

## Chapter I

Silence – utter silence. *What in Fairydom... How did I come to be here?* I wondered as my eyes slowly focused. A slow, deep breath steadied my mind, which was threatening to spin off into oblivion again. *Ah*, I thought in relief as the day's events began trickling back into my memory – a day too lovely to spend cooped up in the palace. *There is nothing like a little fall to muddle one's mind*, I groaned. *And that was nothing like a little fall!* Gathering my strength, I dragged myself into a sitting position, and gingerly fingered the side of my head. I looked around again, careful not to turn my head too quickly.

"So much for my riding skills," I sighed as I staggered to my feet. The sound of my voice echoed a bit in the silence. I shook off the premonition of danger – after all, if there were any danger, the silence would make hearing its approach much easier...would it not? A gleam of sunlight sparkling on the exposed blade of my dirk caught my eye. I half knelt and retrieved it carefully, tucking it firmly back into its sheath.

"Ouch," I winced as my head began throbbing. Simultaneously, the world began spinning. An unnerving thought occurred to me at that inopportune moment – suppose I were to pass out? Determined to avoid that, I sat down. The throbbing grew worse, became a pulsing in my right temple that hurt so badly it frightened me. Half afraid that my head was going to tumble right off – and almost wishing that it would – I lowered it into my hands and just sat there. I did not even care that a strand of long silver hair had escaped my crown and was tickling my nose.

A sudden noise shattered the silence. I tried to jump to my feet, only to be hit by a wave of nausea so intense that it knocked me back down. I stifled a gasp of pain and clutched at my head. The sound, a heavy thump, came again, from much closer this time. I would have to act quickly. In a moment of lucid thought, I snatched my crown from its unsteady perch on my head, and stuffed it inside my vest so I would not lose it.

*What is this?* I wondered as my fingers encountered drying mud on my vest. I touched my hair next and grimaced as my hand came away dirty. The memories of the beginning and ending of my ride encouraged each other and slowly filled in the rest for me. The day had started as one of the loveliest days of the spring season. I had shelved my responsibilities shortly after my noon meal and gone out for a ride. Something – I could not even guess what – had frightened my dragonfly, Belle. I shuddered at the memory of Belle spreading her wings and

banking away from the palace. I had given way to panic upon finding myself trapped in the saddle by a single leather strap that had hooked itself around my ankle and been drawn tight.

I shook my head carefully. I must have been quite mad to have drawn my dirk and sliced through the saddle leather as I had. Touching the medium-sized lump on my forehead, I grimaced. That particular act of idiocy had begun my plunge – straight into a veritable lake of mud.

My thoughts were jerked back to the present by another awful screeching noise. Too weak and dizzy to run, I held as still as possible, hoping that I would go unnoticed. It was a good plan, given the circumstances, but I realized to my dismay that the strange looking creature coming through the trees towards me was sniffing – not looking. *Too late to try anything*, I told myself grimly, and eyed the thing warily. At least twelve twigs tall, it was painfully thin and shaggy. *A coorelum*. The whispered thought hung in the otherwise empty space between my ears, if a thought can be whispered. I fought the surge of panic that swept through me. I recognized it this time, as I knew I would always recognize the detestable thing that had proved my undoing just hours earlier. *Steady*, I told myself, clenching my fists in my effort to control my highly unstable self.

The coorelum paused and looked down at me curiously. Its lips drew back in what might be mistaken for a grin, exposing sharp yellow teeth. It took a step closer.

I swallowed my fear and tried not to shrink under its oddly intense gaze. *My most recent birthday present would have dealt easily with this coorelum*, I thought, irritated that I had not brought my crossbow. If it is any excuse, I had not anticipated landing in the Deep Woods, which is where I must be. Coorelums are found in no other region of Fairydom.

A second coorelum loomed at the shoulder of the first. It glanced furtively at the first coorelum, as though wondering how two such large animals were going to share such a small meal.

*Where did that one come from?* I wondered dazedly. *I must be worse off than I thought not to have noticed its arrival!* As I adjusted to this new development, the coorelums began growling. Then, to my utter astonishment, they lit into each other, with considerable noise and vigor! I was reminded of the stories I had heard while growing up. Ugly and wild, coorelums do not mind eating whatever comes to hand when they are hungry – even an occasional fairy.

Lucky for me that these two were each determined to have me to themselves. I shuddered. Gruesome sort of luck. And then I blinked as I realized that I was not even trying to get away.

With that thought, I rose cautiously. My rest seemed to have gone a long way towards making the world a steadier place, but I picked up a straight twig for a staff just the same. As I was lost, where I ran was not important. Clutching my staff tightly, I began making my way towards the nearest tree. I did not bother to look over my shoulder as I moved along. The sounds of their continued scuffling were all I needed to assure me that they were not paying any attention to me. I hoped to hear it for as long as I was within earshot.

*Oh no!* I thought as the noises faded and stopped. I was still several twig-lengths from the tree. Behind me, one of the coorelums roared angrily. The other began sniffing loudly. Stories say they have poor eyesight and uncanny noses. I bit my lip and tried to move faster. I would never reach the tree in time! And even if I did, hiding from their keen noses would be impossible in my present smelly state. *If only I could fly!* I thought to myself, but pushed the thought aside to make room, I hoped, for something reasonable.

And then, I received the fright of my young life! A strong, tan arm came from behind me and slipped around my waist. Whoever it was whisked me up off the ground and into the air. I started and stopped struggling almost simultaneously as our distance from the ground quickly increased. My head throbbed harder as if to warn me that my first fall that day had been quite enough! Instead of struggling, I twisted halfway round and put my arms unabashedly around my rescuer's neck, holding on for dear life. No sooner had I done so than we began to move faster – and still faster. I closed my eyes as everything around me began to spin and dance. A few moments later, I plunged into darkness.