

PROLOGUE

When the story ends one says, “And they lived happily ever after.”

For those of us among the Faer Folke whose task it is to watch and give aid, this is hardly a satisfactory ending. The lives of people are lived in many stories, especially among the Landed, or those who, in the mists of early time, gave up their magic. In that early time, all human beings had magic. But those who became what we call the Landed gave their magic up to own things, especially land. We, the Faer Folke, have all we need, but we cannot build up wealth and the power over others that comes with wealth. As a result, our lives are much longer, but much simpler and our stories are much shorter.

Not so among the Landed, especially those whose lives cross with ours. Time was, we crossed back and forth quite frequently. True, those of the Landed who had power were bent on making those under them fear us. And magic, once lost is very hard to regain. But as the Landed grew more Enlightened and began to serve reason and logic, as their numbers grew and ours diminished, we found fewer and fewer reasons to walk among them and kept more and more to the wild places where their clamor and their lust for wealth could not bother us.

That’s why those of us who choose to watch and

give aid are honored among us. We do not forget those who have lost their magic, either by greed or by falling in love. It's difficult work. Our magic, when we're among the Landed, is very weak and we cannot always protect our loved ones from harm or hurt. That's why we are also the storytellers because we have the tales to tell.

Which is why I've taken up this tale. The first part has been told many, many times and in many ways. I had watched over young Ella for many years, protecting her as best I could from one who had left our number to pursue her love of gold. I had also watched over Steffan, whose grandmother was one of our own. She had left us to marry one of the Landed but eventually managed to return to us.

This tale actually begins long before Steffan and Ella were even born. It happened in Panomia, one of several tiny kingdoms on the edge of the wild lands where many of us Faer Folke had settled. Elsewhere in the world, there were revolutions and talk of setting up republics. Few in this region thought much about their kings unless provoked.

And the people of Panomia were provoked. Their king, Bartholemew, had ascended his throne as a twelve-year-old boy, so his much older sister, Princess Adele, reigned as regent in his stead. However, she was greedy and began taxing her people in order to build up the army and take over one or more of the neighboring kingdoms. Her people were very angry and they planned a revolt. Young Bartholemew, who had turned sixteen by then, wrested control of the government from Princess Adele and managed to peaceably put

down the revolt. He encouraged Desmond, the Duke of Raultberg, to marry Princess Adele.

Adele was furious that she'd been put aside in favor of her brother, a mere slip of a boy, simply because he was male and she wasn't. She bided her time, eventually giving birth to four daughters. The first, Lanicia, was taught all the customs and the manners of an heir to the throne, what Adele felt was her true station in life. The two middle daughters died young. The youngest, Marcella, was spared her mother's bitterness and became a great favorite in the court of King Bartholemew.

King Bartholemew grew in wisdom, and upon achieving his majority, fell in love with and married the Lady Adriana, of Greenwaldt, not knowing that Adriana's mother was of the Faer Folke. Several years passed before Steffan was born to the young king and queen. There had been several failed pregnancies and two more infants who did not survive their first years.

When Steffan achieved his majority, there was great interest in who he would marry. But he found Ella, a young duchess kept in hiding by her stepmother. At the same time, Steffan's cousin Marcella, who was close to Steffan's age, fell in love with Steffan's best friend, Chester duGrackel, a commoner. It was hardly the usual sort of friendship for a young prince, but that is yet another tale. Duke Desmond did not approve of the prince's commoner friend, even after Steffan had given Chester the Barony of Fin Reache, thus elevating his status. The duke would not have allowed his daughter Marcella to marry Chester, except that the two had married in secret anyway shortly before

Steffan and Ella's wedding.

Five years after Steffan and Ella's wedding, the kingdom was waiting.

CHAPTER ONE

Steffan's father, King Bartholemew, was ill and had been for many months. Few thought he would recover. On the day of Steffan's fifth wedding anniversary, the old king rallied. Steffan spent a couple pleasant hours with his father that afternoon, visiting and sharing with him the affairs of state that Steffan had been managing during Bartholemew's illness. The king was pleased and sent Steffan to spend some time alone with Ella, as was their custom on their anniversary.

Steffan took her to the private garden behind the palace. It was spring, and the rich, mossy scent of a renewed earth filled the air. It had rained most of the week before, part of the usual spring storms. But that day, there was sunshine. Finally able to relax after weeks of worry, Steffan and Ella ran about like children, chasing each other breathlessly, as the sun began its downward course to the horizon.

Laughing, Steffan captured her.

"It's not fair!" she gasped, laughing also. "You run me about until I'm exhausted, and then you grab me."

"It's correct strategy, according to all the books," Steffan replied. He held up a satin slipper. "Besides, you lost your shoe again."

"Oh dear, I have. I thought I felt rather wet."

"You're good at that, you know."

She shook her head smiling, as she leaned against

him and replaced the errant slipper.

"You'll never let me forget, will you?" she chuckled.

"Never." He gently held her face. "Not when that's how I finally caught up to you. Oh, Ella. I've been so happy since that night."

She gazed at him fondly. "And I have, too. You've been so good to me."

"It's the least I can do. Never again will you wear anything but the finest silks and satins."

"May I please have a bit of wool in the winter so I don't freeze?"

"Why certainly, Madam, but only the best lambs' wool. I don't want anything harsh touching your skin again."

"Steffan, you're being silly. I wouldn't be able to kiss one of little Barth's beloved monsters, and that would break our son's heart. Nor would I be able to change Alicia's bottom."

"You can let the nursemaid do that."

"Which I often do. But I'm not so grand a lady I can't take care of my own daughter."

"Well, Alicia doesn't need to be changed anymore, anyway."

"She still has accidents. She's only two. Even Barth still has them every now and then."

"I know." Steffan grimaced, thinking of his four-year-old son and his uncle, the Duke of Raultberg. "I was there for the last one. I can't fault Barth. Uncle Desmond has been terribly moody since Aunt Adele died, and he was always a very imposing fellow, to begin with." Steffan paused. "Why am I talking about him? Relatives are the last thing I want to talk about

right now.”

“We were talking about our children.”

“They are dear, but I’d rather focus my attention on you.”

Steffan wrapped his arms around her, and they kissed, warm and full of strong love.

At the same time, the hands of the cathedral tower clock ground into place, and the great chimes sang out over almost all of the city. Steffan pulled away and glared in the direction of the clock tower in mock irritation.

“Forever interrupting us,” he sighed. “I’m afraid my dearest, we’d best head home.”

“It would be nice to see the children before they’re sent to bed.”

By the time the clock tower rang out the next hour, Steffan and Ella’s coach pulled up in front of the townhouse where they lived in the capital city. They could have lived at the palace. But Queen Adriana had said even before they were married that a bit of independence was the best thing for the young couple. So the two lived in the home in the city where Ella had grown up.

The next day, Steffan and Ella returned to the palace, this time with their children and the nursemaid. The children would spend their morning visiting their grandfather and grandmother. Steffan and Ella also got a chance to spend time with the ailing king. But then it came time to focus on affairs of state, in particular, the ambassador from Karperia, who had arrived late the night before. The visit had been arranged over the past week or so, and it was hardly the first such visit by

an ambassador from a neighboring kingdom since the king had fallen ill.

By the middle of the afternoon, Steffan and Ella were standing in the council room greeting Lord Aldebont, Minister of State of the neighboring kingdom of Karperia, and his retinue.

After the initial introductions, the ladies retired to the salon, except Ella, who remained at her husband's side. Aldebont seemed slightly perturbed by this, and after one or two awkward glances, nodded.

"Dear princess, if you are concerned for my needs," he said, "I assure you, they have been fully met."

"Your Lordship is most kind to reassure me," replied Ella.

Steffan smiled. "I suspect it is not the usual custom in your country for the ladies of the court to join their husbands in conferences. It's a relatively new custom here. My mother always accompanies my father. He is fond of saying that she is his best counselor. My wife has been blessed with similar gifts of wisdom and discretion, so I do the same."

"As your father rules well, and is loved by his people, you are wise to follow his example." Aldebont shifted. He was not comfortable with the situation, and even more disquieted by his mission. "However, if Your Highness will forgive me, I have been asked by my sovereign to deliver my message to His Majesty's ears only."

"A fair request," said Steffan. "But, unfortunately, not a feasible one. As I'm sure you're aware, my father is ill."

"I trust it's not serious."

Steffan nodded, fully aware of what Aldebont was really asking.

"It has been quite serious, I'm afraid," Steffan said, trying to sound reassuring nonetheless. "Fortunately, he seems to be improving. Our physician is still insisting that he rest completely. Your Lordship may be assured that my ears are his."

"Were my mission not so urgent, I might wait, begging Your Highness's pardon."

"Granted. Your first allegiance is to your king, and his particular orders." Stephan smiled graciously but groaned inwardly.

"You are most kind, Your Highness." Aldebont sighed. "I do not wish to be the bearer of bad news, but my sovereign has been much concerned by the recent activities of Duke Desmond of Raultberg. He seems to be gathering an army together, and rules his duchy with an iron fist."

"We are aware of his actions." Steffan smiled. The last thing he wanted was for Aldebont to know the truth about what was going on in the Duchy of Raultberg. "Our current course is to discourage his militia. If he continues, revenues from his duchy will become forfeit. We are trying to avoid sending the guard out against him, but we will if necessary. As for his duchy, the people there are very proud, and will not accept an over strong hand. They are also very loyal to the crown first, and then their duke. I'm afraid my uncle is not very popular there. We keep a close watch on Uncle Desmond."

"That is somewhat consoling. We've been hearing

the most alarming rumors, especially regarding His Majesty's health."

Steffan nodded. "It hasn't been good. However, we are looking to his recovery. And even if we weren't, my father's succession is firmly established through me. These past few months I've been working in his stead. You may assure your sovereign that should the worst happen, the transfer of power will go smoothly. And I am quite prepared to deal firmly with the Duke of Raultberg."

Aldebont nodded. "You have given me more than I had hoped. With Your Highness's permission, I should like to leave tomorrow to make haste back to my kingdom, and report to my sovereign."

"You may go."

Steffan waited while Aldebont left, then turned to Ella

"He's still not satisfied," she observed.

Steffan rubbed his face with his hands. "And what more could I have said to him?"

"Nothing. Your father has been gravely ill, and a change of government makes everyone nervous."

"The vultures. They could at least wait until it's happened."

Ella smiled. "And be out-strategized by someone else?"

A dull thud and outcry outside the chamber caused Steffan's face to light up. "Chester's here."

The door opened, and a young man Steffan's age walked in, nursing his elbow. Lord Chester duGrackel, Baron of Fin Reache and friend since boyhood of Prince Steffan, was not happy.

“Even when there’s nothing for me to fall over,” he grumbled, then suddenly made a grand bow. “Your Royal Highnesses.”

“Well, what brings your lordship here?” Steffan asked.

“The king. What else?” Chester shrugged and found a chair. Sitting without invitation in the crown prince’s presence was a very special privilege that had been officially granted the Baron of Fin Reache. “My fair wife and I were told that your father was expected to expire at any moment. Marcella was devastated and insisted that we come so that we might see her dear uncle one last time. We’ve since found that he’s likely to continue a while longer. The ghouls, ready to bury the poor man before he’s drawn his last breath.”

“Everyone is tense these days,” sighed Steffan.

“A slight understatement, dear friend. Was that not Lord Aldebont of Karperia I saw in the corridor?”

“It was.” Ella led her husband to a chair and gently pushed him down on it. “He came for much the same reason as you. They’re also concerned about the Duke of Raultberg.”

“Hah!” Chester snorted. “He is not the one you have to worry about. The duke, also known as my dear father-in-law, is just barely sane. Marcella’s sister Lanicia, on the other hand, she’s the dangerous one. I should warn you, Steffan, there is more than a little truth in the rumors that Lady Lanicia believes she should be the heir and not you.”

“How could that be?” asked Ella. “Her mother only ruled as regent. Princess Adele couldn’t possibly have hoped to ascend the throne, not while there was

a son living.”

“I’m not sure exactly,” said Steffan. “That all happened years before any of us were born. I’m told that Aunt Adele was very bitter that my father should have primacy over her just because he was a boy, even though he was so much younger than she was. That was one of the reasons she raised taxes and built up the army to conquer Leiderkeit and Karperia. She hoped to get support and stay in power. Father took power while he was just sixteen and then the people revolted anyway. Aunt Adele supposedly tried to blame the revolt on my father and take the throne from him. Fortunately, Father was able to keep enough of the army on his side. And that’s why she was married off to Uncle Desmond.”

Chester shook his head. “They should have done the same to Lanicia and married her off to someone strong with a good solid holding, instead of the landless little flop she did marry. May he rest in peace.”

“I agree,” said Steffan. “But I couldn’t say that to the Karperian ambassador.”

“They’ve nothing to worry about, in any case,” Chester replied. “Lanicia couldn’t care less about them. Her eye is on Leiderkeit, which Raultberg also borders. Not only is it larger, she’s still peeved because King John refused to marry her.”

Steffan laughed. “And I told him not to. John is too good a friend to wish Lanicia on him. Luckily for him, he’s got two good brothers, and doesn’t need an heir as urgently.”

“It’s not entirely lucky since it’s aroused Lanicia’s wrath. And she thinks often how she’s next in line for

the throne, after you, little Barth and Alicia.” Chester shuddered. “Lanicia’s a devious one. I can’t think of anything she wouldn’t do to achieve her ends. She’s got her father completely under her control. She doesn’t like me particularly, but tolerates me because of being married to her sister.”

“Speaking of Marcella,” asked Ella. “Where is she?”

“On her way here, I would imagine,” Chester answered. “She wanted to greet the queen first.”

“I suggest we go find them then,” said Steffan, getting up. “I was planning on spending some time with Mother before we send the children home for their dinner.”

Queen Adriana’s face lit up as her son and daughter-in-law entered the salon where she’d been playing with her grandchildren. Lady Marcella, Steffan’s cousin and Chester’s wife stood by.

“Hello, my darlings,” Adriana crooned.

“Hello, Mother.” Steffan went over and kissed his mother on the cheek. “How are you managing with our little ones?”

“Mama!” Barth yelped and rushed to his mother’s arms as Alicia whined and ran for her mother also.

“Well enough, dearest,” Adriana said. “As you can see, they’re feeling the same worry we’ve all had these days.”

“Indeed,” said Ella as she cuddled her children. “Madam Mother, would you mind terribly if I sent them home with their nurse?”

“I wouldn’t mind a bit,” Adriana said with a weary smile. “I suspect keeping them to their normal routine

is the best thing for them right now.”

“I fear so,” Ella said and rang for the nursemaid. “Marcella, darling, it’s so good to see you. Does this mean you’ll be joining us for the dinner with the Karperian ambassador tonight?”

“Yes,” said Marcella, smiling.

“Oh, thank heavens!” Ella gushed. “It’s not very kind of me, but I’m afraid the ladies of his party are terribly dull. I’ll need you to spark things up a bit.”

As it turned out, the dinner with the party from Karperia was a quiet meal. No one dared speculate on the king’s health, never mind that it was uppermost in everyone’s mind.

Ella and Steffan took advantage of the mood and the dinner ended somewhat early, to everyone’s relief. After saying good bye to everyone, and spending a couple minutes with the queen, Steffan and Ella retired to their townhouse.

It happened quietly. Even Adriana didn’t notice when she checked her husband shortly before midnight. The tower clock tolled two as she checked again. She cried quietly for a few minutes, then summoned the physician, and sent Lord Cedric, the chancellor, to formally notify her son.

Ella woke first. Sleepily, she reached for her nightgown and pushed her husband off of her. Steffan stirred.

“What?” he grumbled, just barely awake.

“Someone’s knocking.” Ella yawned as she sat up and looked for her dressing gown. “Alicia’s probably had another nightmare.”

Steffan groaned and got out of bed.

“Why don’t you go back to sleep?” asked Ella, who was trying to get her nightgown on.

“I won’t sleep until you’re back.” Steffan struggled into his nightshirt and slid into his dressing gown. “I may as well go with you. Barth will be awake also, and wanting attention.”

Ella fumbled with the catch on her dressing gown and followed Steffan.

“We’re coming,” Steffan answered crossly to the repeated knocks.

He opened the door, silently cursing foolish nursery maids, then stopped. Lord Cedric was the one who had knocked, but he would not come to fetch them for a child’s nightmare. But what...

Cedric dropped onto one knee.

“Your Majesty,” he began solemnly.

“Oh, no.” Steffan swallowed.

“The king, your father, has died,” Cedric continued, hiding behind the formality of his duty. “You, sir, are now king, and supreme ruler of this kingdom, as decreed by birth and the will of your father.”

“I know the rest, Cedric,” Steffan interrupted tiredly.

“As you wish, Your Majesty. Long may you live and reign.”

“Thank you, Cedric. You’re excused.”

Steffan shut the door and turned to Ella.

“Cindy...” he began softly, using the old nickname he’d given her years before.

She was holding him before he could ask. Tears slid out of his eyes, as the bell from the tower clock began the death knell.

