

Prologue

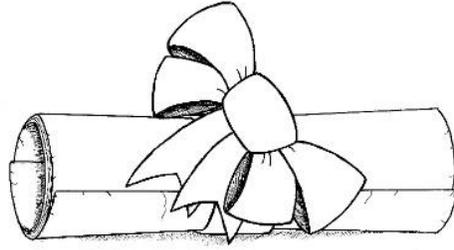
The young woman sewed alone by the fire. The night was cold, and the small hut where she worked swayed slightly as the wind blew, but her father had built the simple structure to be sturdy, and the drafts that eased in were no match for the warmth around the hearth. She wiped her eyes as she thought of her father. Sickness had taken both her parents the previous winter just before she turned sixteen, and being an only child left her lonely, especially on cold nights when conversation and laughter would have warmed her as much as the fire.

A heavy sigh escaped the woman's lips as she returned to her sewing and listened to the sound of the air whistling by. Her homeland was a quiet place. Once, a king ruled, and there were castles and noble lords and ladies, but a curse had befallen the land, and the king left on a quest to uncover a way to remove it. As time passed, the crops dwindled but didn't die. Livestock survived but grew lean. No one in the land seemed to be able to grow or keep more food than they could use for themselves. Trading with outside kingdoms stopped, and anyone who wanted to become rich or simply live a comfortable life moved from their homes. When the king left, others tried to rule but departed after they could not obtain taxes from the few, poor remaining dwellers. Invading armies starved when they came with plans of conquest. It was only a couple of years before everyone left them alone. Fewer and fewer people lived in the cursed kingdom, and soon,

it would be forgotten with just a few like herself able to grow enough food to survive.

She sighed again, her thoughts miserable tonight, when combined with the wind and the cold. Perhaps she should leave, too; move to a nearby village in the next kingdom over, perhaps marry a good man and start a family. She stared into the fire, pondering these thoughts, when she heard a sound she didn't recognize at first: knocking on her door. The sound was weak but urgent, and she rushed to the door and opened it.

A stranger stood in her doorway. The man was old and withered and looked as if he might fall to the floor at any moment. She helped him inside and laid him on her bed near the fire. He mumbled incoherently and shivered as she took off his wet clothes and wrapped him in blankets to warm him. She immediately recognized the signs of fever and ladled the small remains of stew she'd had for dinner into a bowl. Gently, she held the man's head up and helped him eat. He took no more than four bites of the stew before closing his eyes and falling into a deep slumber. She put the bowl near the hearth, placed three logs in the embers, then made herself comfortable on the floor in front of the fireplace. After some time, the woman closed her eyes and slept, her last thoughts swirling about the stranger asleep a few feet away.



Chapter One

Princess Rose sat on the steps of the royal dais among the dresses, jewels, draperies, and shoes that were her birthday presents. Her head was slightly cocked to one side, her blonde hair spilling over one delicate shoulder, catching the late morning sunlight which was cascading across the courtyard. Her slender face bore a look of curiosity as she studied a colorful map in front of her.

Now, Rose knew what the markings on the map meant; her mother had insisted she be taught about them once she was old enough to read. As much as Rose enjoyed maps, she was puzzled as to why it had been given to her on her thirteenth birthday—the first day of her womanhood. Her younger sisters—Tulip, Blossom, Daisy, and Violet—sat around her, silently admiring her gift, though, Daisy could not help but fidget, as was her nature.

“Why, thank you,” the princess said as she looked at the guests for the grateful face of the unknown giver. Each person regarded the other, but no one responded.

“Well, I say, that looks to be very interesting,” said King Charles, which was his response to every gift Rose had received that day. He leaned forward in his throne and held out his hand for the map. Rose bowed to her father and gracefully passed it to him. The king sat back and stroked his beard as he gave the map his full regard. “Yes, yes. Very...,” the king turned the map right side up, “...interesting.”

A hearty laugh rippled through the group of royal guests. King Charles was known for joking often in close company, and the kingdom loved him for it. Of all the royals of the known kingdoms, His Highness of Ametheria was regarded as the most at ease with himself.

Queen Isabel gave a polite smile in response to her husband's foolishness. "My dear, you know your head is for swords and horses, not maps. May I?"

The map now passed from king to queen with a smirk and a shrug from His Highness causing more laughter from the guests. Queen Isabel sat straight in her throne as her dark eyes glanced briefly at the map. Aside from the color of her eyes and hair, the queen looked very much like Rose. With a slight nod, she rolled up the map.

"A fine gift. Very thoughtful," she said and handed the map to her chambermaid with a whisper.

Rose watched as she did this and realized that, perhaps, for the first time in her life, she had just seen her mother troubled.

The party went on as most royal parties did with a feast, dancing, carnival games, a gypsy parade, and horseback riding. Rose danced with her sisters as the royal court musicians played a festive tune. Dancing was not Rose's finest skill, something her sister Blossom often took pleasure in pointing out to her, but she laughed as she made her way zigzagging between her sisters until, inevitably, she collided with the youngest, knocking her to the ground.

"Oh, Violet!" Rose cried as she helped her sister to her feet. "Forgive me!"

Rose fretted about the girl looking for any injury. Violet was tiny for her age and appeared as fragile as an eggshell.

"Did you knock over the 'Little Sparrow,' again, Rose?" Blossom asked with a smirk. "I would wager you will break at least one of her legs by the time we get to your fifteenth birthday festival."

Rose scowled at her sister's sharp tongue, but Violet, ever the gentle soul, said softly to her oldest sister, "I am not hurt. Do not be upset."

Rose patted her sister on the head with a smile and kissed it. “Your patience could fill the oceans beyond the horizon.” She then leaned close with a sly smirk and glanced around as if someone might spy. “How about you sneak us a sweet roll from the baker’s tent?”

Violet’s eyes narrowed and she, too, looked about. Being small did have advantages and, less than a minute later, she and Rose sat on the grass, sharing a pastry dripping with colorful swirls of icing, and laughing together.

As fond as Rose was of carnival treats and games, she took the most pleasure from riding her prized horse, Wisher, for the entertainment of their guests. Her father held Rose as the best rider in the kingdom and often had her demonstrate her skills to others.

As Rose walked to the courtyard, she could see Wisher already waiting inside the fence. The horse’s golden coat and mane had been freshly brushed, making their sheen nearly identical to that of Rose’s blonde locks. Joseph, her royal stable boy, stood next to Wisher. Rose had befriended Joseph years ago during her riding lessons and felt as close to him as she would a brother. The lean fifteen-year-old lad patted the horse lightly and guided the horse toward the approaching princess.

“Good afternoon, Princess Rose of Ametheria,” Joseph said with a bow.

Rose blushed. “Here, now. What is this formality, Joseph?”

“You are a woman now, and I am humbled to be in your presence,” Joseph said, bowing deeper.

Rose slapped the top of Joseph’s head and looked about. “Stop it. You will have the Duchess of Lenstein spreading gossip, and my mother shall have to go to war over it.”

Joseph stood. “By ‘going to war,’ you mean, sending His Highness the King to the Duke’s manor and drinking the night away? That is a war I would like to start.” The two friends laughed for a moment as Wisher stood by patiently. Joseph stepped to the horse’s side and offered his knee to the princess. “Your horse, Princess,” he said.

Rose placed a foot on Joseph’s knee, took his hand, and deftly swung up onto Wisher’s back. She carefully adjusted her riding habit and took the reigns as Joseph stepped away. When she was at the ready, she patted Wisher on the side and said, as she always did, “Run free, Wisher, and carry me with you.”

The party came to a standstill as Rose and Wisher began their ride around the field. If a horse had been born for a rider, Wisher had been born for Rose. King Charles stood from his chair and strode to the fence to watch his daughter perform.

Rose and Wisher trotted around the fence line once. After the lap, Rose patted Wisher, and the horse began a gallop to the center of the yard where two of the queen's royal guard stood. As Rose rode toward the first guard, he knelt and held out a sheathed sword. The horse did not break stride as Rose swung herself gracefully over the saddle, grabbed the handle, and unsheathed the sword as she rode past.

The party members applauded as Rose straightened in the saddle and rode toward the second guard. Rose whistled, and the guard tossed an apple into the air. Rose's sword glinted in the midday sun as she sliced the fruit in half. As the applause grew louder, Wisher approached a wooden target. Rose hefted the sword over her shoulder, aimed, and let it fly. Cheers erupted as the blade sunk into the center of the painted circle.

King Charles beamed and clapped as Rose trotted over to him and gave the reins a slight tug. Wisher halted and bowed his head at the king.

"My eldest daughter!" the king announced. The partiers applauded again. The king called for his horse, and his stable boy set off to fetch it.

But Rose was not watching her father or listening to the applause. Her attention was fixed on something happening in the farthest corner of the party.

Queen Isabel led Joseph behind a carnival tent, both deep in a private conversation. As they started to step behind the cloth, Joseph turned and regarded Rose with what appeared to her to be worried eyes. He then turned away and disappeared behind the tent.

Rose and her sisters, dressed in their bedclothes and robes, entered their parents' chambers as they prepared to turn in for the night. Queen Isabel and King Charles placed the cards they had been playing face down on the table as their children stood in a line from youngest to oldest.

“We have come to bid you goodnight, Your Highness,” the littlest said.

“And goodnight to you, My Precious,” said the queen as she held out her arms. The six-year-old ran over and squeezed her mother tightly. “Oh, you will be a handful tonight, will you not?” the mother said with a light laugh. Violet giggled and joined her sisters. One by one, each daughter hugged her mother goodnight until it was Rose’s turn.

Rose approached her mother but hesitated.

“Why, dear, what is the matter?” asked the Queen.

“Mother,” Rose looked closely for the trouble she had seen brewing earlier in the queen’s eyes. Now, she could find none. “Does a Lady still hug her mother, the Queen, or do I now curtsy?”

The Queen smiled. “A Lady always hugs her mother, especially one who loves her daughter so.”

Rose embraced her mother, and all her fears and worries from the day vanished. “I could never have dreamed of a finer mother than you,” she whispered. When Rose pulled away, she saw tears in the Queen’s eyes. Rose gave a curtsy to her father then joined her sisters.

King Charles took his wife’s hand as she dabbed her eyes. “Nevermore has there been such a blessed family as the one in this room,” he said.

Isabel looked at the princesses. “Now, what do we say, my children?”

In unison, the sisters said, “Tomorrow is another shining day in the land of Ametheria, and we must do our best to be kind and good to all we meet.”

“Always remember that, my darlings. Especially you, Rose,” the queen said.

Rose, momentarily surprised by her mother’s interjection, bowed. The five princesses turned and left the chamber, closing the door behind them.

In the hall leading to the bedchambers, the princesses walked in silence. As each sister reached her chamber, she curtsied to the remaining princesses and entered. Inside each chamber was a waiting chambermaid, ready to tuck her in. Soon, the two eldest princesses, Rose and Tulip, were left alone walking in the hall.

“Tulip, what do you think Mother meant by that last remark?” Rose asked.

Tulip contemplated for a moment. Rose had always found Tulip's extraordinary intelligence helpful, especially when it came to figuring out the thoughts or behavior of others. "I suppose, as a woman, you must be more courteous than we children are expected to be."

Rose nodded. It was as good an answer as she could come up with, and in keeping with the spirit of the day, it made sense. But then, as Tulip reached for the latch on her chamber door, she turned and looked at her sister in a frightful seriousness.

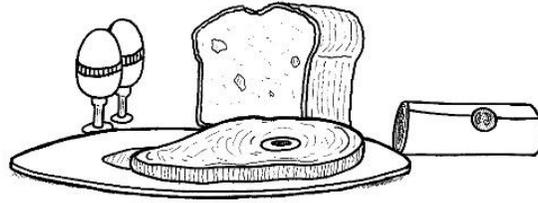
"Mother is not herself today," said Tulip, "and I am not sure why."

Without another word or chance for Rose to respond, Tulip entered her room and closed the door.

Rose stood motionless in the hall. The air had a chill she had not noticed before, and she clutched her robe tightly to her breast. This was the first night Rose would be without a chambermaid, and she now felt isolated and alone.

Silly goose. You are too old for childish fears.

Rose approached her chamber and went inside. She removed her robe, sat on the edge of her bed, and drank the cup of tea her parents always left for each daughter at bedtime. She noticed the tea had an unusual flavor to it that evening, and it had an odor much like fermented fruit, but as a dutiful princess, she drank the rest with no waste and settled in for her first night's sleep as a woman. She gazed out her window at the dark clouds drifting over the moon. Crickets in the grass far below seemed to sing a soothing lullaby as Rose's lids grew heavy and closed in a deep sleep.



Chapter Two

Rose’s eyes squinted against the glare of the morning sun streaming in from the window. She stretched on the bed and yawned as her eyelids fluttered open. As sleep left her body, she sensed something different about her room. After a moment, she realized, with surprise, that it wasn’t even her room at all.

Rose sat upright, and the sudden rush of movement caused the room to sway before her eyes and her head to ache.

I must speak with the kitchen staff about that tea. It was obviously bad.

She squeezed her eyes shut until the swaying feeling passed. Slowly, she opened her eyes and looked around. She was lying on a small but comfortable bed in what appeared to be a one-room cottage she had never seen before. On one side of the cottage was a dresser with two supply packs leaning against it. On the other side of the cottage was a table set for a breakfast of steak, eggs, and bread. In the center of the table was a silver tray, and in the center of the silver tray was a rolled-up parchment.

Rose spied her robe draped at the foot of the bed, and she quickly put it on over her bedclothes. She pulled herself out of bed carefully—her legs experiencing a strange, weakened feeling—and tied the robe tightly.

“Hello?” she called.

There was no answer.

As strength returned to her body, Rose searched what little space there was in the cottage for any signs of life. Finding no one, she pulled open the door and stepped outside. The cottage stood in the center of a forest with a single path from the doorway that disappeared into the trees. Rose hurried around the cottage, looking for any sign of where she was or how to return to the palace. The forest looked no different than any of the ones she and her royal guards rode through on summer days but offered no clue as to which direction her home was located. Fear crept into the princess's heart as she hurried back to the entrance of the cottage. She opened her mouth to call out for aid, then she stopped short.

From somewhere in the forest, footsteps approached.

Rose looked down the path, seeing no one. Whoever was coming, they were making their way through the trees. Quietly, Rose backed into the cabin and closed the door. She listened as the person drew nearer to the cabin. Looking around for protection, Rose quickly picked up a knife from the table and hid it away in the fold of her robe as the latch on the cottage door raised. The door swung open.

"Joseph! Oh, thank heavens!" Rose walked over and pulled the stable boy in.

"Good morning, Princess," Joseph said as he set a pitcher of milk down on the table. He slid a goblet toward her and began to pour. "My apologies if I startled you, but I needed to fetch the milk for breakfast before we set out—" Suddenly, Joseph turned his eyes away. "Your Highness, forgive me," he said. "I thought you would have dressed by now. I will take my leave until you are ready for company."

Rose stepped between Joseph and the door. "You will not go anywhere until you tell me what is going on, Joseph," she said, her brows furrowed and eyes blazing. "Who brought me here and why?"

Joseph looked at the princess with a cocked eyebrow. He then glanced at the parchment still rolled on the table. "Ah, you haven't read that yet."

Rose shook her head.

Joseph pulled out the chair from the breakfast table and walked to the front door, placing a hand on Rose's shoulder. "When you are ready, I will be waiting outside." He smiled, then stepped outside and closed the door.

Rose walked over to the table, sat down and picked up the parchment. The roll contained several pages and was held together by a wax seal. Stamped in the wax was her family crest. Rose broke the seal and hurriedly unrolled the pages. As she did so, she immediately recognized her mother's handwriting as she read.

Dearest Rose,

Please forgive me for the circumstances you have been placed in, but it is required for the journey on which you are about to partake. Since your birth, I and your father have known this day was to come. Alas, we could not imagine it was to be this soon.

But I must start at the beginning. Many generations ago, this land, our home, was ravaged with a curse. Blight had befallen the land, and the ruling king left seeking a remedy but had not returned. Then, one day, a strange man arrived. He appeared without wealth and seemed on the verge of death as he journeyed from home to home seeking shelter. It was a kindly woman of sixteen who eventually brought the man into her home, sharing with him her meager dinner, and gave him her bed as she slept by the hearth. It was not until the morning that the man spoke his first words.

"My dear," said he, "you truly are kind of spirit and good of heart. It takes strength to be as such in these times."

The woman told him to be still and rest, but he would not remain silent. "No, my dear. My time is at hand, as it should be for one as old as I—older than you might believe.

"I am the king of this land, who left many years ago to find the answer to what ails the kingdom, but I am more than that, as well. I am, or I was, a powerful wizard, who founded this kingdom as a place of love and light. I wished to make a happy place of peace where all could prosper, but as years and years passed, I grew lazy and greedy. And so, the magic I worked on this land began to work against me and the people here. I left to find an answer, and after much searching, I know that you are the answer I sought."

He then motioned to the small bag he had been carrying and she handed it to the man, who pulled out a worn map, much like the one you received yesterday. He held it out and asked her to take it. She grasped

one end of the roll as he held the other. As the man spoke, the woman could feel something she would later describe as a warm light pass from the man, through the map, and into her.

“When I am gone, this parchment will be all that remains of who I was,” he said. “You must follow it to the beginning of your journey. Once there, it will serve you no more. You must then continue until the journey is at its end. If you succeed, you will be blessed with a homeland free of its curse and full of richness and peace that you shall rule over. You shall also be blessed with children beautiful in spirit and body. But these blessings must always be earned. Every firstborn daughter of the royal bloodline henceforth will receive this parchment when they are ready to take their own journey. And, none of these daughters must know of the journeys prior, for their knowledge of travels past may affect their travels future. When they return, they will be the new ruler of this land.”

The sorcerer released the parchment and lay back on the bed, very weak. He closed his eyes and spoke his last words:

“Tomorrow will be a shining day in the land of Ametheria. Do your best to be kind and good to all those you meet.”

The woman, your Great-Great-Great-Great-Great Grandmother Elsbeth, cried as the man’s spirit passed on. To her astonishment, his body shimmered in a golden light and vanished from her bed. The only remnant of his existence was the map she held in her hand.

And so, the woman who would be known as Queen Elsbeth of Ametheria set off on her journey. Several years and many adventures later, she returned. Her wisdom guided the people of the land, and by the time of her marriage to your ancestor, King Consort Eldric, Ametheria was enjoying its first joyous year.

And now you know of the purpose of the map you have before you. You are the youngest to have ever received the map, and for that, I have great fear. But to deny the journey is to risk darkness befalling the people of Ametheria, and as Queen, I cannot allow that to happen and must have faith in you to partake this hardship now. But you shall not have to take it alone.

Many times, a companion has been chosen to accompany the princess on her journey. I and your father have chosen Joseph for this task. This choice was made for many reasons but mostly for his deep loyalty to you and your trust in him. Have faith in these two things, for they will be a help and comfort for you.

Know that no matter where your quest leads you, no matter how far you are from home, I am always there with you. I love you. Be good and kind to all those you meet.

Your Mother

Rose placed the pages on the table as emotions swirled within her. She stood from the chair, approached the dresser, and looked inside. Instead of the dresses or gowns she was accustomed to, the clothes of a common girl lay within. She dressed and went to the front door.

Joseph sat waiting in the grass beside the path. He looked up at Rose with a smile and offered her a newly-picked buttercup. Rose walked over and sat next to him, taking the flower.

“So, how long have you known of this?” Rose asked as she looked at the flower.

“Since I turned thirteen, Princess,” Joseph replied. “I wished to tell you many times, but your mother, the Queen, was adamant—and rightly so—that you should not be burdened with knowing until the map arrived.”

Rose gazed at the delicate yellow flower in her hand. She turned and regarded Joseph for a moment, considering all she had just learned about the person she knew as a friend. She then tickled his nose with the buttercup.

“I think we had better eat our fill,” she said. “We apparently have a long journey ahead of us.”

A half-hour later, the breakfast plates were empty, and Joseph and Rose sat hunched over the map. Using her knife, she guided Joseph along the markings.

“See here? This is the cottage,” Rose explained. “The small line is the path leading away from here and to a road. You have seen that, I take it?”

“No, Princess,” Joseph replied. “I was sent here through another path, hidden in the forest, shown to me by the Queen yesterday. I do not know what lies beyond the path leading from the door.”

“Very well,” said Rose. “We follow the road until we come to a small river settlement. Once there, we must ferry across and travel due east until we come to a single building standing by the road. It appears that building is our destination.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Joseph.

Rose pointed to a small cross by the marking of the building. “See there? That means there is something by the road in front of the building. I think whatever that is will contain the information we need to begin our quest.”

Joseph stretched and gathered the two supply packs. With a heave, he hoisted them onto his back. “Then, I suppose we had better be on our way.”

“Hold,” the princess said with authority. “I will carry my pack, if you will.”

“Your Highness, a princess—”

“Is not travelling with you,” Rose said. “I am not dressed in my royal robes, and I do not carry the royal seal of Ametheria. I think this is for disguise, and you shall abide by that. Am I understood?”

“But Princess—”

“And that is another thing,” Rose interrupted. “No more of this ‘Princess’ or ‘Your Highness’ nonsense. You will refer to me as ‘Rose’ until this journey is at an end.”

Joseph’s face flushed and after a moment, he said, “If you insist, Rose.” He set one of the packs on the floor, and Rose slung it over her shoulder. Joseph, with eyes turned low, walked past Rose and started to open the door.

“Joseph,” Rose said. Joseph turned and looked at the kind eyes of his friend. “I am glad it is you with me.”

And, with that, they left.