



Prologue: A Mouse's Introduction

A timid thing was Zaria Fierce. The antithesis of her last name, the young girl was shy, quiet, and self-contained. She kept to her own company most of the time, as she and her family often moved due to her adoptive father's military career. Because of his new post, the family was stationed in Norway.

The move to Fredrikstad was recent, only ten days ago. Zaria would be starting at another new school soon. This would be her fourth school in four years. She hadn't made any friends yet – not seeing any children in their building – but it was okay, because like her adoptive mom, Meredith (Merry), who was a dedicated housewife and online professor, Zaria preferred reading to almost any other activity.

Fantasy was her favorite genre, because the worlds were so much more vibrant and exciting than ordinary tales. They featured giants,

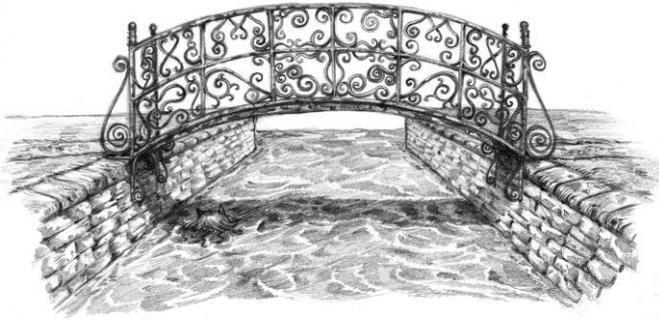
fairies, pixies, ogres, brownies, trolls, banshees, witches, wishes, curses, and so much more. “Why be ordinary when you could be extraordinary?” she often wondered.

Zaria loved the Colonel. Not only was he an attentive father, doting on Zaria with the books she adored, he was also the bravest, most courageous person Zaria knew. She often wished she had his self-possession and the cool levelheadedness. If she did, she just knew her life would take her on an adventure like those of the heroes and heroines in her books.

Her new school was six blocks from their rented apartment. She could walk it easily and often did in the first two weeks with her mom. They both loved crossing a quaint pedestrian bridge two blocks from the school with its ornate metal scrollwork featuring curlicues, spirals, and swirls. To them both it seemed enchanting and special.

As lovely as the walks were, Zaria was ready to go it alone and perhaps meet up with a few of the children on her route. So on Monday, at the start of the third week of school, she kissed her mom on the cheek, made assurances to text her safe arrival, and dashed out the door, carrying her latest book on Norwegian fairy tales, and her lunch.

What Zaria and her parents didn't know was that it wasn't by accident that the Colonel was stationed in Norway. The clock was ticking down – had been since they arrived in Norway – and someone was watching and waiting, eager and expectant. Change was imminent and magic joined the bite of fall in the air. Zaria would get her wish for adventure sooner than she expected.



Chapter One: The Scrollwork Bridge

Two weeks later, Zaria found herself running to catch up with her Chinese friend Christoffer who was jogging a block ahead of her. The wind caught at her scarf and whipped the ends of it and her hair into her face. She was running a little late today, because her mom insisted on fussing a little extra for her birthday. Zaria's dark hair had been freshly braided before the wind snagged it. She wore a crisp red bow jauntily secured over her right ear and a new woolen dress, also red, with a black winter coat that hung to the backs of her knees.

"Christoffer, will you stop running and let me catch up?" Zaria shouted, pounding the pavement and juggling her backpack, books, and lunch.

"Can't!" he called back, with a grin, over his shoulder. "Someone was very late this morning. I waited as long as I could, but you know I can't be late. Mum's the teacher. I have to set a good example. She's going to be livid if I'm late. Hurry up!"

Zaria puffed along behind him for another minute, but gave up as he crossed the scrollwork bridge and turned the corner. She was willing to take the tardy. She secured her bag and books. Then she straightened her hair, tucked flyaways back into their proper place, and tugged at her dress and coat, making sure everything was

properly arranged. “Stupid, Christoffer,” she muttered as she started walking again.

At the bridge, Zaria once again admired the intricate metal scrolling that made up the rails. She ran her gloved hand gently over the top, listening to her feet land on the wooden planks with a steady clop, clop, clop. The river twinkled in the muted morning light – the only creatures to disturb its smooth surface were a family of swans. As she watched them, they honked in agitation and took flight, spoiling the peaceful setting.

“Morning, Princess,” came a raspy voice ahead of her. Zaria glanced up from the swans and jerked in surprise.

In the middle of the bridge, crouched on the rail, was a brown creature dressed in rags. It had overly big ears which were the same size as its head and a long nose. Its mouth held a perpetual frown, pulled in a grimace. When it attempted a smile, it revealed yellow teeth. Zaria rubbed her eyes to erase the strange image. Except it didn’t erase, it moved closer.

“Princess be lacking manners,” it said, wiping a gnarled hand across its nose, sniffing loudly. “Won’t matter if you be mannered or not in the end. Taste all the same to me.”

“What are you?” Zaria asked worriedly, clutching her backpack, toying with the zipper.

If she could get into her backpack she could grab her mobile and call her mom. Was this a joke? Christoffer’s mum was going to be

the least of his problems when Zaria caught up with him. This was not funny.

“Ignorant and mannerless. Tsk. I be the river’s guardian,” the man-like creature stated, pointing to himself with slightly webbed fingers. “You may call me Olaf, if you be liking.”

A shaft of light lit him up, revealing that his brown skin was leathery in parts and scaly in others. The scales glinted a muted, muddy blue-brown. He scratched his chin, and then moved closer. Silently, he slipped off the rail and straightened to full height, revealing a tall body and long lanky limbs.

Zaria took a step back, feasting her eyes on Olaf. He reminded her of creatures in her books, but uglier. He was definitely not human. Maybe Christoffer had nothing to do with Olaf’s presence. That meant she was either dreaming or stumbling into her very own story. A dash of excitement filled her belly.

“Do you grant wishes?” she asked with eager anticipation, letting the zipper of her backpack go.

“Wishes?” Olaf asked incredulously. “Wishes? Bah!” he laughed. “My stomach be wishing for fresh meat. It’s been far too long. Come here Princess, and let me eat you.”

The excitement in Zaria’s belly vanished instantly, replaced with a cold slither of fear.

“Eat me?” she squeaked.

Olaf nodded. “I be very hungry.”

“Oh well. I can see how that would be tempting,” Zaria said, scrambling for an alternative. Her scattered thoughts landed on the fairy tale of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. She breathed a little easier.

Straightening up she said, “But I’m only a child, I am not fattened up.”

“Nay,” Olaf said wickedly, his mouth stretching into an awkward smile. “I’ve watched you for weeks, Princess. You kept crossing my waters, over this very bridge, protected by your youth. Today be your thirteenth birthday though, be it not? You not be protected anymore.”

The situation was worse than she feared. He’d been watching her? How had she not noticed? “H-h-how did you know?”

“I can smell it. Princess, you have the sweetest blood of all. You will be tender... tender and juicy...”

“Don’t come any closer, p-p-pervert,” she stammered.

Zaria scrambled back on the bridge, and Olaf stopped his advancement, eyeing her with bemusement. That look was definitely worse than when Olaf looked at her hungrily. She would not be eaten. She refused to let it happen, but Olaf was fearsome, and he terrified her with his calm demeanor.

“Pervert? Princess, it be not nice to be calling trolls names.” He stepped toward her again, hands loose at his sides, and sharp eyes trained on her. “It not do you any good to run. I be collecting my toll from you Princess, whether you be interested in paying it or not.”

“Did I say I wouldn’t pay it?” Zaria asked. She forced a laugh out, noticing that her voice was high-pitched and squeaky. “I’m happy to pay it, only – only, today isn’t the best day to do it. I’m expected at

school on the other side of the bridge. I must get there before my absence is noticed.”

“Why be Olaf care? After I eat you, Princess, you be missing anyway.”

How had the goats managed to trick the troll? This was harder than she thought. Unzipping her bag Zaria searched for her phone feeling frantic. She did not want to be on the bridge one moment more than she had to be.

Latching on to his nickname for her like it was a lifeline Zaria gasped, “Because as a princess, I must have subjects.”

She relaxed, but still she searched for the phone. She could play this game and possibly even win it. Clearly he thought she was important and wasn’t smart enough to know better. Perhaps she could trick him after all.

“Princess be having lots of subjects. Again, why be Olaf care?”

“You’re hungry. I will send you a feast. It’s as the human proverb goes: give a man a fish, and he’s fed for a day; teach a man to fish,

and he's fed for life. If you eat me, you would be hungry again in a day. If you wait, I can ensure you're fed for a year."

Olaf tilted his head, bringing a crooked hand to his rounded chin, pondering the offer. Zaria held her breath, ready to flee at a moment's notice.

"How tell I if you be telling the truth, Princess?"

Zaria bit her lip nervously. "Are you asking if I have honor?"

"Yes," he hissed. "I wonder if Princess be having honor, as you not be having manners or intelligence."

Zaria bristled. "I have honor. Let me pass freely across the river, and I will do as I say."

Over the next few breaths she and Olaf played a cat-and-mouse game. He'd move toward her; she'd move back. He stopped again, and she'd still. Then he would move again and start it over. Finally, he narrowed his eyes.

"If you be lying, Princess, I not be taking it kindly. I shall let you pass, but I not be waiting more than three days for you to fulfill your promise."

Zaria nodded, eager to agree and get away. "I will keep my promise."

He glowered menacingly. "If you not be keeping your word, I be seeking retribution as befitting the crime. Do you understand?"

Zaria nodded again, but the troll was not convinced. “Speak up,” he growled.

“Yes, I understand,” Zaria said meekly.

“Three days,” Olaf warned and slinked over the bridge.

She expected to hear a splash, but as Zaria raced to the edge of the railing and looked over all she saw were concentric ripples radiating outward. The swans which had flown away at the appearance of the troll, glided back into view and settled calmly on the waters. The troll was well and truly gone. She’d done it; she’d tricked the troll. She nearly whooped in glee.

But as the swans continued to swim lazily, Zaria frowned. They were unruffled by the series of events, as if their morning hadn’t been disrupted. Had she hallucinated the whole event? No. She had a vivid imagination, but nothing quite like this had ever happened before when she day-dreamed.

There had been a troll! Right here in Norway, just like her books. She shook her head in disbelief, hiked up her bag, and dashed across the bridge and the rest of the way to school. Nobody was going to believe her, if she said she was desperately late because of a bridge troll. It was definitely worse than saying the dog ate your homework. And, Zaria didn’t have a dog.

Unhappily, Zaria was right that nobody would believe her. When she got to school she was singled out and given after-school

detention, despite her story of being stopped on the bridge. Christoffer, too, had received a pink slip and would be joining her.

“Zaria,” he hissed when she sat down. “Who stopped you on the bridge? I didn’t see anyone.”

“I think it was a troll.”

“Like from your fairy tales?” Christoffer questioned skeptically, his brown eyes crinkling at the corners. Then he brightened. “Maybe someone was dressed up for Cosplay.”

“N-n-no,” Zaria shook her head in the negative. “Definitely not. It was a troll, troll. Big ears, big nose, string-bean thin, dressed in rags. Ugly. Very ugly.”

“A vaga—”

“Mr. Johansen,” Mrs. Johansen called from the front of the room. “Just what are you talking about with Miss Fierce that is more important than history class?”

That shut the two of them up instantly. Zaria ducked behind her text book, as Christoffer tried to brazen it out with a cheeky grin. His mother gave him a warning glare. Zaria did not envy Christoffer in that moment. He would be getting a lecture tonight on proper behavior.

Now, the consequences of angering a troll are not to be dismissed as insignificant. For Zaria, who saw neither hide nor hair of Olaf over the next three days, assumed she’d been mistaken about the encounter. After all, a troll in the middle of modern-day Norway was extremely unlikely.

The first night she’d been wound up and jittery. She tried to tell Merry about it after school, but her mother thought she was talking

about a book and told her to go do her homework. Then, her father laughed at her even more boisterous retelling of the event over dinner and birthday cake. While slicing a second slice for himself and for her, he agreed with his wife that it was a fine tale and told her she should keep working on it.

After that conversation, Zaria was confused. Olaf had looked run-down and dressed in rags. Maybe he had been a homeless old man and not a troll at all. Could she have made the whole thing up? But Zaria didn't consider herself to be someone to cry wolf over nothing. Olaf had to be real.

When dinner was over, her parents showered her with a small mound of presents, including a new fantasy book series she was most eager to read. They stayed up as a family and watched one of Zaria's favorite movies, *The Labyrinth*. She loved the puppetry and puzzles that needed to be solved in the maze.

Then it was time for bed. Zaria trudged upstairs with her goodies, determined to find out if she'd read the scene with Olaf in her Norwegian fairy tale book. She pored over its contents until her eyes got blurry and heavy with sleep. That is how the Colonel found her when he came to tuck her into bed. He urged her into bed and reached to turn off the lights.

"Night, pumpkin," he murmured as she drifted off to sleep.

In her dreams, Zaria met with Olaf again and again. Each time the bridge troll's appearance seemed a little less real and little more like meeting a puppet from *Jim Henson's Creature Shop*... until when it was morning, Zaria was certain that the truth was that she met a homeless man and conjured up a different scenario to make it seem a little less scary.

She asked her mother to accompany her to school for the remainder of the week as a precaution. Merry didn't mind and made it special

by stopping for breakfast from a neighborhood bakery. Together they ate delicious puff pastries and drank hot chocolate, breathing in the moist steamy air, and warming their reddened noses. Zaria was so delighted with this early morning routine she never hesitated at the scrollwork bridge and soon forgot Olaf completely.