boy Scouts because you can earn “badges” for learning how to stand up in front of

Author's Note

others. :)

The Vintner's Ventriloquism League in this story is a wacky sort of Toastmasters club. If you haven't read the whole story yet, you don't meet them until Chapter 11. Toastmasters do a thing called "Table Topics" that is like the "Pepper Pot" in this story.

When I went to Toastmasters, I was a Girl Scout Leader, so our troop tried everything out at our meetings. Nobody looked at the floor. After a while, the girls ran the whole meeting. The leaders only got a few minutes to talk if they needed to announce something. It was cool.

So I started writing about a princess who didn't think she could ever give a speech.

