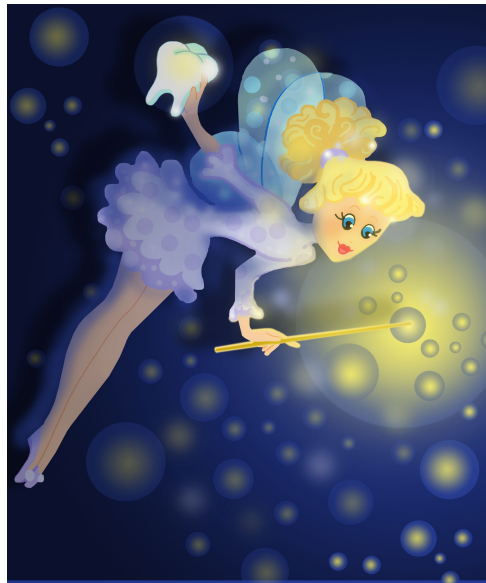


# THE NIGHT THE TOOTH FAIRY DIDN'T COME

HOW BEA AND CHUM SAVED FAIRYLAND

BY

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END

“Quit shoving.”

“Well, move over then. You're hogging the whole sink.”

“I'm not. You're sticking your elbows out too far. There's no room here either...Eeew! You're drooling on me. That's disgusting.”

United in their mutual dislike of their real first names, Beatrice and Tanchum had always been best friends.

“My elbows are in,” Bea said. “Move over. I need extra room to floss. Don't bump. Oh, God, now look what you did.”

“What? What did I do?” Chum complained. “I didn't do anything.”

They were at Bea's house. The last sleepover of the summer. Next week was the beginning of middle school and the end of Chum and Bea.

“Aagh! Da fos is caught on my woose toot,” Bea wailed. “I can't ged it out. Ooo! Id's beeding. Ooo!” A few drops fell into the sink.

“Just pull the string through, Bea. Here let me...Eeew. It is caught.”

“Watch it. You're puwing too hard,” Bea whined. “Look oud. Ow!”

“Hey, Bea! Look, it's out.”

“Quick, close the drain.” They both grabbed for the handle as the tooth made its way unevenly toward the open drain.

“I got it,” Chum cried, holding up the tiny baby tooth, then remembering that it did not come out of her own mouth. “Yuck! It's all bloody and slimey.” She nearly dropped it back in the sink, but Bea grabbed it first.

“My tooth. This is so great,” Bea cackled, sticking her face in the mirror to examine the new empty space while Chum hurriedly washed her hands. Dropping the tooth into the water cup, Bea opened her mouth wide and pulled the corner of her lip as far as it would go to get a better look.

“My toof wasn't that loose yet.” Bea said through finger-warped lips. “It oonwe came out because it got shtuck on da dental foss. Derefore, dis is a sign. Shometing important is going to happen.”

Chum gazed briefly and with the usual pang of envy at the light passing through the fluffy network of tiny curls on Bea's head, then past the real Bea to the mirror Bea.

"It's a sign all right, TweedleBea," Chum said. "It's the end of the world as we know it."

Bea pulled her finger out, wiping her hands on the front of her t-shirt and looked at Chum in the mirror. Dark eyes met light eyes and Bea sighed, as she always did, every time she really noticed Chum's wonderful – definitely not boring-brown – china blue eyes.

"I don't mean school next week, TweedleChum," she said gently. She looked hard at her best friend's reflection. "Maybe..." Bea said, trying to back up her feeling with the kind of facts Chum always seemed to demand, "...maybe tonight we can go inside the mirror, into another world." Chum gave her The Look.

Bea tried again. "Down a rabbit hole?" she offered. Chum added eyerolling to The Look.

Bea threw up her hands. "I don't know," Bea said. "Something weird. Maybe we're supposed to meet the Tooth Fairy."

"The Tooth Fairy? Stop creeping me out, Bea. I'm not in the mood. Face it. Next week we start Middle School. No Tooth Fairy is going to come and rescue us from that. There will be a gazillion other kids and the only class we share is recess. That is, assuming we can even find each other."

## CHAPTER 2 SUCKED AWAY

"Bea," Chum whispered, "are you awake?"

"Yes," Bea whispered back, "What about you?"

"What do you think, TweedleBea? Of course I'm awake. I'm asking the questions, aren't I?"

It was morning. Early morning. Extremely early morning. Barely light. But there was some light, so it had to be morning.

"So, look under your pillow already, TweedleTwit," Chum said, climbing out of her sleeping bag and sitting on the edge of Bea's bed.

"Oh no," Bea clapped her hand to her head. "We forgot to tell my parents. My very last baby tooth and I forgot to tell them." She grabbed the pillow. Bea wanted to demonstrate her point by waving the uncollected tooth bag in Chum's face.

"Hey, Chum. Did you tell anyone about the tooth?"

"No, why?"

"You're sure?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because it's not here."

"It's got to be there," Chum whispered hoarsely. "You probably knocked it off the bed while you were sleeping." They searched all through the bedclothes, behind the bed, under the bed, but there was no bag and no tooth

Their search didn't take long, because it wasn't a very big bed. Even though Bea was small for her age, her toes hung over the edge when she was stretched out. Her parents had been pestering her forever to get a new bed, but she had had this one since she was in nursery school, and she was used to it.

Bea was very fond of her dwarf sized bed. Although she no longer spent time talking to Betty and Sandy, the rabbits who were carved into the wooden head board, they still helped her to fall asleep.

Just then, they heard a scritch sound. Chum jumped.

"It's just Josephine," Bea reassured her.

Josephine was a gray tabby-cat, young and fierce. In the spring, the neighborhood was not a safe place to raise baby rabbits or birds. Even though she was silky and affectionate, Bea wasn't sure she really liked her.

"That's the noise Josephine makes when she's burying something in her litter box," Bea said. "She's probably burying the body."

"What?"

"Yes," Bea said slowly, opening her eyes wide. "Now I understand everything."

"What?" Chum was starting to repeat herself.

"You don't know Josephine very well, do you? She'll eat anything that moves...anything," Bea said. "Listen!"

Lap...lap...lap. Finished with her morning toilet, they could hear the sound of the cat drinking from her water bowl.

"You'll probably find her wings floating in the water dish...because," Bea announced with a wicked gleam in her eyes, "Josephine has eaten the Tooth Fairy!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"You don't believe me? Go and look through her litter box. That's where she's buried the remains. She never eats everything. There's always a foot or something left over."

"That is so disgusting. I will not go digging in a cat toilet. You do it if you're so sure."

"What else would explain what happened to my tooth. My parents sure didn't take it and there's no one else in the house. You didn't take it, did you?" Bea eyed her friend suspiciously.

"No. Of course, I didn't. But only because I didn't think of it," Chum added.

"Then it has to be some kind of major catastrophe," Bea said.

"Well, I guess being eaten would qualify as a major catastrophe, but--"

There was no time for Chum to elaborate on her 'but'. Josephine walked in the door and headed right for Bea's bed. She jumped up and started stalking the pillow, making little growly noises in her throat.

"--Hey, look Bea," Chum joked. "Your cat's helping us."

Bea shrugged. "She's just back to see if there's any more."

Josephine was growling and sniffing at Bea's pillow, probing it with her nose. They watched fascinated as she stuck her head all the way under the pillow, and then did a series of little butt-wiggles as if she was about to pounce on something.

"This is not happening," Chum whispered, half to herself. She looked at Bea for confirmation, but Bea's open-mouthed expression told her that it was indeed happening. Could it be true? Could Bea's cat be back for another Tooth Fairy?

Slowly and stealthily, Josephine moved more and more of herself under the pillow until nothing was visible but her madly twitching tail. Then, so fast that it must have been in between eye blinks, the tail followed the rest of the cat under the pillow.

Both girls were now staring wide-eyed and speechless at the pillow, which was ominously flat. There wasn't a sound in the room. No soft growling, no snorty sniffing sounds, nothing.

"Where's Josephine?" Chum said.

"I don't know. Look under the pillow."

"You look under the pillow. It's your bed."

"Yea, it's my cat, too, but I'm not touching that pillow."

Eventually, they compromised on togetherness. Slowly, and at the same time, they each reached for an opposite corner of the pillow. Slowly, they lifted it up.

There were no surprises under the pillow. There was no vicious cat, waiting crouched, to spring at them. It was worse than that. There was nothing. No cat. No tooth bag. Nothing.

Their arms felt frozen into position. They wanted to run, but were afraid to drop the pillow, afraid even to move. Finally, Bea spoke.

"Chum," Bea whispered, "what's going on? What happened to my tooth?"

"The hell with your tooth," Chum whispered back. "Where's your cat? And what's that?" she added.

They both now noticed what looked like a stain on the sheet, where the pillow had been. It was missing the little hearts and flowers that patterned the rest of the sheet. There was just the beige background color. Only the beige was a little beiger. Kind of like the color their faces were just then.

"There's a hole in my bed."

"It can't be," Chum willed her eyes to see an unbroken expanse of sheet stretched across the bed. "It's probably just a bleach stain."

"No, look. It's really a hole. See?" Bea reached out with her free hand and touched the spot. It was solid and it wasn't solid. Like whipped cream. She let her fingers move past the surface and into the opening to show Chum.

Everything below the surface of the bed was invisible. At the sight of her fingerless hand, little waves of nausea started rolling around inside Bea's gut.

She felt a strong pull from inside the hole. Bea pulled back. Her hand went in deeper. Up to the elbow and still dragging her further in. She pulled back with more force, feeling her whole body go cold-damp with sweat.

"Chum! Help me. I'm being sucked in," Bea cried as her shoulder disappeared.

Chum dropped the pillow and made a mad grab for Bea's legs. In the moment it took her to get a grip on one of Bea's skinny ankles with her big hands, Bea was gone from the knees up. Chum held on tight with both hands and leaned back, putting all her weight into it.

She had two choices. She could let go, or she could be sucked down into the hole with her friend. Chum tightened her grip and pulled harder.

## CHAPTER 3

### NOT A RABBIT HOLE

They landed on a bed of deep, tickley grass. The grass was emerald and the sky was gray. No sun. No clouds. Just smooth, solid gray. The air had that just-before-a-storm stillness. Right in front of them on the ground was Josephine and...

Numbly, Bea reached forward and picked up the tooth bag, dropping it into her T-shirt pocket.

"I knew I shouldn't have gone down that rabbit hole," Josephine said, breaking into the thick silence. "Whoever heard of a rabbit living in a bed."

Chum and Bea sat on the ground feeling dazed and stupid, not knowing what to say, not to each other, and especially not to a cat.

"W-where are we?" Bea finally managed to squeak out.

"Yeah, and how come you can talk to us?" Chum followed up. Between them they seemed to have covered the important points.

"This is Fairyland. I hate this place. Nobody's allowed to eat anybody here."

As if by way of demonstration, a baby rabbit wobbled out of a nearby shrub and with tiny little hops made its way over to them, right past Josephine, scrambling up onto Bea's lap where it promptly curled up and went to sleep.

"Awwww."

Chum watched in amazement, as her best friend, ignoring their obviously imminent peril, suffered an instant meltdown and went into hyper-cute. Bea wrapped her arms around the furry package and practically bent herself in half to rub her cheek on the soft brown fur.

Josephine resumed her throaty growling while her tail twitched furiously.

"I hate this place," she repeated, staring at the rabbit. "A feline could die of hunger around here. I'm leaving." She walked over to the big oak whose branches overhung the grassy clearing where they sat.

"Anybody home?" she said.

Part of the trunk began to separate.

Bea was still bent in half in mid-nuzzle. She lifted her head to see who Josephine was talking to and froze.

So did Chum.

Slowly, a thin, stiff, long-limbed creature, with a head, two arms and two legs emerged. Its skin was the same dry, rough-looking texture and gray-brown color as the bark.

Chum, unfroze enough to wiggle closer to Bea and grab her arm. Bea, still bent in half, didn't even notice Chum's fingers digging into her flesh.

The thing was not identifiably male or female, but had a hairless head and huge gray eyes that reminded Bea and Chum of an alien in a science fiction movie. Big as its eyes were, at that moment, they were matched in size by the slack-jawed, bug-eyed stare of the two girls.

"Thank you," Josephine said brusquely and she started to walk right into the tree, disappearing into it the same way the strange creature had appeared out of it. The creature stood there looking stiff and out of place, following the cat with its eyes.



“Josephine, wait,” called out Chum, afraid to talk and afraid not to. “How come you can talk? Where are you going?”

At the sound of Chum's voice, the tree person turned to stare at the two girls. They held their breath.

Josephine stepped back, pulling her head out of the trunk and freeing her mouth for talking. Bea and Chum blinked their eyes. All this merging and unmerging of solid objects was making them dizzy.

“I told you,” Josephine said impatiently, “because this is Fairyland. And I'm going home.” She turned back to the tree.

“What about us?” Bea shouted desperately, without taking her eyes off the tree thing.

Josephine paused. “The rabbit hole was in your bed. You're probably supposed to be here.” And then she was gone.

The girls leapt to their feet to follow, but stood rooted to the spot by the sight of the tall, awkward creature watching them. The baby rabbit tumbled out of Bea's lap when she rose, landed more or less on its feet and made its way back to the bush where a full grown rabbit could be seen waiting for it.

Bea and Chum hardly noticed. Their eyes and their attention were held captive by the stare of the tree person.

Chum took a tentative step forward. The tree person took a step backward. It was impossible for them to read any expression in its face. They couldn't tell whether it was surprised, curious, angry, or something else altogether.

They watched the tree person move slowly backwards, never taking its eyes off them, until it reached its tree and then, gradually merged back into the trunk. The head, with those staring eyes, was the last thing to disappear.

They stood there without moving, even after it was completely gone, waiting. Now they began to be aware of the stillness in the air, of the grayness around them, and of the almost unnatural brightness that the gray sky lent to the colors in the grass and on the trees.

It was quiet, too. They could see birds in some of the trees, but there were no bird noises. There weren't even any bug noises.

There wasn't much else besides grass and trees. They stood in a woodland clearing with the great oak at its center. Nothing grew there except the ankle-deep grass. Beyond the clearing, all around them, was a dense, dark forest.

## CHAPTER 4 TREE PEOPLE

**“I'm scared,”** said Bea, turning to her friend and breaking the silence.

“Me, too,” Chum answered. “We need to talk.” By mutual consent, they moved to a spot that was in the middle of the clearing, as far away as they could get from the tree, and as far as they could get from the forest.

Chum ran her fingers through the rich, dense grass when they sat down. It felt comforting and gave her a little courage.

"I think I know what that tree thing is," Bea said, speaking in a low voice.

"What? What is it?" Chum said, trying and failing to keep her voice down.

"I'm not sure, but if we really are...are in...you know...Fairyland. If we are, then that was probably a dryad."

"A what?"

"A dryad. I read about it in a story. It's a kind of fairy that lives in a tree. Only the tree isn't just its home. It is the tree. They're the same person."

"What if you kill the tree?" Chum asked.

Bea ran her finger across her throat. "No more dryad," she said cheerfully, forgetting her earlier caution.

Chum tilted her head and looked at her friend. "What if you kill the dryad?"

Bea thought about it for a moment before replying. "I don't know. Maybe the tree dies."

"Are you sure about this?" Chum said skeptically.

"No, I'm not."

Nobody said anything for another minute.

"Somebody has to ask the tree," Bea said tentatively.

"Not me," Chum answered, tacitly acknowledging the question they both knew needed to be asked. "I don't talk to trees." She crossed her arms over her chest.

Bea sighed. She knew that stubborn look. She also knew who Chum learned it from. The only good thing was that they were hardly ever stubborn about the same things.

Slowly, she stood up and faced the tree. She was standing close, but not too close to the tree. Ready to turn and run if they were lucky enough to actually get a response.

"Oh, tree," she began.

"No whining! Pl-ease!"

"You don't like the way I talk to trees, you do it," Bea snapped. Chum didn't say anything, so Bea turned back to the tree and continued.

"Oh, tree-ee"

"Ugh!"

Bea glared at Chum and kept talking.

"We need your help. Do you think you could take us home the way you did for our cat. We go to the same place, so it shouldn't be any extra trouble for you."

"That's not what Josephine said. If you're going to do it, do it right," Chum said.

"Chu-um. You can't talk to a tree like that."

"Why not? Josephine did."

"Okay, okay. Is there anybody home?" Bea said to the tree as politely as she could manage.

Nobody was.

"Get real, Bea. This tree is not on speaking terms with us. We've got to get out of here and it's obvious we're not going to do it the same way we came in."

"Maybe there's a path," Bea said tentatively. They turned to look at the woods. The trees grew close together, crowding out light and space.

"Nah! Not a chance," Chum said. "Does this look like a place with paths, the kind of place everybody wants to get to?"

"Well..."

"Bea! It doesn't. Not in Fairyland, not in any land in the world. That tree thing—"

“–Dryad.”

“Right. Dryad. That dryad isn't going to help us. Why should it?”

“It came out for Josephine, didn't it?”

“Maybe it only comes out for cats. Maybe it doesn't like people. I don't know,” said Chum. “I'm not sure I want it to come out again, anyway.”

“We're stuck in this stupid place,” Bea wailed. She dropped to the ground in a hopeless heap and buried her face in the grass.

“We'll never get home in time for Orientation Day at school on Monday. I'll never make any friends. I'll be alone. My whole year will be ruined.

“I hate to tell you this, TweedleBea,” Chum said quietly. “But if we don't figure out how to get home, we're going to miss a lot more than the Middle School Orientation. I'm thinking college and my plans to create an entirely new kind of operating system. I don't think fame and fortune count for a lot around here.”

Bea looked up at Chum and gave her a damp smile. “Willow Brook Middle School isn't looking so bad right now, is it?” Bea said.

“It's bad all right,” Chum said. “It's just that this is worse. Come on, Bea.” Chum sat down cross-legged next to her friend. “The only way we're going to figure out how to get out of here is if we can get a good look around first. And the best place to do that–”

“–Oh no,” Bea jumped up. “Not me. There's no way I'm going up into that tree. Are you nuts? Do you know what could happen to us in that tree?”

“No, do you?”

They were both standing up now. Bea had her hands on her hips and was glaring at Chum.

“No, but I can imagine,” Bea said. “I am not going up in that tree. And neither are you,” she added.

“Be sensible, Bea. If we go one way, it might be a ten-minute walk out of the woods. A different direction might be ten miles. We have to try and find out.”

“Okay. I'll climb any tree but that one.”

“You're on, TweedleBea. You find the tree, and I'll climb it with you.”

## CHAPTER 5 TREE CLIMBING

“It's not as if there aren't any other trees around here,” Bea said. They were surrounded by trees.

As Bea look around the edge of the clearing, she realized that none of the other trees had branches less than fifteen feet off the ground.

“All right, TweedleChum,” she said at last, “but I'm coming with you. I don't think we should be separated. And I want to talk to the tree first.”

“Agreed,” Chum said. “Double agreed. Just hurry up.”

They turned back to the tree. “Hello again, tree,” Bea began hesitantly. “I just wanted to let you know that we're going to climb up in your branches. I hope that's okay. You

see, we're lost, and we need to get high up to try and figure out where we are. We promise to be careful and try not to break any of your branches or anything. Okay?"

"Okay, you did it. Let's go."

"Wait a minute. Maybe the tree has something to say."

They waited.

"Let's go," Chum urged. "This tree is obviously not talking to us. I want to get out of here."

In spite of Chum's haste, they approached the tree cautiously, stepping gingerly onto the lowest branches. The fact that they were both barefoot and wearing nothing but the oversized T-shirts that they had slept in also had a lot to do with how carefully they moved.

With so many branches so close together, each as big around as a small tree, it was not hard to climb. The oak bark was rough, giving their bare feet a good grip. Before she knew it, Bea was ten feet off the ground.

Choosing a flatish waist-high branch, Bea started to pull herself up. Midway, with one leg over the higher-up branch and one leg still hanging in the air, she stopped.

"Chum?"

"Yes, TweedleBea?" Chum said with affection from three branches up.

"Do you think Josephine was right?" Bea said, pulling her other leg over the branch and reaching up for the next one.

"You mean about there not being anything to eat here?" Chum carefully twisted around to look down at Bea, waiting for her to catch up.

"No, not that, the other thing Bea said. That we're here because we're supposed to be?"

"I don't know," Chum answered. "I guess so. There must be a reason."

Bea pulled herself onto Chum's branch. She wiggled over on her stomach until they were side by side, toes propped on the branch below, arms dangling in the air in front of them.

"Do you think it could have something to do with the Tooth Fairy?" Bea asked.

"Come on!"

"No, really, Bea said. "Think about it. Josephine said that this is Fairyland and we agreed that that tree thing is a kind of fairy, didn't we? Where else would a fairy live?"

"Yes, but that's just one theory. What if we've been zapped into another dimension where the people are trees instead of people?"

"This is not another dimension," Bea said emphatically. "It would be different."

"Brilliant." Chum waved an arm in the air for emphasis. "We drop out of a hole in the sky. Your cat walks into a tree, and you think that's not different? It is different."

"No, I mean more different."

"You mean like the fact that there's no sun? Look." Chum raised both hands to point dramatically at the gray sky, losing her balance in the process.

"It's just overcast," Bea said, so wrapped up in her idea that she didn't even notice Chum slowly slipping away. "That's all. You can smell that it's getting ready to rain."

"Yes, but—" Chum was waving her legs wildly to regain their foothold.

"—Listen, will you?" Bea said, still looking straight ahead in order to concentrate completely on her latest theory. "Just pretend for a minute that Josephine knows what she's talking about, because if it's true, then everything make sense."

Chum's toes bumped into the footrest branch and dug in.

“OK, I'm listening. Make it make sense.”

Bea resettled herself on the branch so that she could face Chum.

“Well, if this really is...you know...where Josephine said. Then there could be tooth fairies living here too, right?”

Chum thought that was a pretty big leap, but she didn't have any better ideas at the moment. “Okay, right.”

“And,” Bea's voice took on an upbeat note as she came to her final point, “that rabbit hole, or whatever it was, was exactly where the Tooth Fairy was supposed to be last night, but wasn't. Whatever prevented her from collecting my tooth had to be so big, or important or something, that it tore some kind of hole in the wall or whatever it is that keeps this place separate from where regular people live.”

“That's very interesting, TweedleBea, but how does it help us?”

“Because now we know exactly what we have to do.”

“I'm still listening, so what is it that we have to do?”

Bea spoke, with the calm, firm voice that comes from finally knowing the truth of a thing. “We're already in Fairyland,” she said, finally managing to get the word out in one piece. “All we have to do is find the Tooth Fairy. She'll explain everything, including how to get out of here.” Since nothing Chum could say could possibly shatter Bea's conviction, she didn't wait for a reply but pulled herself up and continued to climb.

Chum looked around at the forest beyond the clearing. Even from this vantage point, there was no sign of a path or even a break in the trees anywhere.

“Just great,” Chum said to the tree, not really caring whether it could hear her or not. “All we have to do is find the Tooth Fairy. No problem. My friend, the optimist.” She sighed and reached for the next branch to follow Bea.

Chum wasn't thrilled with Bea's logic, but it beat hands down the only thing she could think of, which was wandering aimlessly around in the woods calling for help. Looking for the Tooth Fairy would do, until they thought of something better.

## CHAPTER 6 TREELEVATOR

**T**hey were about twenty feet off the ground now, being even more careful, and not out of consideration for the tree, either. Bea tried not to look down. Chum, who was a faster climber had moved ahead of her friend. She kept looking down to check on Bea, but she didn't like it.

The next branch was a little higher than the rest had been. Propping herself against the trunk, Chum carefully raised herself up onto her toes and reached, but her fingers could only graze the bottom of the branch.

“This one's is too high, Bea,” she said. “We have to go down a little and around to the other side of the tree to look for a better way.”

As she spoke, she felt her fingers touch the out-of-reach branch and then move slowly higher and higher until her whole hand curved over the top. Chum started to get dizzy.

She let go of the branch and wrapped her arms around the main trunk, holding tight and closing her eyes.

“Chum! Are you okay?”

“No...yes. I'm alright...I think. But something weird is happening.” She paused, taking a deep breath, still afraid to open her eyes.

“Either the branch above me is getting lower, or the one I'm standing on is getting higher. I don't know.” Chum opened her eyes slowly. The branch that had been just out of reach was now about chest height. “I think it's stopped,” she said. “I'm going up.”

Chum shut out all the invented monsters that were rapidly taking over her mind and concentrated on what she was doing. She pulled herself up onto the apparently accommodating limb and when nothing bad seemed to happen, took another big shaky breath and started to look around for a good spot for the next handhold.

“Bea! Look at this! Look up! The branches are coming down. They're getting lower. This is totally cool. The tree is helping us.”

Bea looked up. She could see the larger branches above Chum slowly moving down and over to arrange themselves in a more serviceable fashion. Bea, who was standing with both feet on one branch and both arms wrapped around another, could feel the rubbing of the rough bark against her arms as the branch under her feet began to move slowly upward.

“Chuum,” she squealed, tightening her arms, “It's doing it to me, too.”

“Hold on till it stops,” Chum called down. “Then follow me. This is great.” Chum was elated. But Bea, still clinging tightly while her limp knees gave way to the bending of the bough beneath her, wasn't so sure.

“How do you know the tree is trying to help us?” Bea said.

“What do you mean? It's a little obvious, isn't it?”

“What if...what if...it's not doing this to help us? What if it's a trap?!”

“Oh!”

Neither spoke for a minute, while they thought about the possibilities and the options. There weren't many.

“What do you think we should do, Chum?” Bea called up.

“I don't know. Keep climbing, I suppose. If the tree is really helping us, that's great. If it's not, well, I guess it doesn't matter. We can't get down unless it lets us. It just has to move branches out of the way to keep us here.”

“I told you we shouldn't have climbed this tree,” Bea said.

“Be quiet and keep climbing, TweedleTwit.”

They kept climbing, but they did not enjoy the experience nearly as much as they should have.

Even with help, it took a long time to reach the top of the gigantic oak. Finally, they got as high as they could go and still stay close to the main trunk. Choosing a wide branch that angled steeply upwards with a lot of smaller branches coming off of it, they began to crawl up and out towards the leaf canopy.

As the branch started to narrow beneath them, the smaller side branches grew more and more numerous, until they were so surrounded by twigs and leaves that it seemed that they could hardly move.

So surrounded, that they didn't even realize that some of the smaller branches were beginning to wind around their bodies, until they were gripped so tightly that they really couldn't move.

Chum felt it first. "Help me," she screamed. "Bea! Help! Its got me! I'm trapped! Help! Help!"

Bea, who had just noticed that she had her own problems, was on a screaming jag of her own.

"Help! Help! The tree has me! Help me, somebody help me!"

There was a combination sob and giggle from just ahead of Bea.

"Somebody?" Chum said. "Which particular somebody were you calling to? It's just you, me, and the tree here, Bea."

"Oh, Chum," she gulped out, "I don't know what to do."

"I don't think we have a lot of choice in the matter," Chum said. "So you don't really have to worry about that." There was another sob-giggle, this time from Bea.

"The tree," Chum called out, "it's moving up again. Hold on, Bea."

"Hold on?" Bea must have been feeling a little better. This time there was more giggle than sob. "You must be kidding. I couldn't jump if I wanted to."

The branch began to move upward, until it cleared the top of the tree, pushing them past the uppermost leaves. Chum, who was further up on the branch, was the first to put her head through to the sky and see what was beyond the forest.

## CHAPTER 7 TREE FRUIT

**F**rom the top of the great oak, the earth lay before them like a crazy quilt. The big, green blanket beneath them had darker green patches for woods, blue patches for lakes and ponds, gray roads running between brightly colored houses, and, of course, the requisite castle.

"There it is," said Chum. "That's where we have to go." She managed to free one arm from its leafy embrace enough to point at the castle, large and colorful even in the distance.

"But, Chum, it must be a hundred miles away." Bea hung tight to the main branch and twisted her head around to get a better look. "Besides, how do you know that the Tooth Fairy lives there? Maybe she lives in one of those houses."

"Maybe there's lots of tooth fairies living in lots of houses," Chum said. "How will you know which one we want?"

Bea didn't say anything. This was obviously a point that had not occurred to her.

"Anyway," Chum continued, "it doesn't matter who lives there. The castle will be the best place to find someone who can help us get home, some kind of chief fairy who may or may not be the Tooth Fairy," Chum said.

"I guess," Bea agreed reluctantly.

"Come on, TweedleTwit. It's not as far as it looks. Besides, look at all the roads. Once we get out of the forest, we can get a ride with someone."

“I don't talk to strangers.”

“Twerp. This is Fairyland. You can talk to anyone.”

“No, you can't. Just because it's Fairyland, doesn't mean everybody is some kind of goody goody.” She tried to gesture her concern, but shoulder shrugging and a little toe wiggling was all she could manage without disturbing the branches that surrounded and supported her.

“You can, too.”

“Can't.”

“Can.”

“Not.”

“Ooooooo.” Chum made a long letting-off-steam noise. “Listen, Bea. Let's just figure out the best way to get out of the woods. Then we can decide who we can and can't talk to.”

“Agreed.”

“Double agreed?”

“Yes, okay, double agreed.” Then, as her head was her only available body part, Bea used her chin to point directly ahead. “That's the way we have to go,” she said.

“Are you crazy? The castle is this way.” Chum pointed the other way with her free arm.

“I know, but look how thick the woods are in that direction. We might never find our way out.”

“But the castle is that way. It must be where everyone goes, so there's bound to be a path through the woods going in that direction,” Chum argued.

“Yes, and there might not be. Besides, look at how close we are to that big lake. Once we get there, it will be easy to follow the shoreline out of the woods without getting lost. And, in case you didn't notice, your way is uphill. The lake is downhill.

“Downhill sounds good to me,” Chum agreed. “Now, how about asking your friend to let us out of here.”

“Aye, aye, Captain Chum. Hold on to your branch, and get ready to move...I hope.

“Oh, Tree,” she said, formally. “Thank you for helping us. Could you please let go of us so that we can climb down now?”

They tightened their arms and legs and waited, not sure what to expect.

After a two or three second eternity, the tree began to move again. But the narrow branches that were holding them did not unwind. Instead, even more of the pliant outer branches began to tangle around the girls shoulders and legs. Their status was rapidly progressing from firmly wrapped helplessness to near mummification.

For a moment both Bea's and Chum's hearts stopped beating. Neither of them had the courage to protest or move.

Then the tree began to move them downward, higher-up branches unwrapping as new lower branches took over. In this way, the tree gently passed them from branch to branch to the ground. This time they enjoyed it as much as they should have.

It took only a few minutes to reach the ground this way. Bea and Chum emerged from the tree, flushed and excited. And confused.

“Chum? Which way is the lake?” They were standing at the base of the tree, facing the almost impenetrable forest again.



“The lake? Why it's...it's that way. No, that way. Let's see.” She looked back at the oak and tried to concentrate.

“We came down this side, but we moved around from that side, and we were facing that way, sort of...there. The lake is that way,” she said pointing in an entirely different direction.

“Are you sure?”

“No, I'm not. I'm not sure at all,” she said, shrinking down in bewilderment.

“I guess we'll have to climb back up the tree again,” Bea said, brightly. She was thinking about how much fun it had been, being swung through the air.

Chum, who was still trying to figure out the direction, was looking pensively into the woods.

“Stop breathing on me, Bea,” she said and turned to her friend. Bea, who was not breathing on her, turned also.

The dryad had emerged from the tree and was standing behind them, with one hand resting lightly on Chum's shoulder, the other pointing towards the woods. Bea, jumped back, startled, unsure. But Chum looked up and found herself eyeball-to-eyeball with a pair of soft gray eyes.

Its body gave off the odor of baby leaves uncurling. Each time it breathed out, a little oak-flower-scented breeze tangled itself into Chum's hair. She wasn't afraid.

“That's the way to the lake, isn't it?” Chum said.

The dryad smiled and nodded, its eyes brightening. Then it half turned, indicating a low branch behind them, covered with oak leaves, apples, and oranges.

“Breakfast,” Chum cheered. “I'm starving. How did you know?”

The dryad didn't answer, but its smile got a little bigger. They each took an apple and an orange, one for each hand. Then the dryad pointed again towards the lake, still smiling and giving a little head shake, the kind that means, ‘go on, get out of here’.

Chum and Bea didn't even bother asking how apples and oranges came to be growing on an oak tree. They were too grateful. Besides, their mouths were already full. They headed into the forest, waving, and calling goodbyes.

## CHAPTER 8 NOTHING BUT GRASS

The same thick grass that grew in the clearing carpeted the forest. Their bare feet were lulled to dull pleasure by its cool, between-the-toes tickle.

It did, however, make it difficult to walk in a straight line. There was no path to indicate direction. The grass was everywhere, growing over all but the largest roots of the trees.

They had been awake for over two hours. They were hungry. The apples disappeared almost as quickly as the dryad did into its tree. Bea had always been a careful eater. She took a little longer to finish than Chum.

“Look at how pretty the seeds are, Chum.” Bea held out her apple core. The shiny black apple seeds showed faint overtones of different colors. “Like a little rainbow,” Bea said, starting to pick them out with her fingers.

Chum had already finished her apple and tossed the core. She was now in the process of peeling the orange, leaning forward as she walked so that the sticky juice dripped on the ground instead of her shirt. She glanced at Bea's apple core and shrugged. “They look like regular apple seeds to me,” she said. “They're just shiny from being wet with apple juice.”

Like a little kid collecting pretty pebbles, Bea picked out the seeds and put them in her tooth bag. She did the same when she ate the orange, sucking each seed clean and inspecting it for colors before she put it in the bag. Altogether, she had eight apple seeds and six orange seeds.

“Look at that, Bea,” Chum said. She used her sleeve to wipe the last bit of orange juice off her mouth and pointed to one tree where the grass seemed to curve upward onto the trunk itself, “it looks like the grass is trying to eat the tree.”

She meant it to be funny, but the joke made Bea shiver instead. Most of the lower branches were leafless, with peeling bark. Did this tree have someone living in it too? Were they hurt or sick? Was the tree dying, or was the grass killing it?

“Don't be so creepy,” Bea said, hiding her feelings. “It's just grass. It just means we have to look a little harder for a path or something.”

She craned her neck and peered into the dim light, concentrating on discovering some sign that would give them a sense of direction. Chum also began anxiously looking around.

“Look, Bea!” Suddenly she was excited. Pointing to a spot near their feet, Chum said, “If that isn't a path, I'll eat my—” She paused. There were only two choices, her T-shirt or her underpants.

“—my T-shirt, I guess,” she said weakly.

“You're safe, Tweedletoes,” Bea said, grinning. “It looks like a path to me, too.” Starting about two feet away from them, the grass seemed to take on a slightly different color, the way a rug does if part of it is rubbed in the wrong direction.

The more they looked at it, the clearer it became, and the more they wondered why they hadn't seen it right away. It was a patch of darker green grass about two-feet wide, ribboning out in the direction they were already going, but with a slight curve to the right.

“Come on,” Bea said, skipping ahead, “follow the yellow brick road.” It wasn't yellow, and it wasn't brick, and it certainly wasn't there a minute ago, but it was a welcome sight. The sooner they got out of this dim forest, with its dying trees, Bea thought, the better they would both feel.

Less than ten minutes later they saw light coming through a break in the trees just ahead. They started to run.

They stopped.

“I don't believe it,” Chum said, smacking her forehead with her hand.

“We're back where we started. Look there's the breakfast tree.” Apples and oranges still hung on its lowest branch.

“No big deal,” said Bea. “We just follow the grass path backwards to its beginning. Then we can look for a better path.”

They did. Ten minutes later, they were back in the clearing again.

"I don't understand, TweedleBea."

"Neither do I, TweedleChum. That path ended, I mean started, in the middle of the woods."

"Well, maybe we accidentally switched paths somewhere and that's why we never found the beginning of the first one."

"Maybe," Bea said, but she didn't think so.

Neither did Chum, but they both pretended to.

"Let's go back out the way we started. The way the dryad first showed us," Bea said. "That way, when we get to the beginning of the path again, we won't take it."

"Huh?"

"We'll look for a different path, TweedleTwit."

Starting out from the spot and in the direction that the dryad had first indicated, it took only a few minutes before they both recognized the dying tree where they had first located the grass path.

"It's not here," said Chum. "It should start right here."

"This is the spot, all right," Bea said, looking at the dead branches and peeling bark. She lowered her gaze to the base of the trunk. Had the grass moved up a little higher, or was it her imagination?

"Don't laugh at me, Chum, but that tree doesn't look right." She knelt at the base of the tree and started to pull back the grass.

"Leave it alone, TweedleBea. How do you know that it's not supposed to be that way?"

"Ouch!" Bea cried out. "It bit me."

## CHAPTER 9 MORE, NOTHING BUT GRASS

**B**ea jerked backwards and held up her hand.

"Ow, it hurts," she whined.

A piece of grass root was wrapped around her index finger. It was tight, and it stung. She pulled it off quickly. Underneath, was a red welt, ringing her finger where the root had been.

"Leave it alone, Bea. The tree wants you to leave it alone. Help me look for another path. I don't like it here. It's dark and it doesn't smell right."

"Maybe you're right," Bea, said standing up and squeezing her finger with her other hand to ease the pain.

"But it wasn't the tree that hurt me," she said, staring at the dying tree. Her mind held a confused image of a forest full of nothing but trees like this one with peeling bark and broken branches.

"It was the grass." Bea put her finger in her mouth to cool the sting as she slowly backed away from the tree. "I don't understand," she said, walking backwards in the dim light and half talking to herself. "It's like that grass on the tree was alive or something."

“Dork. It is alive.”

“No. I mean alive alive. Like us. This place isn't right, Chum.

“And another thing.” Bea sniffed at the air. There was no woody scent from decaying leaves. “Woods should have leaves on the ground. Not grass.”

At that moment, they both noticed a faint singing noise in the grass, like crickets. It seemed to grow louder with each step they took. It wasn't very loud, but it was notable in a place where even the birds had no voices. They could almost make out actual words.

“Heereeweeeeeareeeheereeweeeeeareee.”

“What's that sound?” Bea said, looking down at her feet. “Hey, Chum. Here's that grass path again. Look. I'm standing right on it.”

“No, it's not. The first path started more over there.” Chum pointed to a spot further on. “This is a different path. And look,” Chum said with relief. “see how it goes just a little to the left? It's the opposite of the other one. This path goes the right way. Come on, TweedleBea. Let's get out of here. This place gives me the creeps.”

Five minutes later, back in the clearing again, they were both close to tears.

“At least we don't have to worry about getting lost in the woods,” Bea sniffed. “We couldn't get lost in the woods if we wanted to.” She attempted to smile. It came out looking more like a facial twitch.

“No,” Chum said, “we can't.” Her own effort at humor was coming out less like a twitch and more like a grimace. “Instead, we get to worry about getting lost in the clearing.”

Bea twitched some more, Chum grimaced again. Then they both lost it, plopped themselves down on the grass and burst into tears.

“I want to go home,” Bea wailed.

“Me, too.” Chum added her whines to Bea's wails. “I want to go to Willow Brook Middle School with class after class of snooty strangers who won't talk to me,” she said tearfully. “But I'll settle for just getting out of this forest.” She sniffed. “Any suggestions?”

“Breadcrumbs!” Bea said brightening. “We could drop breadcrumbs, like Hansel and Gretel.” She wiped at her wet face with the collar of her T-shirt.

“Breadcrumbs?” Chum held out her hands to demonstrate the absence of anything remotely resembling breadcrumbs.

“Well, apple seeds would work, wouldn't they,” Bea said. She put her hand on her t-shirt pocket where the bag with the apple and orange seeds were. “Of course, we would have to eat a lot of apples.”

“That's perfect, TweedleTwit. Then we would have a permanent trail leading out of the clearing and back into it again. It's just what we need. Any more bright ideas?”

“Sure, I've got lots of them,” she said, sniffing back the last of her tears. Her hand was still on her pocket and she could feel the tooth-bag.

“We can use my tooth,” she said slowly, pausing for effect.

Chum waited. “This had better be good,” she said. “I'm getting desperate.”

Bea leaned forward conspiratorially and whispered. “We use the tooth for bait. We set a trap, and then we wait. When a tooth fairy comes to get the tooth. Bang.”

“Bang?” Chum was having a little trouble with the logic.

“Bang. She springs the trap and we have a hostage. We don't let her go until she tells us what we want to know.”

“Are we talking about the same tooth here?” Chum said. “The one that nobody came to get when it was under your pillow where it was supposed to be. Why should anyone come for it when it's somewhere it's not supposed to be.”

Bea shrugged. She had been more enamored of the telling than the actual idea, anyway. Besides which, she had no desire to spend the night in the middle of the forest, waiting for the Tooth Fairy. It sounded ridiculous, and it felt frightening.

“We need a new strategy, Bea. No more paths, ok?”

“Definitely. The first one I see, I go in the opposite direction.”

“No. That's no good either. No paths at all. We ignore them.”

“Don't you remember why we decided to go in this direction in the first place?”

“Sure, it's shorter.”

“No, the other reason. The thing you noticed from the top of the tree,” Chum prompted.

“You mean that it's downhill?” said Bea.

“This is the deal,” Chum said. “We walk as straight as we can in the direction we know the lake is.”

“But, Chum,” Bea interrupted. “You saw what it was like. As soon as we get into the woods, it's impossible to tell which way the lake is.”

“Wait, I'm not finished,” Chum said. “When the trees get in our way, we just have to make sure that we're going downhill. As long as we keep going downhill,” she reasoned, “we should eventually get to the lake.”

Bea nodded. “It sounds good, Tweedletoes. I wonder if the tree-person approves.” They looked back at the oak tree, but there was no sign of life.

Chum shrugged. “Let's do it,” she said. “The worst thing that could happen is that we'll end up back here for lunch.” She looked meaningfully at the fruit-filled branch.

They set out for a fourth try. The grass was now awash with crisscrossing patterns leading off in all directions with a low whispery noise as if a breeze was ruffling through the tops.

“Thisswayyythissswayyyfooolloowmee.” Only there was no wind.

## CHAPTER 10 SOOO HUNGRY

**A**bout forty minutes later, they reached the shore. The grass grew right up to the edge of the water, making it look like it was trying to get a foothold under the water as well as above.

“I never thought Fairyland would be this grassy,” Bea said. “I guess it's because it's so overcast. If the sun started shining, this stuff would all dry out.”

“No, it wouldn't,” Chum countered. “Grass grows in sunny places, like golf courses.”

“Only when you water it all the time, and dump lots of chemicals on it. Maybe this is fairy grass. It only comes out on cloudy days.

“Right,” said Chum. “Maybe they just water it a lot.”

“Maybe you should stop sleeping through science class in school,” Bea said. Chum bristled. She worked hard in science. It just wasn't her best subject.

“Science is your favorite subject, not mine,” Chum said. “I never notice you looking terribly alert during math.” They were close enough so that Bea could see Chum's nostrils start to wiggle, a serious sign that in another minute they would be moving from minor quibble into a full fight. That meant at least two days with no talking. Under the present circumstances, that might not be such a good idea. Fortunately, at that moment, Bea looked out across the lake and discovered a handy-dandy change of subject.

“All right, all right,” she said grudgingly. “Your point. Check out this view,” Bea said, ending the argument.

Chum and Bea had come out of the forest near the bottom end of the long narrow lake they had seen from the top of the dryad's tree. They could see across to the opposite shore, and the distant edge at the lower end of the lake, but the top of the lake was lost around the curves that it made into the forest. Of course, that was the way they had to go. The long way.

The girls weren't thinking about that at the moment. Their eyeballs were stuck on the view. The lake by itself was beautiful, but that wasn't what they were admiring. Halfway between where they stood and the far shore was a small island.

On the island was a house that was too small to be a real house and too big to be a playhouse. Oversized windows lined the walls and were all open wide so that you could see through to the trees on the other shore. The house was painted turquoise, trimmed with yellow and orange. The colors stood out against the gray sky like an earthbound rainbow.

Because they were facing the fresh breeze blowing off the lake, they didn't notice the new smell behind them. Not at first. Not until it was strong enough for the odor of a winter's worth of unbrushed teeth to surround them, cutting off any hope of fresh air.

“Ugh! What is that awful smell?” Chum said, holding her nose and turning around to locate the source.

Bea's brain was stuck on the little house. She automatically put one hand over her nose and mouth, without actually noticing why.

“Hmmm,” she said. “Did you say something?”

“Eeek,” was the most that Chum was able to squeak out when she saw eight feet of brown bear, standing upright on its hind legs, looming over her.

Bea turned and sucked in a big breath that stuck in her throat with a funny sound when she found herself nose-to-bellybutton with a giant brown furball.

Their feet were still facing the lake. Their top halves got a good look at the bear for about half a second. Then, all of their bits tried to jump straight up into the air.

“Eeek, eeek, eeek, eeek, eeek,” said Chum, making pitiful little panic sounds as she rose up.

“Oo, oo, oo, oo, oo,” Bea responded as she also attempted to launch herself into the air.

Eight arms and legs went in every possible direction as their bodies desperately tried to regain equilibrium. Firm contact with the earth was finally made when they landed in the shallow water at the edge of the lake.

The bear was big and it looked even bigger from a sitting position.

“Does anybody know what time it is,” he said, looking down at them from what seemed a monstrous height. “I think I overslept.”

Time? Chum and Bea looked at each other and then at their empty wrists. Who wears watches to bed?

They both knew without a shadow of a doubt that this was a test. If they didn't tell the bear what time it was, he would eat them.

“I can't believe I slept so long,” he rambled on. “It looks like half past spring.”

“Half past spring,” Bea blurted out. “It's almost fall.”

“You mean I missed the berry season?” He swatted himself on the head with his paw. “I'm starving. Look at this place.” He cast his paw around in no particular direction.

“There are no flowers.

“No flowers, no bees.

“No bees, no fruit and no honey. There's nothing to eat and I'm sooo hungry, I could eat a bear.”

This seemed to give him an idea. The bear made a smacking noise with his mouth as he dropped down to stand on all four paws.

“Yum, yum,” he said, stepping into the water, reducing the already over-small distance between them.

Bea and Chum automatically started to slide backwards on their bottoms in the shallow water, pushing with their legs.

“Swim for it,” Chum hissed out of the side of her mouth, still moving slowly back towards deeper water in time to the forward motion of the bear.

“Bears are good swimmers,” Bea hissed back, “and you're not. Think of something else.”

“I think maybe I could do better this time,” Chum said hurriedly as the three of them danced another slow step together.

Bear steps forward, girls slide back. Bear steps forward, girls slide back, and so forth.

“Yum, yum. Smack, smack.” The bear wasn't talking to them anymore. Just looking and getting closer. The water was getting deeper fast.

“Wait!” Chum screeched out.

He stopped.

“This is Fairyland,” she hollered at him. “Nobody's allowed to eat anyone here.”

“Sorry,” he said, meekly, stepping back and slowly swinging around. “I'm still half asleep. And I'm really hungry,” he added under his breath. “Maybe I can find some bugs or something.

“I've never overslept like this before,” he said as he walked away. “I just can't understand it.

“Where is everyone, anyway?” they heard him mutter as he lumbered off into the woods.

Chum and Bea sat there, waist deep in the water not daring to move or even breathe until the bear had disappeared behind the trees.

“I thought you didn't believe this was Fairyland,” was the first thing out of Bea's mouth after she was sure the bear was well and truly gone.

“I have no idea what this place is,” Chum said. “I was just quoting Josephine. Anyway, it worked didn't it?”

“It worked all right. You were brilliant. You can be in charge of all emergencies in my life from now on.”

“Your problem, Tweedlebrain, is that you spend too much time thinking about stuff. Sometimes you just have to do it.”

## CHAPTER 11

### MERMAID INTERLUDE

Midway between the island and the shore, they could see someone in the water swimming in their direction and waving. Chum and Bea were still nervous after their encounter with the bear. They stood up quickly, backing out of the water and squinting at the shape trying to decide what it was. It looked like a girl, with long hair and narrow shoulders.

“It's probably okay,” Chum said, “but be ready to run.”

“Run where?” Bea countered. “Into the woods with the bear?”

“Just be ready, okay?”

It was a girl, looking very close to their own age. She stopped at a big flat-topped green rock sticking out of the water, near to where they were standing. Pulling herself up so that her arms and elbows rested on the rock, she smiled cheerfully and greeted them.

“Hi! My name is Nardis. What kind of fairy are you?”

Bea looked at Chum. Chum looked at Bea. It was a tough question. Bea was about to settle for honesty, but Chum, deciding that avoidance was a better strategy, spoke first.

“My name is Chum, and this is my friend Bea,” she said, nervously wringing out the hem of her T-shirt into the ankle deep water in front of them. “What kind of fairy are you?”

Nardis turned her head to indicate a point in the water just beyond her and said,

“This kind.” The business end of a big, greeny-gray fish tail reared high out of the water and splashed down hard. Any bits of Bea and Chum that had so far managed to remain dry were now soaked.

“Come on out,” said the mermaid, laughing. “The water is great. What happened to the bear?”

“He decided to leave,” Chum answered. “I don't think he liked us.”

“Too bad,” Nardis said. “Well, I do. Come for a visit. I haven't had any company since the sun went away.”

Bea and Chum looked up at the sky. It wasn't gray and overcast, they realized. It was just gray. There was no hint or promise that the sun was back there waiting for the gray to move on.

“You mean it isn't supposed to be like this?” Bea said.

“Of course not,” Nardis answered. “You're not from around here are you?”

“No,” Bea said. “We're not even fairies. We got sucked in through some kind of hole. We're looking for the Tooth Fairy. We think she can help us.”

Nardis looked them over carefully. “I've never met anyone who wasn't a fairy before. I never would have guessed. You look like regular people to me. Come and visit anyway.”



I've been so lonely since my friends stopped coming." Nobody, certainly not Bea and Chum, ever had to be asked twice to visit a mermaid.

"We would love to. Where do you live?" Bea asked.

"In the island," she answered.

"Ohhh, it's such a cute house," Chum enthused, "but I don't think I can swim that far."

"I don't live on the island. That's my guest house. I live in the island, under the water, and it's easy to get to if I help."

Bea looked at Chum again. Chum looked at Bea again. They were ready.

"What do we have to do?" Chum said.

"Just get in the water and give me a kiss," Nardis answered.

"A kiss?"

"Yes. A kiss. Don't you have kissing where you come from?"

"Am I going to turn into a frog?" asked Chum.

"Are you going to turn into a frog?" Bea asked.

"Frogs? Who's talking about frogs? I thought we were talking about kissing," said the mermaid. "Nobody is going to turn into anything."

"You go first," Chum said.

"Me," Bea squeaked, "I'm the one who doesn't talk to strangers."

"This isn't talking. It's kissing. Go," her friend said urgently.

Bea looked at the island with the little painted house waiting empty for a playmate. She looked at the smiling girl in the water with a tail where her legs should have been.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming," she said. She waded out to where the mermaid was waiting, stubbed her toe on the rock which was a lot bigger under the water than above it, leaned forward and gave Nardis a peck on the cheek.

"Not like that," Nardis said, "a real kiss." She leaned her head forward and puckered her lips. "On the mouth," she said, and repuckered.

Bea took a breath, leaned forward and gave Nardis a kiss on the lips. There was a nice, loud, smacking sound as Nardis returned the kiss, and then Bea felt a small sting in the back of her throat.

"Ouch," she said. "What's that?"

"That's just the water-filter," Nardis said. "You won't feel it in a second. Put your head under the water now and test it out."

Bea ducked under the water and stayed there. Chum watched anxiously from the shore, not sure what to do and feeling guilty that she had pushed her friend into going first.

Suddenly, Bea burst out of the water, arms outstretched, her face flushed with pleasure. "Chum, Chum," she called out. "This is so great. I can breathe under the water. You've got to do it, Chum. You'll love it. It's the best."

## CHAPTER 12

# UNDERWATER FLASHLIGHTS

Chum felt a stinging feeling in the back of her throat. Squeezing her eyes tight and pretending she was somewhere, anywhere else, she ducked under the water.

She was holding her breath, but somehow the water went in anyway. Since it didn't seem to bother her, she opened her eyes and swam over to Bea who was sitting cross-legged on the bottom, grinning her head off.

Suddenly, Chum stopped and put her hand to her chest. Bea knew from the puzzled look on her face, that even while Chum thought she was holding her breath, she could feel her chest gently rising and falling, as her lungs automatically did what they were supposed to. She knew, because it had just happened to her.

Bea waved both her hands and did a backwards somersault, all of which meant, "Isn't this great? Don't you love it?"

Chum got the message, kicked off the rock to get a strong start and zoomed ahead. This was correctly interpreted by Bea as, "Catch me if you can."

So she did, at least she tried, but the moment it took for the message to sink in had given Chum a good head start. She got her chance when Chum stopped to look back and see how far behind Bea was.

"Ha! Gotcha!," was what her right arm was saying as she waved it at Chum, after her left hand had successfully grabbed hold of Chum's ankle.

At this point, Chum grabbed Bea's available right hand, and they both sank to the muddy bottom, gesturing wildly. But this time, with both of them 'talking' at once, together with all the mud they were stirring up, the communication got a little mixed up. It didn't look like communication anymore, but some crazy underwater dance, as they both tried to make their meanings clear.

"Wouldn't it be easier if you just talked normally?" Nardis said, taking them both by surprise.

"You mean we can talk under water?" Chum said, talking underwater. Nardis scrunched up her face and raised her eyebrows, which they both correctly interpreted as "You just did, didn't you?"

"Yes...I did, I mean, I am..." Chum spoke and then clapped her hand over her mouth. Then she looked at Bea who had both hands over her mouth. "Speak, Bea. Speak to me."

Bea wiggled her eyes back and forth, then lowered her fingers and spoke. "Hi...Hello....Testing, one, two, three...It works. It works."

"Come on," Nardis said. "It's not far." She flipped her tail a couple of times and glided out towards deeper water.

"Swimming underwater is so easy," Chum said, pushing off from the bottom to follow Ardis. "I feel...I feel..."

"Fishy!" Bea said gleefully from behind, in no particular hurry to catch up. She had her legs tight together, her arms close to her side and was wiggling happily through the water like an eel.

Before they knew it, they were at the island. Chum and Bea followed Nardis into the underwater cave.

"This is really just where I sleep," Nardis said. "The whole lake is my house, but this is the best place for sleeping, because it's so soft."

"It's soft all right," Chum said. "I never saw so many pillows."

"Wait till I turn on the lights so you can see the colors." Nardis took a carved driftwood box off of a ledge cut into the rock wall and picked out a polished blue stone.

In the dim light, Bea and Chum hadn't noticed the almost transparent globes floating near the roof of the cave like big bubbles. When Nardis put the blue stone into one, pushing her hand right through the globes surface to do it, they noticed all right.

"Wow, underwater flashlights," Bea said, as the big bubble lit up the room.

"Forget the flashlights," Chum said. "Look at this place. I feel like I'm inside a painting."

The walls and ceiling were covered with tapestries decorated with underwater scenes. The pictures, woven into the heavy satin in more shades of blue and green than the girls knew existed, showed forests of waving plants growing out of the ocean floor. Swimming around and through the plants were fish in all sizes and colors; people like Nardis; and smaller people with fins on their arms and legs.

The floor was deep with bright cushions. "Boy, if I were a caterpillar," Bea said, "and this was my cocoon, I would never want to become a butterfly."

"The weaving is done by salt-water fairies from the ocean," Nardis said. "They make everything out of sea plants." She was beaming almost as brightly as the big round lights. "My friend Mycroft brought them for me. He lives in the Old Woods." She indicated the direction they had come from.

"You sure have nice friends," Chum said, sinking down onto the soft cushions. "Nardis, shouldn't we be near the surface, I mean, how long does this underwater breathing last?"

"Oh, that's all right," Nardis responded. "It only works in this lake, but it lasts forever. It means you can come and visit me whenever you want. Would you like to see my guest house?" Without waiting for an answer, she let down a trap door in the roof and swam through it.

## CHAPTER 13 EYEBALL ART

**C**hum and Bea were finally on the inside of the inviting island house. They emerged from Nardis's bedroom into a shallow pool. Like the sleeping room below, it was padded for comfort with big soft pillows.

Chum sighed and snuggled down on a kid-sized cushion near the edge where the water was shallow. She let her hair and face float on the surface, sucking in fresh air, breathing the old-fashioned way.

"This is so neat," Bea said. "I want to see everything." Leaning on the padded edge of the pool Bea lifted herself onto her elbows to look around.

She was at the center of a one-room house that seemed to have more windows than walls. The narrow spaces between the windows, were white as was the floor. White see-through curtains billowed out from the sides of all the big, open windows, giving the whole place a sort of inside/outside feeling.

"It's perfect, Nardis," Bea exclaimed. "It feels so nice to be here. It's exactly how I thought it should be, except that I didn't know how it should be until I got here."

Scattered throughout the room were oddly shaped couches and chairs. Every piece seemed to be painted a different color. The hodgepodge jumble of colors and shapes had a surprisingly restful effect.

“Hey, Chum. Sit up and look at this stuff,” said Bea. “You name a color. I bet I can find it here somewhere. This isn't a guest house. It's a furniture garden.”

Nardis pulled herself up next to Bea, their shoulders just touching.

“What's with all the weird furniture, Nardis?” Bea asked.

“This way, I've got something for everyone,” Nardis explained.

“Everyone?”

“Yeah, everyone,” Chum interjected from across the pool where she still floated on her back. “You've got to check out this ceiling, Bea. It's like a museum.”

“Just look up,” Nardis urged, seeing the confusion on Bea's face.

Bea looked. There was a mural of an outdoor scene, crowded with people. It was much more detailed than the tapestries in the underwater room and covered the entire ceiling.

Some of the people in the painting looked like they might have been humans. Others were clearly standard fairy types, like people with elf ears or wings. Then, there were those who were too small to be anything but fairies, like the man riding on a gray cat, complete with saddle. Or the group of birds sitting in a tree, only some of them weren't birds.

Bea looked at the chairs again.

“I get it,” she said. “Non-standard chairs for non-standard bodies.”

“Non-standard?” Nardis said, looking puzzled.

“She just means different,” Chum said, giving Bea a dirty look. “Different-shaped chairs for different-shaped bodies. Right Bea?” Bea blushed.

“This painting is really amazing.” Chum changed the subject without waiting for an answer. Or waiting for Nardis to realize that she had been insulted. “The people look so real.”

“Well, that's because they are real people,” Nardis said. “Everyone in the picture is a personal friend of mine. The next time you come back, there will be pictures of you, too. I'll have to find a special spot, though,” she said, thoughtfully.

“You did this yourself?” Bea said, incredulously. How do you get up there?”

“I don't,” Nardis replied. “I use my eyes.”

“You paint with your eyes?” Bea and Chum exchanged glances. ‘Time to go’, their expressions told each other. This mermaid has been cooped up in one lake just a little too long.

“All artists paint with their eyes,” Nardis said, matter-of-factly, either not noticing or pretending not to notice their expressions.

“Watch.” She rested her head on the edge of the pool so that she was facing the ceiling.

“See that tree?” she said pointing directly overhead. “The one with the yellow bird on it. I've been thinking that the trunk needs more texture. Just watch and don't interrupt. I'm not used to working with people around.”

Bea and Chum stared at the tree.

Nardis stared at the tree.

Sure enough, after about half a minute, they could see the color starting to change around the base of the trunk.

Where it had been a smooth, brownish-gray color, the browns and grays started to separate into small spots that gave the impression of high and low points. There were some new shades of gray-green and yellow-brown starting to come in as well. The whole effect was exactly what Nardis had described. More texture.

"It's a walnut tree," Nardis said. "They have very rough bark."

"Magic inside magic," Bea said softly, looking from the mural around the room and back to the mural again.

Just for a flash of a second, all the strange-looking chairs were filled with the people from the mural. Bea closed her eyes and listened to their noisy, happy chatter.

"Nardis. You're an artist. A real artist," Chum exclaimed.

"A wonderful artist," Bea added, not so softly anymore.

"I'm glad you like it," Nardis said, her face radiant with shy pride.

## CHAPTER 14 NOT A GARDEN

"How about a snack?" Nardis said, pulling over a tray floating nearby. There were peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a fruit salad. Chum and Bea were getting to like the idea of food appearing whenever they happened to be hungry.

"Oops, sorry," Chum said when a piece of her sandwich fell into the water. She reached down to retrieve it, but never got there.

"Hey. What was that?" she cried, pulling her hand out of the water.

She had touched something that wasn't a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. It didn't hurt, but there was a distinct nibbling sensation.

"It's just the Four F's," Nardis said, laughing at her.

The sandwich was moving around in the water. Underneath it, they could see four flashes of silver attacking the crumbs.

"The Four Feeders," she added seeing their baffled expressions. "They're my cleaning crew. They always show up at lunchtime. Come on under so I can introduce you.

They ducked their heads under the water. The fish stopped eating and turned to regard them silently.

"Guys. These are my new friends, Bea and Chum.

"This is Marvin, Mervin, Melvin and Stella," Nardis said to Chum and Bea. One by one, each sleek shining fish left the sandwich and swam over to the girls, gliding around their bodies like a cat rubbing her scent.

"Hi," Chum said weakly.

"Nice to meet you," Bea added. Introductions over, the Four Feeders resumed their attack on the sandwich.

"They don't talk much, do they," Chum commented drily.

"Not unless they have something to say," Nardis explained. "What do you want, they're fish. Hey, Marvin. Are you guys coming back for dinner?"

One of the fish, presumably Marvin, stopped eating long enough to speak.

“Probably,” he said and pushed back in for his fair share.

“They get pretty focused when there's food around,” Nardis said. “Speaking of which, how about another sandwich?” She surfaced and reached over for fresh sandwiches, handing them to Chum and Bea who came up after her.

They finished eating, passing the crusts on to the Four Feeders.

“Come on, Bea,” Chum said when they were done. “Let's explore.”

“Go ahead,” Nardis said approvingly, shoving the tray out of the way. It drifted over to the side of the pool.

“I'll be right here when you're ready.” She patted her full stomach with a contented sigh, stretched out and let herself sink under the water, crossing her arms over her chest and closing her eyes when she touched down onto the pillows at the bottom.

They went outside and walked around the little island. There were a few small, ornamental trees and the same wonderfully cool and deep emerald grass everywhere they put their tender, naked feet.

“Oo, I just love this grass,” Bea said, wiggling her toes. “It's sooo nice to touch.” She bent down and pushed her fingers through the blades and stuck her nose into the earth. “Mmmm, it smells nice, too.”

“Listen, Chum. It likes all the attention. I think it's purring.” She put her ear to the ground to hear better.

“You're weird, TweedleTwit, you know that,” said Chum. But she listened, too.

“Somebody's purring all right,” she said. She could just barely hear a soft, rumbling sound in the earth. It was sort of like a purr, and it did seem to be coming from the grass.

First Bea, then Chum, stretched out and rolled around like puppies, then they lay on their backs and looked up at the gray sky.

“Say, Chum,” Bea said, “don't you think that little house would look pretty with some flowers around it? I wonder why Nardis doesn't grow any.”

“Beeea,” Chum whispered hoarsely. “She can't. She's got a tail, not feet.”

“Oh, right,” Bea whispered back. “I guess it would be kind of hard to get to the weeds. Maybe she gardens with her eyes,” she said half seriously.

“What's with all the whispering?” Nardis called out from the pool.

“We were just trying to figure out how to plant a garden out here,” Chum said, rolling and leaning on her elbows to talk to Nardis. Nardis laughed.

“There's nothing more ridiculous than a mermaid out of water,” Nardis said. “I used to have a garden,” she continued, but dropping the smile. “The flower fairies took care of it for me. But when they stopped coming to visit, the flowers all died. Nothing grows now except for the grass. It's everywhere. I hate it.”

Bea rolled over on the grass to face Chum. “That doesn't make sense,” she said softly. “I thought everything in Fairyland was always perfect,”

“How do we know this is Fairyland?” Chum whispered back. “Maybe it's some other place.”

“Of course it is. Remember? Josephine told us.”

“Josephine is a cat. You believe everything your cat tells you? This could be some really bad place. We could be stuck in some really bad place.”

“Hey, Nardis,” Bea called. “What do you call this place, I mean, everything,” She swept her arm in a big half circle to show what she meant. This country. This land.”

“This is Fairyland.” Nardis sounded puzzled. “I thought you knew that.”

“We did,” said Chum. “Sort of. We just wanted to be sure. You know, Nardis,” she continued, “we probably should go soon. It’s a long way to the castle. I don’t think we can make it in one day.”

“What castle,” Nardis said.

“That’s where we’re headed,” Bea said. “We saw it from the top of a tall tree. We think that’s where the Tooth Fairy must live, and that’s who we’re looking for.”

“At least, that’s who we think we’re looking for,” Chum added, mildly embarrassed.

“We’re counting on the Tooth Fairy—” Bea said.

“—Or whoever is in charge of these things,” Chum interjected.

“—on the Tooth Fairy,” Bea insisted, “to tell us how to get back home to our families,”

“If we find her,” Chum finished glumly.

“I’ve never met the Tooth Fairy,” Nardis said, “But I know one thing about her. She’s the queen of the flower fairies. Maybe if you find her, she can tell you why my friends don’t want to visit anymore.”

## CHAPTER 15 THE GIFT

**B**ea and Chum automatically stood up and went back inside to be with Nardis. They sat down on the edge of the pool with their feet dangling in the water.

“You’ll see,” Nardis said, looking up at them. “the Tooth Fairy will know what to do. She’ll fix everything and the next time you visit, you’ll be able to meet some of my other friends.”

Bea and Chum looked at each other nervously. They both realized that they had no idea what would happen to them after they left.

“Nardis. We don’t...” Bea struggled for words. “This is not our home. We want to come back,” she said, “but we just don’t know if we can.”

“First we have to figure out how to get home,” Chum said. “Then we have to figure out how to get back. We don’t even know what we’re doing here,” she added.

Somehow, if they did manage to get home, they didn’t expect there to be a permanent hole under Bea’s pillow that would let them visit Nardis whenever they wanted. They felt uncomfortable, and a little sad.

“It was wonderful,” Chum said, absently kicking at the water with her feet. “Your lake, your island, everything. Breathing underwater is the nicest present I ever had.” Then Bea had an idea.

She lowered herself into the water next to Nardis, with a little grunt of pleasure. The water was just a shade warmer than the air, making it feel extra delicious.

“Nardis,” she said trying to speak with a formal seriousness. “Just in case we can’t come back again, I want to give you something to remember us by.” She reached into her pocket.

“I love presents,” Nardis said enthusiastically. “What is it?”

“Well, since your fairy friends aren’t here to plant flowers for you, I thought we could give you some.” Bea opened her hand. “It’s an apple seed. When it’s grown, it will have

apple blossoms. They're beautiful, and they smell even better than they look. The best part is when the flowers finish. Every little breeze stirs up the smell and makes it rain flower petals everywhere.”

“No. The best part,” Chum said, sliding into the water to join them, “is when you get to eat the apples.”

“Anyway,” Bea finished up, “I hope that it grows okay, and that it will remind you of us.”

“Friends forever?” Chum said, holding out her hand. Bea raised her arm and grasped Chum's pinky finger with her own.

“Friends forever,” Bea said as they did a pinky shake. Then they held their joined hands out to Nardis who added hers for a three-way pinky shake.

“Friends forever,” they all sang in unison.

They decided to plant the seed just outside the doorless entry where Nardis would have a good view of the tree from her pool. Chum went down to the lake to look for rocks to use as an edging to keep the grass from growing back and smothering the baby tree.

Meanwhile, Bea took a big serving spoon that Nardis gave her and dug the planting hole. She thought she heard a squeaky protest as the spoon bit into the grass, but didn't pay it any attention.

“What an interesting way to grow things,” Nardis called from the pool where she was watching them dig. “The flower fairies never do it like that. If I bury my leftover sandwiches can I grow new sandwiches?”

“It only works with seeds,” Chum called back. “Where do you get your food from, anyway?”

“I grow it. I can only grow things in the lake, but I don't need seeds. I use magic. It's a little like painting.”

“Wait a minute,” Bea asked. “How do you grow peanut butter and jelly sandwiches underwater?”

“I cheat,” Nardis said with mischievous smile. She pointed to a chest in the corner. “People bring things and I keep the leftovers in there.”

“Doesn't the bread get stale?” Chum asked.

“Not in the ‘keeper-box’.”

When the hole was ready and the seed was planted. Chum stood up to pour the water onto the little mound of dirt, then waited at attention while Bea gave the earth a final pat with her muddy fingers.

Carrying their tools like trophies, they walked together back to Nardis's guest house. Because they had their backs to the planting hole, they didn't notice the tiny shoot already pushing its way out of the ground.

“We should go,” Bea said, solemnly. “Our families are probably really worried about us.”

“I'll come with you to the top of the lake,” Nardis said. “I hope you can come back.” They swam down through the open trap door into Nardis's bedroom and out into the lake. The Four F's were hanging around near the entrance to the underground room.

“Sorry, guys,” Nardis said. “We don't have anything else to eat right now.”

“Full,” one of them said.

“Exercise,” said another.

“We're headed for the top of the lake,” Nardis told them. “You want to come along.”



“Hooray,” the first fish said. The others expressed their approval by swimming circles around the three girls.

## CHAPTER 16

### FOUR FAT FISH FLASHING, FLYING, FLOPPING, AND FEELING FABULOUS

For the first few minutes, they swam without talking, each of the three caught up in her own thoughts. Only the Four Feeders were enjoying themselves. The girls' bodies seemed to be both the obstacles and the bases in a fishy version of tag.

The third time Chum got poked in the ribs by a fish in a hurry, she finally cracked up.

“Ayyyy! I can't stand it,” Chum tried to say, snorting bubbles out of her nose from the effort of trying to talk while laughing. “Make them stop using me for a trampoline.”

At the same time, somebody tried to use Bea's armpit as a hiding place. She lost it.

“Ooo. Yeeea. Marvin. Mark. Whoever. Out, out, out. I am not a nest.” She did the underwater equivalent of jumping up and down, in a weak attempt to protect her armpits.

Unfortunately, the other three Feeders thought hide-in-the-armpits was a great new game and they all descended on poor Bea. Finally, she managed to clamp both arms tight to her side causing her to slowly sink towards the bottom.

Seeing that her friends could use a little relief, Nardis gave Bea and Chum a broad wink while she waited for one of the Four to come close to her tail.

Bea and Chum watched as a hapless fish naively approached the mermaid's bottom half. Quickly, Nardis drew back her fin then snapped it forward. The doomed fish went flying through the water.

“Fishball!” Nardis called out, holding her tail in readiness for the next victim.

“Hooray! Fishball!” the victim hollered, still spinning head over tail.

“Hooray! Fishball!” the other three yelled, lining up for turns while Chum and Bea watched.

“You know,” Bea said to Chum after a while, “I don't think I've ever heard a fish giggle.”

“Fascinating, isn't it,” Chum commented dryly. They turned their heads to follow the action as Nardis hit another flying fish.

“I wonder how far we've come,” Bea remarked.

“Shall we swim up to the surface and check?”

“Let's.” They headed toward the surface, but apparently, Fishball didn't work as well without an audience. Nardis flashed by them.

“To the surface,” she shouted. “It's leap-and-flee.” She was trailed by the Four F's, going almost as fast.

“Leap-and-flee. Leap-and-flee. Leap-and-flee,” they called after her.

Nardis hit the surface and kept going with an impressive jump. She twisted around in the air and managed to land right on the spot where the Four were about to surface. They

scattered screaming and laughing, came back, jumped out of the water all together and landed on Nardis.

“Leap-and-flee. Leap-and-flee,” they shouted. Then, with the score even, they retreated.

“Enough. Enough.”

“We're pooped.”

“Goodbye.”

“See you later.” They swam off still giggling.

“That was fun,” Nardis said after they were gone. “They're not usually quite so active. I think they were showing off for you.

“Anyway, I'm glad they're gone. It's too hard to talk when they're around.

“Look how far we've come,” she said, pointing.

“I can see the end of the lake. We must be almost halfway,” Chum said, looking back toward the island to judge the distance. They swam close to the surface, putting their heads out of the water periodically to check how far they had to go.

“You know what, Nardis?” Bea said, after a while. “You're not the only one with a list of missing people. Chum, remember the last thing that that bear said before he left?”

“Yea, he was sooo hungry. How could I ever forget?”

“No, not that. It was just before he walked into the woods. He wasn't even talking to us. He was talking to himself. It was something about all the other forest people. He seemed to think there should be more of them.”

“There were plenty of birds,” said Chum, “and we saw two rabbits. He was pretty spacey. I mean, whoever heard of a bear oversleeping a whole season?”

“Maybe he wasn't the only one who overslept,” Bea said. “Maybe he's the only one who woke up.”

“That's impossible.”

“Maybe,” Bea continued. “But it would explain why he didn't find as many bears or fairies or whatever it was he expected to find in the woods. What do you think, Nardis?” The mermaid sighed and shook her head.

“The only reason for flower fairies to hibernate like a bear,” Nardis said, “is because they are losing their magic.”

“That sounds bad,” Chum said. “Has it ever happened before?”

“Yes, it is, and no, it hasn't,” Nardis said. “I know a lot of the fairies that live in the Old Woods. Even if they just plain left, it would only be for a really important reason.

“It never occurred to me that the reason my friends weren't coming to visit might be because they weren't there anymore. I don't even want to think about that happening. Anyway. My magic still works. I'm sure there is a much simpler explanation.

“Don't forget,” Nardis said when they finally reached the top of the lake, “if the Tooth Fairy can't help you, this is at least a three-mermaid lake.”

“It's pretty scary thinking about maybe never seeing our families again,” Bea said.

“I know,” said Nardis. “But if it happens, we can be a new family.” She made a fist with the pinky sticking out, “Remember,” she said. “Friends forever.”

“Friends are one thing,” Chum said. “If we came to live with you it would be more like sisters.”

“I could get used to it,” Nardis said with a shrug and a serious expression. Then she dove under the water and disappeared.

## CHAPTER 17

# THE SNARED SLEEPERS

Nardis was gone. The formerly bright water in front of Bea became murky and gloomy. Now, Bea knew what happened to tears underwater. They absolutely ruin the view. She looked to her friend for sympathy. Chum avoided Bea's gaze, looking straight ahead, her jaw set.

It took only a few more strokes for their feet to touch bottom. As they began to walk out of the water, their exposed heads and shoulders were caught by the sudden drenching spray that Nardis made leaping like a dolphin, out of the water behind them.

"I would looove to get used to it," she said a huge smile plastered on her face.

"Hey, Nardis," Chum said, grinning back. "Do you know what happens to humans who spend too much time in the bathtub?"

"They turn into mermaids, like me?"

"Not quite," Chum said. "They turn into prunemaids."

"Yeah," Bea added, "We could join a circus. Come and see Nardis the mermaid and her two wrinkled sisters."

"No. Really." Nardis looked worried. "It wouldn't happen. You won't wrinkle up. Not with the air filter. You'll be fine." Then she saw their silly snarky smiles and realized that they were teasing her back.

"Seriously," she said. "I do hope you get back to your families. I'm sure you'll find the Tooth Fairy and everything will be okay. I bet she even knows how to help me as well. Tell her how lonely it is without anyone to talk to."

"We will, Nardis. We won't forget," Bea said, wrapping her arms around her new friend.

"You'll see," said Nardis, "it will all work out for the best. Next time you come you can bring your parents. Now hurry up and find the Tooth Fairy. I'm counting on you."

Nardis watched them out of sight. Chum and Bea finally stopped turning back to wave and took a long hard look at where they were going.

"I don't think we have to worry about getting lost, do you Chum?" They were looking straight ahead at the castle. It was a depressing view. Nothing but an occasional tree, lots of grass and a tiny castle on the horizon.

"Nope."

"There's absolutely nothing between us and the castle," Bea said. "No hills, no houses. It's like, right there."

"Right."

"Maybe the people who live there are really small. You know, like Nardis' flower fairies. So maybe the castle is actually much smaller than we think," Bea speculated.

"I don't think so."

"You think it's a regular-size castle, don't you?"

"Yep."

"You think that it looks so small because it is really far away, don't you?"

“No,” Chum said slowly. “I think it's really, really far away.”

“Oh, Chum,” Bea wailed, “it's going to take us forever to get there. We'll never find the Tooth Fairy.”

“Look. Look how far we walked while we were talking. We're already closer.”

“Cut it out, Chum.” She threw herself down on the grass. “I'm tired from all that swimming. I want a nap.”

“You can't do that, Bea. Your parents will worry if we don't get home soon.”

“Where have you been, TweedleBrain?” Bea said. “We already weren't there for breakfast and lunch. They're worried. I'm having a nap. Now.” She closed her eyes and was instantly asleep.

“Wake up. Wake up, TweedleBea.” Chum shook her and then shook her again harder. “Don't go to sleep without me. I'm scared.” Chum shook and shook and after about a minute, Bea opened her eyes, half awake, half asleep, she said,

“Oh, Chum, I'm having the nicest dream. The grass is singing me a lullaby. Do come.” Then her eyes shut down and she was gone again.

Chum had her arms around Bea and was trying to pull her up to a sitting position, when she noticed how hard it was to keep her own head upright. It was as if she didn't have any muscles in her neck. Also, her eyelids were displaying a distinct lack of muscle tone and kept drooping downwards.

She didn't even notice the moment that she actually fell asleep. She certainly didn't notice the grass growing taller and closer, cradling her with its nearness.

## CHAPTER 18 THE WATCHER

**I**t could have been a minute or an hour later that Bea's dream changed and she decided to wake up. In her dream, there was still singing. Now it was a song about the light. How soft it was. How gentle. How just right it was with no hot burning. Even though she was asleep, it made Bea think about the gray sky without any sun. She dreamed about a world where the sun never shone.

It scared her right awake. Jerking herself upright, Bea pulled at the new grass plants that almost covered her ankles. They tore away with a low hissing sound. Staaaaayyyysleeeeeppp.

“Chum. Wake up. This is a trap. Somebody doesn't want us to get to the castle. I just know it. It has something to do with the sun being gone. Listen to me, Chum. This is important. It means we've got to get to the castle.”

Chum had this silly smile on her face. She closed her eyes a little tighter. Bea put her hands under Chum's armpits and started to drag her in the direction they needed to go. She noticed a rocky outcrop, just a little further ahead.

“I'll give her a bed she won't want to sleep on,” Bea thought.

It took nearly ten minutes for Bea to drag Chum to the rocks. It took two seconds for Chum to wake up after they got there.

“Ouch. Hey. What are you doing? Let go.”

“Are you awake?”

“I'm awake. I'm awake. Stop, already. Couldn't you just tap me on the shoulder or something?”

“I did all that. I tapped, I shook, I screamed. Nothing worked. At least, almost nothing.” She grinned. “These rocks seemed to work okay.”

Then Chum remembered how scared she had been when Bea had gone to sleep so abruptly, and wouldn't wake up.

“Bea, what's happening?”

“There's something wrong with this place. It has to do with the gray sky. Remember how Nardis said that her friends stopped coming to visit when the sun stopped shining?”

“I think there's someone else here. Someone who doesn't want the sun to shine. Someone who doesn't want us to get to that castle. They put a spell on us to make us go to sleep.”

“I think you're right, TweedleTwit. We've got to figure out a way to get there without going to sleep.” They looked towards the castle. It was appallingly distant. It would take days, not hours, to get there.

“Listen, Bea, this is serious. We've got to find someone who can give us a ride.”

The gently rolling landscape was empty as far as they could see. There was a small group of trees about a mile away and more trees scattered here and there beyond them, but nothing else. No roads, and no houses.

There was also a young oak, less than two stories high, growing at the far edge of the rocks they were standing on. Bea had an idea. She didn't like it very much, but it was the only thing she could think of. She looked at the tree and then at Chum. Chum looked at Bea and then at the tree.

“Well, at least it's an easy tree to climb,” Chum said, shrugging her shoulders. “Maybe you'd better talk to it first. Just in case.”

They walked over to the tree. The closer they got, the more they felt like the tree was watching them.

“It's like the tree has eyes or something,” Chum said in answer to what both of them were thinking.

“Yeah,” Bea said. “It sort of prickles in your back. The tree that helped us didn't make me feel this way and that one really did have eyes.”

They looked up and searched the branches. Yellow eyes blinked closed, making the shadowy figure they belonged to almost invisible while it drew back deeper into the tree. They found nothing to explain their feeling.

“Talk!” Chum said, nervously poking her friend with her elbow. Bea took a breath, and started.

“Oh, tree,” she said, facing the tree. “We need to find people who can help us get to that castle.” She pointed in the general direction of the castle.

“Will you cut it out with that ‘Ohh, tre-ee’ business?” Chum said.

“You know a better way to talk to a tree, you do it,” Bea hissed back. Chum just tightened her lips and didn't say anything, so Bea continued.

“We want to climb up in your branches to get a better view and see which is the best way to go,” she said, keeping the same formal tone that was so irritating to Chum. “We will be very careful not to hurt you or break any of your branches.” They waited for a minute, and then started to walk up to the tree.

“I think the roads and houses we saw from the other tree were more over that way,” Chum said, pointing in a direction that was at a right angle from the castle. “As long as we can keep the castle in sight, we should be okay.”

“Stop.” Bea spoke quietly and urgently. “There's something wrong with that tree. Don't go any closer.”

As they watched, the trunk of the tree began to change shape.

“It's another dryad,” Chum whispered. They just stood there and watched, unable to decide on any other course of action.

“Bea!” Chum whispered out of the side of her mouth without taking her eyes off the tree.

“What?” Bea whispered back, also not moving her gaze from the tree.

“Are they all, you know, friendly? Like the other one?”

“How should I know?” As they watched, the dryad became more distinct from the tree. A head formed around the eyes that were already watching them.

“It looks just like the other one.” Chum said. “Is it the same one? Can you tell?” Chum's body was tensed. She had one foot behind her ready to swivel around and run as fast as she could back toward the safety of the lake.

“I don't know,” Bea grumbled nervously. Stop asking stupid questions.”

## CHAPTER 19 EARTH FOLDING

**W**ith a series of small jerking motions, the dryad continued to emerge from its tree. Its head, one arm complete with shoulder, and one leg up to the knee were out. It continued pulling and tugging for a while, but no more dryad showed up.

There was the head, neck, shoulder, and right arm, all in one piece and then there was the leg, the right, one, dangling in the air, long gray toes delicately reaching for the ground, but not quite making it.

With a resigned nod to the girls, the dryad reached up with its one arm and broke off a low-hanging branch. Bea and Chum could see the dryad wince, as the branch snapped. The dryad held out its broken limb and waited.

Chum nudged Bea with her shoulder. “It wants us to take the branch,” she said. When Bea didn't move, she nudged her again.

“It's your turn,” Bea hissed. “Go.”

“You know,” Chum whispered, “this could be the someone who put the sleep spell on us.”

“It is not like it's going anywhere real soon,” Bea whispered back. “It looks pretty helpless.”

“Maybe that's why it wants us to come to it. To catch us.”

The dryad pointed the branch at the castle and then at Chum and Bea, waiting expectantly.

“We do the pillow thing,” Chum said. “Agreed?”

“The pillow thing?”

“We do it together, like we did when we looked for Josephine under your pillow. Remember?”

“Oh, right. Agreed.”

Shoulder squeezed against shoulder, as together as they could get, Bea and Chum stepped forward one little step and then two more equally tiny ones.

“That's close enough, Bea,” Chum said. “Lean.” Without taking their eyes off the half-dryad, they bent forward from the waist and reached out as far as they could, trying to make the distance without actually getting any closer. Almost, but not quite. They went up on tiptoes. The dryad rolled the branch into their outstretched fingers.

“Retreat. retreat. retreat,” Chum intoned. They nearly fell over each other trying to hang onto the branch while they backed up.

The oak bough was about four feet long, slim and not too heavy, but with a solid feel to it. Smaller branchlets and twigs split off the narrow end, each with a cluster of oak leaves.

Once it was in their hands, the dryad made a little shooing motion with its hand, then pointed to the castle again. Bea let go of her end of the branch and spoke.

“Oh, dryad,” she began. “Are you trying to help us get to the castle? Is that what this branch is for?” The dryad nodded and smiled.

“Don't be stupid, Bea. It would say that no matter what. Maybe this is a sleepstick. To make us go to sleep again.”

“I don't feel sleepy.”

“Well, it's a heavy stick, anyway,” Chum said. Without Bea holding the other end, it felt awkward. She let the larger end sit on the ground while she held the upper, like a walking stick.

The moment the stick touched the ground, something very big happened. Only it happened so noiselessly, they almost didn't notice.

“Oh, my god!” Bea saw it first. “Chum, look.”

Chum looked, and gasped. “Oh, my god,” she echoed, letting go of the stick. It remained upright seeming to have fastened itself to the ground.

Not six feet in front of them was the small group of trees that only moments before had looked as if they were about a mile away. At their feet was a two-foot wide gap in the ground where there had not been one before.

They were in shock, looking stupidly from the tree to its branch stuck in the ground, and back again. They didn't notice a small figure jump lightly down from the tree. It moved so quietly and quickly that they never saw it leap easily over the gap and disappear into the stand of trees, now easily identified as birch.

“The earth...the ground...” Bea stuttered. It's...it's...folded.” They looked back at the dryad, who was still smiling.

“How can you just stand there and grin?” Chum yelled at the dryad. She was shaking all over. “Can't you see what just happened? Look at the ground. It's all folded up underneath itself. It's not supposed to do that. This is serious.”

Still smiling, the dryad made a shooing motion again and pointed to the other side of the gap. Automatically, they stepped over it so that they were on the opposite side of folded-up land from the dryad.

Then the dryad pointed to the stick, stuck in the earth at the spot where they had been standing before they stepped across the narrow crevasse. The girls understood that it wanted them to retrieve the stick. Numbly obedient, Bea reached out and picked it up.

The moment the branch left the ground, smoothly, noiselessly, without a tremor, the earth began to unfold. Seconds later, Chum and Bea were looking at the top of the dryad's oak tree in the distance. It was as if nothing had ever happened.

Only they had gone a mile in one step.

"I think I need to sit down," Bea said, still shaking.

"Don't do that. You might fall asleep again," Chum said.

"That sounds pretty good to me right now."

"Yeah, if you want to sleep for a hundred years, it sounds great."

"Okay, okay," Bea said, starting to lower the stick to the ground for a little support.

"Stop! Don't do that!" Chum grabbed the lower end and held it up. Realizing what she had almost just done, Bea started to shake even more. Chum wasn't exactly rock-steady, either.

"You're right, Bea," Chum agreed. "We have to sit." She sat. Bea followed suit, still holding up her end of the stick.

They didn't say much, but just sat there, catching their breath, the dryad's branch across their laps. Not far off was a house, that had been hidden from their view by a dip in the land before the earth had folded up to meet them.

It was not much bigger than Nardis' guest house and built of knotty pine. The window frames and the front door were painted blue. To the right of the door and under one of the windows was a bench made of tree branches tied together. A stepping stone path led from a white picket gate to the entrance, inviting the passerby to stop and visit.

Discussion was not necessary, as by mutual agreement they got up and walked to the house. They weren't sure what to do with the dryad's amazing earth folding branch. Finally, they decided that since nothing had happened when it rested on their laps, that the the bench would probably make a good substitute. Carefully, they tested their theory. It worked. They left the branch on the bench and knocked on the blue door.

## CHAPTER 20 NO BUGS

The door swung open on its hinges with a creak that sounded louder than it was in the still gray air. "This is like a ghost story," Chum whispered.

"Only we're not looking for ghosts, we're looking for fairies," Bea whispered back. She knocked again.

"Stop knocking, Bea. There's nobody here." They were looking into a one-room cottage painted pale yellow and filled with handmade wooden furniture including a high backed rocking chair in front of the fireplace. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it? I mean, there's nowhere else someone could be."

"Maybe they're in the bathroom," Bea said.

"There's the bathroom." Chum pointed to the pot under the bed.

"Oh."



“But you're right. There's probably an outhouse out back. Let's look,” Chum said. There was an outhouse, and it was empty.

“Whoever lives here is probably at work, and they just forgot to lock the door,” Chum said.

“I suppose,” Bea agreed reluctantly.

“Let's go,” Chum said. “Where there's one house, there will be others.” Chum and Bea headed back towards the stand of trees, looking around for more houses.

“These trees are different from the ones in the forest,” Bea said, as they got closer to the grove.

“Yeah, there's not as many of them,” Chum joked.

“No, they're creepier.”

“Creepier than that forest? You have got to be kidding.”

“I'm not, doesn't it feel like—”

“—Oh, that. I was trying to ignore that,” Chum said.

These trees were watching them, too. At least, that's what it felt like to both girls.

“Let's look more over this way,” Bea said, turning to face a direction with no trees in sight.

Chum gave the grove one last hard look, scouring the branches with her eyes before she turned to her friend.

“Okay. Let's go.”

Yellow eyes watched the pair, waiting until they were a little further away, and then jumped noiselessly down from the tree, padding along softly behind them, just out of sight.

In the next half hour, they found four more houses, all standing empty. One had a wide door, but the roof was so low they had to bend over almost double to fit inside. All the furniture was short and wide too. Another was too small to get into at all, but they could see through the window that it was just as empty as the others.

As they were leaving the last house, Bea took a good look around outside. Stuck in the lawn behind the house, she saw plant markers, standing in neat rows, each with the name of a different vegetable. There were tomato cages and bean poles, but no tomatoes and no beans, just grass. There was another place near the front door, bordered with stones, that looked like the perfect spot for a flower garden, only there weren't any flowers. Just more grass.

“I don't mind the houses being empty,” Bea said. “But this dead garden gives me the creeps. It looks like it was deserted a long time ago.”

“The insides of the houses would be covered with dust if they had been abandoned for a while,” Chum said.

“Yeah. That's what gives me the creeps.”

“Maybe the grass just grows really fast around here,” Chum joked.

“Maybe,” Bea answered, remembering how she had to pull the grass away from her ankles and shivering. “But I don't think the people who live here just happen to be out for the day. I think they're gone. Just like the bear said.”

“Cut it out, Bea. You're getting carried away again,” Chum complained. “This is Fairyland, isn't it? At least that's what everyone's been telling us. They don't need to grow food. Nardis sure didn't need to. People around here probably just garden for fun. Maybe

whoever lives here got bored growing stuff the hard way. They gave it up and then planted grass to get rid of the mess. People do that all the time.”

“Whatever.” Bea sighed and shook her head. “There's nobody here now. Let's just go.”

They started walking back to the first house near the birch grove and the bench where they had left the dryad's earth folding branch. Bea was feeling abused and didn't speak. Chum didn't notice Bea's hurt feelings. She was deep in thought.

“There is something else, now that you mention it,” Chum said, when she was ready. They were walking briskly, Chum, keeping her stride a little shorter so that they stayed side by side. The trees were just ahead of them, now, and the house with the blue door a little beyond that. “Did you notice the bugs?”

“What bugs? I didn't see any bugs.”

“Exactly. Neither did I. What about birds? Have you seen any birds? Any squirrels, chipmunks, anything?”

“No, but this is Fairyland. Maybe they just don't have that stuff here,” Bea reasoned. “Anyway, we're not looking for bugs. We're looking for people. Any people.”

“There were plenty of bugs in the woods,” Chum continued. “We saw lots of birds and those two rabbits. And what about the fish in the lake.”

“So. Maybe the bugs just went to work with everybody else,” Bea said in exasperation.

“If you're a bug, this *is* where you work, TweedleTwit,” Chum said. “There should be animals here, too, like in the woods.”

“So, what are you saying, here, Chum.”

“I'm saying that maybe I agree with you. Maybe Nardis was wrong. That the real reason nobody comes to visit her is because there's no one left to do any visiting. That something serious and major is going on here.”

## CHAPTER 21 YELLOW EYES

“**I** think somebody wants this place empty,” Bea elaborated as they walked. “They did something that made all the people go away.”

“And the bugs. Don't forget the bugs.”

“How can you joke,” said Bea. “You always do this.”

“And you don't?” Chum countered.

“Well, maybe once in a while, but not now. This is serious. Whoever wants this place empty, has to be the same somebody who doesn't want us to get to that castle.”

“Yeah,” Chum said. “Somebody who's really into grass, like a sheep farmer. Or maybe a golf course owner. Maybe they want to start a golf course for fairies.”

“Stop, already. What is it with you and golf courses?” Bea said.

“It's like I said,” Chum argued. “If this is Fairyland. Then everyone here is a fairy. Right? When we find them they'll be like Nardis, all sweet and nice. Isn't that what it means to be a fairy? Like your tooth fairy friend who's going to get us out of this mess. There's no bad guy here, Bea. What we're looking at is some kind of natural disaster.”

Bea gave Chum a long hard look. "I don't know about good guys and bad guys, but I don't think you will *ever* meet anyone else like Nardis. Not in Fairyland, not in any land."

"It doesn't matter," Chum countered. "If there are any people left, they'll be holed up in that castle." They had reached the house with the blue door. The branch was just as they had left it.

"We use the stick again," Bea said simply.

"Agreed," Chum responded. "Let's do it,"

Nervous, and standing as close to each other as they could, they gingerly started to pick up the stick.

"Ouch. Get off of my foot. You're standing on me," Chum said.

"Sorry," said Bea. "Maybe we should hold hands or something."

"Good idea."

Putting their arms around each other's waists and holding the stick with their outside hands, Bea and Chum faced the castle. Bending slightly forward from the waist, they let the thick end touch the ground, as far from themselves as they could reach.

Then, as they watched, it happened again. It was fast, and it was quiet.

They saw the earth in front of the stick wrinkle up into a giant fold, until it was all inside a two-foot wide crack. Stepping over the gap, they retrieved the stick. Everything opened up and smoothed out again, just the way it had been, with no noise and no fuss.

"Awesome," Chum finally said when it was all over.

"Yeah," Bea agreed, lacking a suitable adjective for the occasion.

"Let's do it again," Chum said, this time with marked enthusiasm.

"Ready when you are, Captain," Bea said, saluting smartly.

They did it again, and again, and again. And each time, a small shadow crossed over the folded earth, just ahead of them and just out of their sight. This happened each time. Except for the last.

That time, yellow eyes was in mid leap, hanging in the air when Bea and Chum pulled the stick out of the ground. And that was why, just when Bea and Chum were starting to get the hang of the whole thing, they heard a terrific yowling noise.

Bea was so startled, she jumped right off the ground, dropping her end of the stick. Chum jumped, just a second behind Bea, tossing her end into the air before she dropped it. For a moment, the magic stick wobbled unevenly in the air. Then the thick end moved a little lower and headed for the ground, right between the two girls.

One of them was about to become a sandwich.

"Get it, Bea," Chum shrieked, grabbing for the stick, herself.

"Don't let it touch the ground," Bea cried. She reached desperately with all ten thumbs, managing only to shove Chum away. For a moment, it seemed that their shaking hands were combining to push it closer to the ground.

Chum dropped to the ground. "Got it," she called. She caught the heavy end less than an inch from the earth, sending the thin end spiraling down. Bea, grabbed it in midair, then fell, stick and all, landing hard on her bottom.

The noise continued. It was long and loud. The moment one yowl finished, another started up, until it became one long howl like an ambulance siren.

They turned toward the sound. At first, they could see nothing. Then a moving speck appeared, growing larger as they watched. They couldn't take their eyes off it, fascinated and frightened at the same time as it continued to grow and take shape.

"It's some kind of animal." Bea had to talk loudly to be heard above the howling. "Look. It has four feet."

Chum squinted and could just make out four or five legs. "A tail, it has a tail," she said.

"Oh, Chum. I think it's some kind of cat. I think it's a tiger. Let's use the stick. Let's get out of here." She started to rise.

"No. Wait," Chum said, putting her hand on Bea's shoulder to hold her back. "It's closer than it looks. It's not a tiger. It's a real cat."

Bea looked harder. "That's not a cat. It's Josephine!"

Bea and Chum left the stick on the ground and began running towards the approaching figure. As soon as they started to move, the howling stopped. They could see her more clearly now. It *was* Josephine.

Now that everyone was moving in the right direction, it took only another minute for them all to converge. Josephine threw herself down at their feet, panting heavily.

"I'm...a cat...not...a long-distance runner," she gasped out between breaths.

"Oh, Josephine. Are you all right?" Bea knelt down and began stroking her fur.

"You were the eyes, weren't you?" she said. "You were stalking us." She turned to Chum. "She does it all the time at home. I never know when I'm going to get pounced on."

"It's what I do," said the cat, lifting her head to lick at the fur on her neck.

Chum ignored her. "We left the magic stick back there," Chum said. "We should go and get it."

But Josephine was not to be ignored. "I don't feel like walking," she said. "Carry me."

Bea picked Josephine up gently, putting the cat over her shoulder.

"Hold my tush," Josephine said, using her back claws just enough to make the point.

"Okay, okay. Watch those claws, will you?" Bea put her hand more firmly under the cat to support the weight. "Is that okay now?"

Josephine did not deign to answer, but turned her head slightly so she could see ahead and began to purr softly to indicate that she was pleased.

"Have you ever noticed," Chum said as they walked, "how cats always make you feel like they're doing you a favor just by letting you do what they want?"

"My mother always told me," Josephine hissed at Chum, "that humans make lousy servants. And the ones that are half-way decent," she continued, "'ooshy-goo' all over you."

They reached the earth-folding stick and Bea carefully put the cat on the ground. As soon as her feet touched earth, Josephine sat down, put one back leg in the air and twisted herself in half to attend to her rear end. She used her tongue to fluff the uncomfortably crunched-up fur between her legs.

"That rabbit hole is still in your bed," she said, when she finally finished, "and it's making me nervous. I came to see what was taking you so long. Besides, your parents are still asleep and there's no one to feed me. You should stop playing around and come home."

"We're not playing around." Bea said. "We have been trying to find the way home all day."

"Well, you should hurry up," Josephine said. "I don't like it here,"

"We already know that," said Chum.

“No, I don't like the way it is *now*. Something is wrong. I can't feel enough magic. Something is happening to the magic.”

## CHAPTER 22

### NOT ENOUGH MAGIC

“**W**hat do you mean?” Bea asked Josephine. “How do you know there's something wrong with the magic? Are you a fairy, too? Is that why you can talk to us? Is that how you know about magic stuff?” “I'm not a fairy, and I'm not not a fairy,” she answered. “I'm a cat.”

“We already know that,” Chum said, exasperated.

“No, you don't. You don't know what it means to be a cat,” Josephine said. “All cats are halfandhalf. Half magic and half not magic.”

“Wow,” Bea said. “I didn't know that. What about dogs? Are they part-magic too?”

“Dogs? Don't be stupid.”

“How about mice?”

“No.”

“Sheep?”

“No.”

“Anything?”

“No, nothing. Just cats. We are unique. Everything else is either magic, or it isn't. Like your tree friend,” she said indicating the earth-folding stick with her eyes.

“So, which half of you is magic?” Chum asked. “The front half or the back half?”

Slowly and deliberately, Josephine turned around and put her tail straight up in the air, giving Chum a clear view of her non-speaking end.

“For a reasonably okay human,” Josephine said to Bea, “you have very poor taste in friends. For your information,” she said, still speaking only to Bea, “all of me is half magic.”

“What kind of magic can you do?” Bea asked.

“I don't *do* magic, I *am* magic. I get to live in both worlds. I can come here whenever I want.”

“Big deal,” Chum said to Josephine's rear end. “You hate it here.”

Josephine didn't say anything, but her tail got a little stiffer.

“I had the worst time getting back into this place,” she said. “I just came to tell you that it's time to come home. If you two know what's good for you, you'll get out of here fast. I don't know why the magic is draining away but if you don't leave soon, you won't leave at all.”

“I think I'll go sit on your father's chest and see if I can't stare him awake.” She turned and started to walk away.

“Wait a minute,” Bea said. “Don't pull that disappearing act on us again. Why can't you take us back with you?”

“Tsk tsk, a little slow on the uptake, aren't we? I told you. I'm half magic. You aren't. Do you really think you could travel with me?”

“Well, then, how can we get back?” Chum asked. “At least tell us what we're supposed to do.”

“How should I know? I'm a cat, not a travel agency for humans. Practically anybody here should be able to help you. Ask anyone. One of the elves or the flower fairies could probably do it. If they have any magic left to do it with. So you had better stop wasting time exploring and get to it.” She started walking.

“Just what do you think we have been exploring for, anyway?” Chum said to her rear end. “Can't you see there's nobody here? There aren't any elves and there aren't any flower fairies.”

“We did meet a mermaid.” Bea said. “Would she know what to do?”

“Mermaids are dumb,” Josephine said. “They don't know anything. They spend all their time under the water. Find an elf or something.”

“What about the Tooth Fairy? Could she help us?”

“I'm sure she could. She's probably the person who got you into this mess in the first place. But there are lots of people who can help you. This place is usually teeming with fairies. Try the castle. There are bound to be plenty of people there.

“Only hurry,” she added. “I like sleeping on your feet at night. Your parents are too lumpy.”

Josephine walked a little further, and `poofed'.

“Why couldn't she do that the last time?” Chum asked. Bea shrugged.

“If I ever see her again, I'll ask her.”

“Come on, Bea,” Chum said, gritting her teeth. “She's gone. Let's go. The sooner we get to that castle the better. And remind me never to get a cat for a pet.”

She was already holding one end of the stick. Bea took the other end and they wrapped their arms around each other, while together they lowered the fat end to the ground in front of them.

They didn't bother to look for any more houses, but kept folding and unfolding, until at last, they arrived at the castle.

## CHAPTER 23 SINGING GRASS

**B**ea and Chum were standing at the bottom of a small hill. The castle was at the top, outlined against the gray sky, which was why they had been able to see it so well from far away.

By now, the thrill of taking all those giant steps had softened their moods. Their anxiety had been replaced by anticipation.

“Come on, Bea. Let's go find your Tooth Fairy.” Chum put the traveling stick over her shoulder. They raced up the hill, without stopping until they reached the castle gates.

“Chum?” Bea asked when they were at the top. “What should we do with the stick? We can't bring it inside, it's too dangerous. We could accidentally fold up the entire castle.”

“An inside-out castle?” Chum said with a smirk. “It’s too ridiculous to be possible. But I guess we’d better leave it out here, just in case.” She put the stick carefully on the ground next to the castle wall.

“We can’t leave it here,” Bea worried. “What if somebody finds it while we’re inside?”

“We should be so lucky,” Chum said.

“Lucky for what?”

“Lucky enough for there to be somebody here to find the damn thing. Come on,” she said. “We’re here. This is The Castle. This is where everyone is holed up. Even Josephine thought it would be loaded with people.”

Leaving the traveling stick behind, they went through the gates into the castle courtyard. Like everywhere else they had been, the courtyard itself was completely grassed over. But they were not prepared to see grass growing right up the walls. It covered almost everything, reaching nearly to the second-story windows.

“Hey, Bea. Look. It’s grass with a personality disorder. It thinks it’s ivy.”

Bea smiled. “I wonder how it does that?”

The whole lower wall of the castle started moving. Beginning at the top, the grass started to ripple. The wave broadened, encompassing more and more grass, moving down the wall and across the courtyard to where they were standing.

There was also a singing, that they could almost but not quite hear. It seemed to follow the rhythm of the waving grass.

“Weeeelllcooomeeeeweeelllcooomeeetoomyyycaaasstille.”

“Look at that stuff move,” Chum said. She licked a finger and put it up in the air. “There’s no wind. I bet it’s full of bugs.”

“Eiyuu!” Bea hopped on one bare foot and then the other.

“That must be the entrance over there,” Chum said, pointing to the wide steps on the other side of the courtyard. At the top was an outline in the grass resembling a pair of giant doors.

They tiptoed across the courtyard, watching for bugs, and climbed the grass-carpeted steps to the grass covered, ceiling-high double doors.

“Help me find the handles, Chum.”

“Here they are.” Chum said. “But that grass is awfully thick. I don’t know if we can open the doors.”

They each took a handle, prepared to work hard to break the grass’s hold.

“One, two three, pull,” Bea said. They pulled hard and nearly fell over backwards. The handles turned easily and the doors swung open smoothly and effortlessly.

They were standing at the top of a grand staircase, overlooking a ballroom. It was a beautiful room, crystal chandeliers, pink marble floors, velvet-covered chairs and couches, the whole bit. It was also empty, as they had known it would be. Bea and Chum didn’t even bother to call out, but stood looking out sadly out over the lovely room. Behind them the grass began inching forward over the threshold and into the castle.

“I know! I know!” Bea’s face lit up excitedly. “I know what happened to all the people!”

## CHAPTER 24

### THE TOWER ROOM

"This," Bea announced with considerable pride of accomplishment, "is Sleeping Beauty's Castle."

"Right," said Chum, pulling the big doors closed hard enough to make them slam, "and this is really Disney World. Look, here comes Mickey. Come on, Bea," Chum said. "Get serious."

"I am serious, and I don't need your sarcasm. It explains everything. Even the sun being missing."

"This had better be good, TweedleTwit."

"Listen, Mush-for-brains. When Sleeping Beauty was put under a sleeping spell, everyone else was, too. Just like in the story. Even the sun is sort of sleeping. That's why we can't see it.

"That's why all this grass is here, too. Don't you remember how, in the story, a magic forest grew around the castle? Look at how the grass is covering everything up. In a hundred years, this will look like a hill. Nobody will know it's really a castle."

"That's great, Bea. Now we can go tell Nardis that all she has to do is wait one hundred years for some prince to come and everyone will wake up. And what about the lake and the forest? Everyone was awake there."

"Maybe the sleeping magic didn't reach that far. Look at how that sleeping spell didn't start working on us until after we left the lake," Bea argued. "Maybe that's what Josephine felt when she said that the magic was disappearing. If everyone is asleep, their magic is, too."

"Hmmm, you're starting to make some kind of sense, TweedleBrain. Well, we have to search this place for the Tooth Fairy, anyway. We might as well look for Sleeping Beauty as well."

They started in the ballroom at the bottom, and worked their way up, paying special attention to all the bedrooms, checking each bed for sleepers.

The furniture in the castle came in all the different shapes and sizes they had seen on Nardis's island. But the majority of it looked like scaled-down human furniture.

"You're looking for the wrong princess, Bea," Chum joked after they had been through the tenth bedroom filled with small furniture. "This isn't Sleeping Beauty's Castle, this is where the Seven Dwarves live."

"Well, we'll just have to add Snow White to the list of people we're already looking for," Bea said.

Chum had to look at her twice to make sure she was joking.

One of the rooms on the ground floor was green. It was covered, floor, walls, and ceiling with grass. Even the furniture was invisible under a layer of green.

"Look," Bea said. "Someone left a window open. That's how it got in."

Chum shuddered. "I don't like this room. Grass belongs outside. Let's get out of here." They closed the door tightly behind them to keep the grass from spreading further into the castle.

There were two more grass filled rooms on the ground floor, each with a window open to the outside. Bea and Chum closed both doors tightly behind them. Once they got to the



upper floors, they began to feel more comfortable, but they were careful to shut any open windows they found.

Eventually, they reached the top of the stairs. There was a small landing with two wooden doors opposite each other. One of them, when they opened it, led out to the roof. The other opened onto a long, narrow flight of circular stairs.

“The tower,” they exclaimed together.

“The traditional resting place for Sleeping Beauty, I might add,” said Bea.

“Or sleeping Tooth Fairies,” giggled Chum.

They went up the stairs with mounting anticipation. When they got to the top, there was another door that could only lead into the tower room. They opened it and squeezed through together, both wanting to be first.

## CHAPTER 25 THIS TIME AN ORANGE TREE

“There's no one here,” Chum wailed.

Bea looked at her skeptically. “I thought you didn't believe me,” she said.

“I didn't. But I wanted to. This castle is really empty, just like everywhere else we've been. We'll never find the Tooth Fairy. We'll never find anybody. I want to go home. I want my mom.” She sank down onto the floor and started to cry.

“Don't cry, TweedleChum. I know what it is. This must be the Beast's castle in Beauty and the Beast. That means that everyone is invisible like they were in the story. Now that we know what to look for, I'm sure we'll find someone who can help us soon.”

“Oh, no. No more fairytales. I never want to hear another fairytale as long as I live.” Chum put her head on her knees, covered everything with her arms and wailed louder.

Bea wandered over to one of the windows. The view was magnificent. She could see all the way to Nardis' lake from here. It looked especially beautiful with the sun shining on the water like that...

“Chum!Chum!”

Chum heard the nervous excitement in Bea's voice and looked up.

“Chum. I think you better come over here and look at this.”

Chum got up slowly, still sniffing, and walked over to the window. The view was indeed beautiful.

“Okay,” she said. “It's a great view, but...”

Then she noticed. The sky was still an even, uniform gray. Except for one place. Right over the lake. There was a broad band of sunshine directly over Nardis' island. It was as if an island-sized hole had opened up in the gray, just at that spot.

“I think we had better go back to the lake,” was what Chum said when she got her voice back.

“Double agreed,” Bea said quietly.

It took a while to get out of the castle. There were a lot of stairs. When they finally stepped off the last stone step onto the courtyard, Chum wiggled her toes in the grass.

“You know, this stuff is really nice,” Chum said, nodding towards the ground, “but I'm starting to agree with Nardis. I think I could get really tired of nothing but grass. It's like a giant golf course. Actually, I hate golf.”

“Listen, Chum.” Bea grinned at her. “It didn't like that remark. It's hissing at you.” Chum put her ear to the ground and could hear a faint sound like steam in a kettle.

“Hissssssseeeeeppppppsssss,” came the sound.

“Sure sounds like it. This must be sensitive-grass.” Chum grinned back. “We had better hurry,” she said, shaking her head to fight off a yawn. “I think that sleep-spell is still working.” She was almost overcome by an overwhelming desire to curl up on the grass and go to sleep again.

Bea took a long look around the courtyard and the castle. “You know, Chum,” she began, “everything here is so beautiful, but it's sort of sad, too. Sort of sad and lonely.”

“I don't suppose that the complete and absolute lack of people has anything to do with it,” said Chum, giving in to the yawn and stretching out her arms.

“Of course it does, stupid. That's what I'm talking about.”

“So?” Chum said, hoping to encourage her friend to get to the point.

“So, I thought it would be nice to plant another tree,” Bea said quickly to get it all out before Chum started laughing at her.

“Okay,” Chum said. It seem like a perfectly reasonable thing to do. “There's a well over there. I'll get some water. You look in the stable for something to dig with.”

This time they decided to plant one of the orange seeds. They chose a spot in the middle of the courtyard. When it was planted, they took a long look at their work.

“It will look pretty when it's grown,” Bea said, “with the castle behind it like that.” Then the two friends turned and left by the way they had come, through the big gates.

They had forgotten to put a border around the new planting to keep the grass from regrowing, which it started to do almost immediately. But it didn't matter. Well before the grass had grown as far as the planting hole, the seed had sprouted and grown strong enough to withstand the pressure of mere grass. It was a good thing, too, that they had left before the seedling sprouted. Otherwise, Bea probably would have started ranting about Jack-and-the-Beanstalk.

## CHAPTER 26 BURIED ALIVE

**T**hey couldn't find the walking stick. It wasn't the stick that was gone. The whole place where they had left it was gone.

“I'm sure this was the spot,” Bea said, walking back and forth. She dropped to her knees and started tearing at the grass next to the wall. It pulled away with a hissing sound.

“hisssssyouwickedwickedgirlshisssssyouwickedwickedgirlshiss.”

“Chum!” she said, ignoring the noise and pulling faster. “There's something here.” Chum bent down and started helping to pull away the grass.

“There it is, Bea. That's it. That's our walking stick.”

Bea leaned back on her heels while Chum finished uncovering the stick.

“That's it, all right,” Bea said quietly. “This stuff grows pretty fast around here. No wonder it's everywhere we look.”

Chum was carefully lifting the stick up. She stopped and looked at her friend. “It does grow fast, doesn't it. It's a good thing we didn't go back to sleep when we wanted to.”

Bea shivered. “I don't even want to think about it. Let's get back to the lake.”

“Double agreed,” Chum said. “I want to be somewhere where this stuff doesn't grow. And I want to be there now.”

Standing close together with the walking stick between them, Chum started to lower her end to the ground. Bea turned her head for one last longing look at the empty castle. If wishing could fill it up, the air would have echoed with the noise of hundreds of people, inside, outside, and all around the castle.

It was, of course, still empty. She sighed and turned back to face the direction of the lake. As her gaze passed over the castle wall, something on the ground caught her eye.

“Wait a minute, Chum. Look at that.” She pointed to a lumpy patch of grass near the main gates.

“Hey, way cool,” Chum said. “Look what the grass did. A kid-shaped pile of dirt. It's just like the animal-shaped bushes in Disney World, only flatter. I wonder if there are any more.”

Bea didn't say anything. She just stared at Chum with a strange expression. Chum stared back for a second, then the light went on upstairs.

“Oh, my god. Bea. A kid.”

They turned together and raced over to the lumpy spot.

“Put the stick down over there,” Chum said, handing it to Bea. “Carefully.” She bent over the mound and started tearing away the grass.

Bea laid the stick on the ground. Then she kneeled next to Chum and started pulling up grass. It wasn't rooted into whatever was underneath and came away easily in large chunks with a steady hissing sound. In less than a minute, they had each uncovered a foot wearing soft brown shoes with big gold buckles.

“Chum, Chum, the grass is starting to grow over the stick again.”

“Quick,” Chum answered. “Put it over there.” She pointed to a spot a few feet away with one hand. With the other hand she kept on tearing away at the grass, uncovering a green pants-covered leg.

“Don't lay it out,” Chum said. “Put it standing up, like when we use it.”

“But the ground will fold up.”

“That's okay. That's the way we want to go and it will be harder for the grass to take over if it's upright.”

Bea let the heavy end of the branch fall to the earth. She watched the ground bend into a half-mile deep fold.

HisstoolaaatehssstoolaaaterevengesSSSHISSSS.

Bea put her hands over her ears. The noise was getting louder. It seemed to be coming from everywhere. Moving quickly to Chum's side, she began pulling grass off the chest and arms of the buried figure.

“Look at your feet, Chum. This stuff is getting worse.”

Chum's ankles were already covered with grass. She looked back at her feet and jumped straight up into the air.

“Get it off. Get it off me,” she hollered, jumping from one foot to the other.

“It's off already,” Bea hollered back, standing up to protect her own ankles. She bent from the waist, leaning over so that only her hands and feet were touching the ground while she pulled the grass away from the neck and shoulders.

“Hurry up, Chum,” she said. I feel like I'm trapped in one of those speeded-up action films where you can see stuff growing.” She kept on weeding the small figure while she talked.

“You keep working,” Chum shouted, still hopping nervously from foot to foot. “I'm going over there.” She pointed to the gatehouse built into the castle wall. “The door is closed. Maybe it's safe in there.”

“What? What did you say? I can't hear you.” The hissing continued to grow in volume. Bea watched Chum run over to the gatehouse, pull open the door, slam it shut, and then run back.

“There's no grass in there,” Chum shouted in Bea's ear. “We can drag him inside to wake up.”

“What? Speak up,” Bea hollered.

“I said,” Chum started to scream, then she stopped. Bea had uncovered the rest of the figure. “It's a man,” Chum said softly, looking at the lined face and salt-and-pepper beard. “...and look at his ears. He has weird ears.”

“What? What did you say? Bea hollered. “Stop talking like that. I can't hear you.”

Chum pointed at his ears.

“Oh that,” Bea said, still shouting. “He's an elf. Those are elf ears. Can't you tell?”

“He looks more like a Vulcan to me,” Chum yelled. “Is he dead?” That time Bea heard.

“Eyooo,” she squealed, jumping backwards. “I thought he was sleeping,” she screamed as loud as she could. “Eyooo, I touched him. How can you tell?”

“How can you tell he's sleeping?” Chum screamed back.

“I don't know,” Bea hollered. “I've never seen a dead body before. Have you?”

“Never.”

“So, how do you know?” she shouted.

“HISSSSYOUWICKEDWICKEDGIRLSHISSSSYOUWICKEDWICKEDGIRLSHISSSS.”

“If he doesn't wake up, he's dead,” Chum shouted back, trying to be heard over the earsplitting drone of the grass. She put her hands under his armpits and started to drag him towards the gatehouse. “Get his feet. He's heavier than he looks.”

“No,” Bea shouted at her. “No way am I touching a dead body. You can get terrible diseases doing that.”

“Fine,” Chum screamed. “Get the stick then. I don't want it to disappear on us again. Anyway, he's not dead. Look. His nose is twitching.”

HISSTOOOLAAATEHSSSTOOOLAAATEHSSSREVENGEHSSSS.

First his nose began to twitch. Then his shoulders started to wiggle free of Chum's grip. He sat up. He opened his eyes.

“Hurry. Stand up,” Chum yelled as loud as she could. “The grass is growing really fast here.” She was still hopping from foot to foot.

Finally, he spoke.

“Why are you shouting at me?” he said.

## CHAPTER 27

### WHAT GAZUNDA HAD TO SAY

The noise had completely stopped. The silence was deafening.

“What's going on? Why are you jumping around like that?” the elf asked.

“It was the grass,” Bea said, speaking normally and keeping both feet on the ground with difficulty. “You were under a sleep-spell and the grass grew over you.”

“How long have I been sleeping?”

“We don't know. But probably for a while,” Chum answered, remembering what Nardis had said about her friends not coming any more. “Do you know what happened to all the people in the castle?”

He put his head in his hands. “Gone, all gone. We were starving. There was nothing left to eat and there wasn't enough magic to grow more. I am the last,” he said, lowering his hands and looking up at them miserably. “I am Gazunda the Gatekeeper. My job was to lock everything up so the grass couldn't get in.”

“Well, you did a pretty good job,” Bea said, kindly. “There's only grass in a few places.”

“I think you'd better stand up,” Chum said. “It sounds like the grass is working up to another sleep-spell.” They could hear a faint hissing starting up again and Gazunda's brown shoes started to turn green.

hissleeeephssleeeephssleeeep.

“Oh no, not again,” he said with annoyance, standing up and pulling his feet out from under the emerald tufts. He stood more than a head shorter than Bea and Chum, and was built like a skinny kid with oversized hands and feet. If they hadn't have seen his face, Chum and Bea never would have believed that he was more than seven or eight years old.

“I'm leaving. You won't catch me so easily this time,” he said, shaking his fist at the ground. He turned and started walking rapidly away.

“Wait! Where are you going,” Chum called.

“To Poundlaundry. It's the capital of the Greater Elf Kingdom. That's where everyone else from Elfscastle has already gone. Maybe I can catch up with them if I hurry,” he called back without stopping, as he broke into a jog.

“Please don't go, Mr. Gazunda,” Bea called. “Josephine said you could help us. We need your magic to help us get home.”

“Magic,” he called back, his feet getting faster and his voice already getting softer. “There's no magic here. The earth is dead. Use your feet like the rest of us. Who's Josephine anyway?” Those were the last words they could hear as he raced out of earshot.

“Come on, Bea. Let's get moving.” Bea turned to face the direction of the lake.

“Not that way,” Chum pointed to the almost disappeared figure of the elf. “Follow that elf.”

“No!” Bea planted her feet firmly into the ground to demonstrate her stubborn conviction. Then she remembered that planting was exactly what she did not want to do with her feet, and sheepishly resumed hopping from foot to foot.

"Listen, Chum," she said, trying at least to sound serious. "We've got to get back to Nardis' lake."

"Stop being silly, TweedleTwit. This is important," Chum said, doing her own little anti-grass dance. "Gazunda will lead us to the other elves. To someone who will help us."

"You heard what he said," Chum continued. "This place is dead. If we don't get away quickly, we'll be trapped here forever, which won't be very long, considering how much there is to eat. Don't you still want to find the Tooth Fairy?" she added coaxingly.

"Don't treat me like a baby, Chum. I know what I'm talking about."

"Oh, yeah. This is the kid who had me searching the castle for Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and the Tooth Fairy. Hurry up, before that elf is out of sight. Oh, and pick up your feet. They're getting grassed."

"Listen, Chum," Bea said, speeding up her foot-to-foot dance and trying to balance the walking stick at the same time.

"This is the deal. With the sun gone, the grass grows everywhere, even in the forest. In a regular forest, the leaves on the ground decompose and become food for the trees. But the grass doesn't put food into the soil, it takes it out."

"The dying tree," Chum said.

"Right. Eventually, the whole forest will die. Understand?"

"I understand that if we don't get out of here soon, the trees won't be the only dead things around here. This footsie game is driving me crazy. Come over to the gatehouse where we can argue without looking like we can't wait to get to the bathroom."

They carried the stick between them to the gatehouse. Chum pulled the door tightly behind them. They were in a small room with damp stone walls, a dirt floor and not very much light coming from a high window.

"Hey, no grass," said Bea. "I like it already."

"Good. I'm glad you approve. Sit." She pointed to a wood bench against one wall. "Say what you have to say and say it fast. If we don't leave soon, we'll lose track of the elf."

HisssyouwickedwickedgirlssstoolaaAATEREVENGESSSS.

"That hissing is getting louder again," Bea said, talking louder. "I think the stuff is mad at us."

"Mad? Try furious. Not only didn't we go to sleep when we were supposed to, we woke up the elf. Speaking of which, let's get going."

"Wait," Bea said, searching for a way to make her friend understand. "Look at that." She pointed to the high window. "Sit over here next to me." From where Bea was sitting, it was just possible to make out a small corner of the sunbeam over the lake.

"That's why we have to go to the lake."

"Okay, I get your point" Chum answered. "When we were in the tower, it was a good idea to go back to the lake. But it's different now. We have a better plan."

"No, we don't. That sunbeam is still the reason why we have to go to the lake. Look, we can't just walk home, like Gazunda said. We need magic, right?"

"Agreed."

"Well, we have no way of knowing if we'll find magic wherever the elf is going, Bea said. "But we know it's there at the lake. We can see it."

"All we see is a little piece of sunshine."

"Sunshine equals magic."

“Sunshine is not magic.” Chum was adamant. “Sunshine is everywhere. We have it where we live, too. Sunshine is regular.”

“Not around here it's not. We have grass at home, too, but it's nothing like this stuff. In this place, not-magic is when the sun doesn't shine. Therefore sunshine is magic. That's where the magic is.

“We need magic to get home. Why should it be any better where Gazunda is going? But it's better there.” Bea pointed to the spot of sun that still showed through the window. “That's one place we know has magic, and we're not going home without it.”

Chum's expression started to soften. She was starting to have doubts.

“You realize,” Chum said, “that if you're wrong, it's mermaids forever.”

## CHAPTER 28 REVENGE

**A** sudden shower of broken glass rained down on them.

Automatically, they ducked their heads and raised their arms to protect their faces.

“Hey, what's going on?”

“What is this stuff?”

“It's glass. Be careful.”

“I think it's stopped,” Bea said, slowly lifting her head.

She gasped. “Chum, the window.”

Chum's head was still down. She had her hands over her face and was gently shaking her head to dislodge the fragments of glass from her hair.

“Of course, it's the window, TweedleTwit,” she replied, carefully raising her head to look. She gasped.

“The Grass!”

“It's getting stronger.”

“It's time to go,” Chum said. “Right now.”

The grass was spilling over the window sill and down the wall, growing thicker, greener and visibly faster than anything they had seen before.

“Listen, Chum, the noise has stopped.”

“Yeah, it's probably putting all its energy into growing faster especially for us. Look at how thick it is. In another minute the window will be blocked up completely. Let's get out of here.”

Slowly and carefully, they picked their way past the broken glass, gently brushing and shaking the pieces off their hair and bodies.

“Hurry up,” Chum hissed. “That stuff is fast.”

“I can't. There's glass everywhere and it's getting hard to see.”

“Well, there's no glass at the door, so just get there.” In spite of Chum's frustration with her speed, Bea got to the door first, and tried the handle.”

“Help me, Chum. The door is stuck. The handle works okay, but I can't open it.”

“It's the grass,” Chum said. “If it's grown as high as the window, it must be over the door as well. We just have to give it a little push.” She stood next to Bea and helped push.

“Are you sure you're holding the handle down, Bea? It's not moving.”

“Yes, I can see the latch. It's open. Push harder.”

“I am pushing harder,” Chum grunted. “We didn't have any trouble tearing the grass off Gazunda or the walking stick. I don't understand.”

“I do,” Bea said, grimly. “Look at how thickly it's growing. Look at how it broke the glass. It's not just stronger. It's really stronger.”

“Push harder, Bea. Push harder.”

They dug their feet into the ground and pushed until their muscles ached. Then they pushed some more. They pushed until they both collapsed on the ground from exhaustion. The door never budged.

“I don't think we have to worry about starving to death anymore,” Chum said, trying to control her rising panic. “This place is starting to look less like a room and more like a coffin. It looks like the grass is planning to smother us before we even get hungry.”

“This is just great,” Bea said, with a catch in her voice. “Any suggestions?”

“Nothing strikes me at the moment,” Chum answered. “How about you?”

“Well, we could wait until it grows to the ground and then climb up the grass to the window.”

“What window?” Chum said, pointing out the obvious. The grass had completely covered over the window. The only light in the room was coming from the cracks in the wooden roof. “Even if we could find the window,” Chum said. “If we can't open the door down here, what makes you think we could break through the grass up there?”

“Maybe there's a loose section in the ceiling that we could break open?” Bea said weakly.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“We're trapped, aren't we, TweedleChum?”

“No, of course not. As soon as that grass gets low enough, we climb up and out.”

“But I thought you said—”

“—I was just pointing out the problems. That doesn't mean we shouldn't do it.”

“Oh.”

They stood there waiting while they watched the grass move closer and closer to the ground.

“Chum?”

“What?”

“I think I have an idea,” Bea said slowly.

## CHAPTER 29

### RUBY SLIPPERS?

**“W**hat? What? What is it?

She hesitated. “You're not going to like it.”

“I'll like it. I promise,” Chum said urgently. “Just say it.”



“Well,” Bea began, “Do you remember what we learned about the food chain in school? How all the vitamins and stuff are in the soil. How it gets into the stuff that grows and then it gets into the people and animals that eat the stuff that grows in the soil.

“Gimme a break, Bea. Just get to the point. I said I would like it, didn't I? It's not like we have a lot of time on our hands,” she said, looking up at the descending grass.

“Okay. Here it is. The grass has taken all the vitamins plus all the magic out of the soil. That's why it's so powerful. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“But we ate the stuff that grows here, too. Therefore, we have some of the magic.”

“At least until we go to the bathroom and poop it out.”

“Come on, Chum, you said you would like it.”

“I like it. I like it. Wait. Let me guess who we are this time. ‘Oh, Dorothy,’” Chum said in a squeaky, preachy voice. “You have always had the power to go home. The ruby slippers will take you whenever you want.’ The Wizard of Oz. Right?”

“Well, sort of, I guess. I was trying to think more scientifically, but, hey, if it works for you—”

“—It works for me, because you've got me fairytale trained, TweedleTwit. Let's do it.”

“I haven't figured out that part yet. Any suggestions?”

“Yeah. It probably doesn't matter if we say Abracadabra or Hocus Pocus, as long as we concentrate on what we want to happen. Let's do the Dorothy bit. Do you remember how it goes?”

“How could I forget? I must have seen that movie a hundred times. Let's click.”

“Ready for action, Captain Bea,” Chum said, saluting.

“Ready, Sergeant. Click away.”

Thud, thud, thud, came the sound as they knocked the heels of their bare feet together.

“Close your eyes,” Chum whispered out of the corner of her mouth. “Now say it, and concentrate.”

“There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home,” they repeated over and over in unison.

“I think it's working,” Bea said, opening one eye to sneak a look. “The room is getting fuzzy.”

“That's your brain, Fuzzhead. Keep concentrating.”

“There's no place like home. There's no place like home,” they kept the mantra going for a full five minutes.

“We're still here,” Bea wailed. “We're doomed. The grass is almost all the way down the wall. We're going to drown in grass.”

“Don't panic yet. We're on the right track, TweedleBea. It almost worked. I could feel it, too. Maybe we don't have enough magic for this. Let's try something simpler.”

“Like what, Tweedletoes?”

“Like the door.”

Bea perked up immediately.

“Ready to proceed with new concentration target, Captain.”

“Only this time, let's give it some extra help.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let's push.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Bea said putting her shoulder to the door. Chum joined her.

“What should we say?” Chum asked.

“Well, we could try ‘Open Sesame,’” Bea suggested.

“How about we stick with ‘Open Door,’” Chum said. “Otherwise, we’re liable to find a giant yellow bird on the other side.”

“‘Open door’, it is,” Bea giggled and they commenced pushing and concentrating.

“Open door. Open door. Open door.” In less than a minute, they could feel the door beginning to give way.

“Open door. Open door,” they kept repeating as they pushed. Afraid to stop or even open their eyes, they moved, one small step at a time, until they could feel the grass between their toes.

“Hold the door, Bea,” Chum said. “I’ll get the walking stick. We’re outa here.”

“Which way? We never decided which way to go.”

“Are you kidding? To the lake. It’s almost suppertime. I, for one, plan to stuff myself silly.”

“The grass isn’t growing over my feet anymore, Chum. Do you think it’s given up?”

“Nah, I think it’s just resting. Saving its strength for something worse. Let’s get moving.”

## CHAPTER 30 APPLE BLOSSOM TIME

The only thing that they agreed on was that the walking stick was too dangerous to abandon at the shore of the lake. Chum and Bea weren’t sure what would happen if they took it into the water with them. However, they were sure that they didn’t want to try and find out and so, spent the trip back arguing over which was the less dangerous choice. It was Chum who finally came up with a solution as they were stepping over their eighth earth-fold.

“Why don’t we see if the tree will take it back? We can always ask again if we think we need it,” she pointed out. Bea agreed with relief. It seemed the safest and simplest. If only the dryad would take back its branch.

“But none of that whiney tree talk, okay?” Chum said.

“Alright, alright,” Bea answered. “Just don’t bug me once I start talking.” Three more folds took them past the cottages they had visited on the way out and to the rocky outcrop where the oak tree grew.

Trying hard not to completely compromise her instinct for formality when having a one-way conversation with a tree, Bea tried to speak in what she hoped would be a more acceptable voice for her friend.

“Excuse me, tree,” she said politely. “Thank you for the walking stick. It worked great, but we are on our way back to the lake. We can’t think of a safe place to put it. We thought maybe you could—”

Before she finished, the dryad began to emerge. Fingers first, wiggling as if they were testing the air, then a long brown foot. Knees, elbows, a smooth head with round eyes and a very big smile. They watched as this time all of the dryad came out of the tree.

Grinning from ear to ear, the dryad walked over and tenderly took the branch. Lifting the broken end up to the matching break in the tree, the missing piece seemed to grow back as if it had never been gone.

Turning back to the girls, it gently stroked the top of Bea's head, kind of a 'good dog' pat. Then it did the same to Chum. They didn't move while this happened, like baby rabbits who let you pet them only because they are frozen with fear. Bea and Chum were not exactly frozen with fear, it was more like stiff with nervousness, but the effect was the same. Finally, with a wave and a smile, the dryad melted back into its tree.

Walking briskly and speaking little, they hiked the rest of the way to the lake. The distance was short, but without the walking stick, it took longer than did the entire trip from the castle to the oak tree.

On the other hand, the swim back to Nardis' island went a lot faster than the island-to-shore swim had taken. Anxious to get there as soon as possible, they didn't stop to play. The only breaks they took were frequent trips to the surface ostensibly to check their progress, but really because they were both secretly sure that if they didn't keep an eye on it, the fat sunbeam shining down on the island would go away.

It didn't go away. It was bright and sunny when they walked out of the water onto the island.

But there was more.

"Oh, Chum, look at all the flowers." Bea was ecstatic with floral happiness. The whole island was filled with growing things.

"I've never seen roses and daffodils growing together like that," Chum observed wryly. "They must be making up for lost time." Everything seemed to be blooming at once, from the old-fashioned flower beds around the guest house to the irises and daylilies by the water's edge.

Best of all, just beyond the entrance to the little house, was a graceful apple tree, covered with pink apple blossoms. Dragonflies with iridescent wings were flying around under the shade of its branches.

"Say, Bea," Chum said. "Don't those dragonflies have awfully long legs?" Bea looked carefully.

"That's because they're not dragonflies," Bea answered. Chum kept looking until she saw what Bea saw.

"Way cool, Bea. They're little fairies,"

"I know that, Dumbo."

"What should we do? Do you think they've seen us?" Chum asked

"What do you think? We must look like two mountains to them. Of course they've seen us."

"Well, they're not flying away. Do you think it's okay to get closer?"

"How should I know? I didn't bring my Rule Book of Fairy Etiquette along."

They were talking out of the sides of their mouths, trying not to move, when they heard a small but distinct sound above them. It sounded like a tiny 'Hi!'. They both looked up. Then, they both sucked in their breath and held it.

"Hi!" said the little voice again.

"You're a real fairy!" Chum blurted out.

"Giggle."

"Chu-uum," Bea interrupted, "Everyone here is a fairy."

"I mean a sort of a classic fairy. The kind you read about in stories."

"Giggle."

"Giggle."

"Giggle." Suddenly they were surrounded by giggles. Actually, they were surrounded by giggling fairies. It was very nice. The two girls smiled with shy pleasure.

"We're apple blossom fairies," a tiny voice said. "You must be Nardis' friends, Bea and Chum." The fairies wore tunics and leggings in various shades of apple blossom red, white, pink and green. Each fairy had a double set of dragonfly wings. They hung in the air like hummingbirds so close to Bea and Chum that the girls could see each tiny toe on their bare feet.

"And I guess you're Nardis' flower fairy friends," Chum said lamely. "Where is she? What happened?"

"Her friend Mycroft came, and she went over to the Old Woods to see him," said one of the tiny voices. It was hard to tell who was talking. They were moving too quickly. Not unlike the dragonflies they resembled. "We couldn't go with her because there is no sun over there."

Bea and Chum turned to look, and they could see Nardis waving at them from the shore. She was sitting on the same big flat-topped rock where they had first met.

Another voice began to speak. This time they could tell who it was because the tiny fairy was sitting on Chum's outstretched hand. Chum was thrilled. She kept very still, and tried not to breathe too hard.

"You should have been here when the apple tree bloomed. It was gorgeous. Are you Chum or Bea?"

"I'm Chum."

"Hi, Chum, I'm Nomata.

"Well, Chum. You should have seen it," Nomata continued. "The tree was just covered with big, pink flowers. And then, then just when I thought it was impossibly beautiful, then...then the sun came out and, well, it just lit up everything. It was wonderful." She sighed, and settled contentedly in Chum's hand.

"Of course, we didn't actually see it," said another tiny voice.

"True," said Nomata. "But we dreamed it. That was almost as good, and then we knew."

"Knew? Knew what?" Bea asked.

"We knew it was time to wake up," said the little creature on Chum's hand. "And then all the other flowers started to grow, and it won't be long now before the rest of the flower fairies wake up."

Bea gave Chum a poke with her elbow.

"Don't do that," Chum said. "You'll bump Nomata."

"Chum, look," Bea said. Chum saw that Nardis was waving at them with both hands now.

"I think she wants us to come now," Bea said.

"Don't you want to see the rest of the flower fairies wake up?" Chum asked.

"Of course, I do, but look at Nardis. Maybe she needs help."

"She's right," said the little voice in Chum's hand. "You had better go".

## CHAPTER 31

# RAINBOW MAGIC

The water lost its sparkle as soon as they moved out of the sunbeam's range. Bea and Chum were swimming as fast as they could, but Nardis couldn't wait. She was in the water hugging them before they even got close.

"Isn't it wonderful," Nardis gushed. She broke out of the hug, bobbing, spinning and waving her arms. "First the sun and the flower fairies and now my friend Mycroft is back," she said breathlessly.

Chum and Bea poked their heads out of the water both anxious to get a first look at the famous Mycroft. What they saw, sitting crosslegged in the grass, dead calm to Nardis' frenetic excitement, was a dryad. Chum looked at Bea. Bea looked at Chum. Wasn't this the same dryad that they had met with Josephine?

"But, he can't talk to me," Nardis cried, moving from delighted to dejected in less than a micro-second.

"I didn't know dryads could talk!" Bea said, surprised.

"Way cool," Chum quipped. "A talking tree." They ducked back under the water and started swimming, anxious to meet, or maybe re-meet Mycroft.

"They hardly ever do," Nardis said in answer to Bea's question, popping her head under the water so they could hear her. "I think they're shy. Mostly, dryads sing, especially when they're together. But Mycroft is different. He talks to me all the time." She swam a little behind Bea and Chum, talking non-stop the whole time.

"He came right after the apple tree bloomed," Nardis continued. "It really did smell wonderful, just like you said it would. Then the sun started to shine on it, even before the flowers were all the way open.

"Do you know, I dragged myself out of the water just to feel the sunshine on my fins. Boy, I'll never take a sunny day for granted again."

Meanwhile, they had arrived at Nardis' rock. It reached above the water almost as high as Bea and Chum were tall, blocking Mycroft from their view. Chum and Nardis lingered in the water as Bea pushed in front, struggling to pull herself out of the water. The smooth, sloping sides were slippery with green moss. It was like climbing up a wet sliding board. But on top, once she got there, the moss was dry, soft and cushiony.

"Mmmm. Nice rock," Bea cooed, rolling around like a puppy. She leaned over the side so that her head was hidden from the land where the dryad sat patiently waiting only a few feet away.

"How come Mycroft doesn't come to your island?" Bea asked Nardis.

"Hey, Bea," Chum called, treading water and reaching up with both hands. Bea rolled onto her stomach, grabbed Chum's hands and pulled. Chum relaxed and let Bea slide her up to the top.

"He can't leave the Old Woods," Nardis answered quietly, "just like I can't leave my lake."

"You can't?" Chum said, hanging her head over the side to talk to Nardis, still in the water.

“Well, I guess I could, if someone carried me,” Nardis giggled. “But why would I want to? It's different for dryads. They really can't travel beyond their own forest. I think it affects their health or something. We always meet here on the boundary between my lake and his woods.”

Nardis swam to the other side of the rock. The stone there was full of big cracks and little ledges. She easily pulled herself up and squashed herself into the last bit of empty space between Bea and Chum. It was close, but they all just fit.

“By the way,” Nardis said with a smirk. “Did I mention? That side...the slippery side...” she indicated the spot facing into the lake that Bea and Chum had just struggled to climb, “...is *just* for going down.”

Then she turned, still grinning, to face the forest and her friend. The dryad had moved only enough to face them, staring silently with soft, grey golfball-sized eyes.

“Mycroft,” Nardis said. “These are my friends, Bea and Chum.”

He nodded and smiled politely.

“Are you the same dryad who helped us climb your tree and gave us breakfast?” Chum asked.

He nodded again, his smile broadening.

“Well, thank you for all your help,” Bea said. “We never did find the Tooth Fairy, but—”

Mycroft caught their attention with a flutter of his hands, then pointed to the sky, beyond the far end of the lake.

“A rainbow,” Bea gasped. They all stared, speechless as a stub of bright colors grew longer and higher into the gray sky. It was already half a bow, and...

“It's headed this way,” Nardis shouted.

“Oh, it is, it is,” said Bea, nearly falling off the rock in her excitement. “And look, it's getting fatter as well as longer.”

“NO, IT'S NOT,” Chum screamed, significantly reducing the quality of Bea's and Nardis' hearing. What Chum saw startled her to her feet. She was jumping up and down, consequently, using way more than her share of the limited space. Holding their still ringing ears, squashed to the edge and then some to avoid getting stomped, Bea and Nardis slid one on top of the other down the slippery slope. Chum ignored the moving tangle of arms and legs. Totally focused on the sky, she kept screaming and bouncing.

“It's not getting fatter,” Chum screamed. “That's not blue rainbow. It's blue sky. There's a big hunk of blue sky on both sides.”

Nardis's tail must have been working at triple-speed because the rest of her was three quarters out of the water, pointing to the sky.

“It's coming to my island!” she shouted. “It's coming to my island! Look! Look at that!” She did a double twisting flip-flop that splashed so much water, even Mycroft was left soaking.

There were two in the water, one on the rock and one on the land, all of them wet, and all of them looking at the same thing. The rainbow continued to grow, over the lake, heading to the island.

“And look where it's coming from,” said Bea with a calmer sounding but intense excitement. “It looks like it's coming from the castle.” While they watched, the rainbow curved down onto the top of the apple tree on Nardis' island.

“It's the end of the rainbow,” Nardis sighed, “and it's right in my tree.” She sighed again. I want to be there. I want to be right there with my rainbow tree. Come on. Let's go.”

“Wait,” sang a voice from the shore. “Look.”

“Mycroft!” Nardis shouted. “You're talking!”

He grinned at her and winked. “It's rainbow magic. Watch.” he crooned, then returned to his own rainbow watching.

Chum was already in the water with the other two, ready to head for the island. They rolled over and floated on their backs to watch. They saw a full-bow rainbow and all around it the gray was breaking up and blue sky was taking over. Within minutes, the sun itself, large and low in the late afternoon sky, was revealed.

“The sun is back,” Nardis whispered.

## CHAPTER 32

# HOW BEA AND CHUM SAVED FAIRYLAND

Everyone sat quietly enjoying the afternoon sunshine. Bea and Chum on the grass, Nardis, on her freshly sun-warmed rock, all of them silently watching the last little pieces of rainbow color fade into blue sky. All of them but Mycroft, who had his eyes closed, head tipped back to face the sun. His skin glowed the color of new leaves.

Their silence was broken by a soft hissing sound.

“Hisssssyouwickedwickedgirlshissss.”

The grass nearest to the water began to curl up and turn brown. As quickly as the grass died back, green shoots started pushing up between the brown blades. Only they weren't new grass plants. They grew quickly to be the long, narrow leaves of the daylilies and irises that were already blooming near the water on Nardis' island.

There were other sounds now as well, drowning out the droning protests of the grass. At last, they could hear the birds. It was as if their voices had been released with Mycroft's.

Further back, in the woods, they could see dryads emerging from the trees. Almost every tree seemed to have one. Each of them, turned back to their tree, put their hands on the trunk and shook. The sturdy trunks didn't move, but something must have been happening, because leaves started falling to the ground. As they watched, the leaves buried the dying grass plants.

“That's what the woods are supposed to look like, isn't it?” Bea asked no one in particular.

Mycroft opened his eyes, looked around with calm pleasure and nodded. A few leaves that had settled on his head, fell to the ground.

“That's what it looks like where I live, too,” Bea said. “Except that the leaves aren't still green, of course. Oh, and we don't have E.T. and his family wandering around in the woods at home.”

“I gather that Elfcastle was empty,” Mycroft said. Running a hand through the leaves he began idly turning them over with his fingers.

“Was it ever,” Chum answered, watching his long fingers gently turn and smooth each leaf they touched.

“Well, going there seemed like a good idea at the time.” Mycroft's lilting voice sounded more like music than speech. It was as if the rainbow, had left behind all its colors in his voice. “It doesn't matter anymore. Once they hear that the dryads are free and the flower fairies are awake, the elves and the rest of the fairies won't be long in coming back.

“It won't be long either, Nardis,” Mycroft crooned, “before your island is filled with friends again.”

“What we don't understand,” Chum asked, “is what—”

“—is who,” Bea interrupted.

“—is what,” Chum corrected, “would cover up the sun like that?”

“—is who,” Bea said quickly, determined to have the last word, “would cover up the sun like that, just to grow grass. And why? What's the point here.”

“Nobody,” Mycroft sang. There's no evil magician controlling the grass.” Chum grinned and elbowed Bea in the ribs.

“Told you.”

“Like everything else in Fairyland,” Mycroft explained, his voice taking on the notes of a sad song, “even a grass plant has a mind of its own. When the individual plants began to work together, they found that their combined magic had the power to blot out the sun and they did. It was good for the grass, but not so great for the rest of us. We knew what was happening, we just didn't know how to fix it.” Bea stuck her tongue out at Chum.

Nardis looked alarmed. “Oh, no,” she said. “What if—”

“—Don't worry, Nardis,” Mycroft said. “If this ever happens again, we know what to do now...thanks to your new friends,” he added, nodding in their direction.

“Us?” said Bea, moving from triumphant to puzzled. “What did we do?”

“You really don't know, TweedleBea?” Chum said affectionately and waited for her friend to figure it out. When she didn't, Chum continued.

“That rainbow started at the castle, but it wasn't just sort of generally around the castle. It started at a very particular place.” She paused. There was still no sign of understanding on Bea's face.

“It was something that wasn't there before,” Chum said.

Bea's face lit up. “Our tree. It's just like the apple blossom fairy said. When the apple tree bloomed, it broke through to the sun, just at that one spot. And when our orange tree blossomed—”

“—You planted another tree?” Nardis said.

“Yes, we planted an orange tree from the seeds in the fruit that Mycroft gave us.”

“I bet we're the only people here who ever tried to grow something from seed,” Chum said looking at Mycroft for acknowledgment.

“It's true,” he agreed melodiously. “Everyone here is used to using magic to produce food. We tend to forget that seeds have their own kind of magic.”

“Anyway,” Chum said, “when the orange tree flowered—”

“—It must have done the same thing,” Nardis interrupted. “Only now there were two of them and that gave the rainbow a base to grow on.”

“Wow!” said Bea. “We did that? We did all that? Why, why—”



“—Why, we just saved Fairyland,” Chum said. “That's all.”

## CHAPTER 33

### FRIENDS FOREVER?

The sun was setting over the far side of the lake. And as far as the four friends were concerned, it was doing it very beautifully. Bea and Chum lay back on the sweet-smelling, new moss to watch, their arms behind their heads and silly smiles on their faces. They glowed with regal self-satisfaction, as they breathed in deep, full breaths, puffing up their chests to the maximum. Any minute now they would start exchanging compliments, telling each other how wonderful they were.

Nardis and Mycroft exchanged glances. They knew just how to handle this. Nardis counted softly to three, and the attack began.

They tickled without mercy. There was no escape by water, Nardis saw to that. And Mycroft defended the land route. Worst of all, when they tried to retaliate, Bea and Chum discovered that dryads weren't ticklish.

But Nardis was.

The battle moved into the water where it was two against one. Nardis was fast, but eventually Bea and Chum outmaneuvered her and she begged for mercy.

“I give up. I give up,” she cried out, laughing uncontrollably. They swam back to shore with only an occasional quick tickle to slow them down. Mycroft stood waiting, looking like the Jolly Green Giant, with his arms folded across his chest and a wry smile on his face.

“You had better say goodbye,” he said looking down on the three girls sitting together in the waist-deep water near the shore. “I want to get Bea and Chum home before dark.”

“Home!” Bea and Chum said together, looking panicky.

“Home!” Nardis cried out, visibly distressed.

“Yes, you know, the place you've been trying to get to all day,” Mycroft answered.”

Suddenly...They weren't ready to go.

“Come on,” he said in gently chiming tones. “It's time.”

“Can we ever come back?” Chum said, with a catch in her voice.

Mycroft looked at them sadly, with a shake of his head and an embarrassed shrug. “I don't know,” he said. “But you will always have friends here.”

Nardis held out her hand with her pinky finger extended. “Friends forever?” she said.

The three friends joined pinkies and shook hard. “Friends forever,” they all said together, sniffing.

Chum looked directly at Nardis and gave another shake to their still-joined pinky fingers. “*Best* friends forever,” she said, wholeheartedly. “Let it be known,” Chum announced, standing up with water dripping off her t-shirt and tears streaming down her face, “that Bea and Chum are no more. It's time for the TweedleTwins to become...” She got in between Bea and Nardis, plopped back down in the water and put an arm around each of them. “Ta Da...The Tweedle Triplets.

“And, best friends stick together,” Chum added. “I say we stay.”

“What, are you crazy.” Bea was thunderstruck.

“Come on Bea. This is what we wanted. Friends forever. No Middle School. We don't have to go...do we Mycroft?”

Bea gave a sniff so loud, it drowned out his answer then wiped her nose on her sleeve. “Come on yourself, TweedleChum,” she said. “Our parents must be sick with worry. Besides,” Bea said with a lopsided smile, “I thought you were going to be a astronaut when you grow up.”

“I am.”

“Not here you're not.”

“I know. I know. Just joking. Say, Nardis,” Chum said. “I don't suppose you have e-mail, do you?”

“Eee what?”

“Well, how do you stay in touch?”

Mycroft reached down and put his hand on Chum's shoulder. “Word of mouth works pretty well around here.”

“Well,” Chum said, grasping at straws, “what's the chance that we can get Josephine to carry messages?” Nobody even tried to answer that one.

“You were just joking about not going home, weren't you?” Bea asked.

“Mostly,” Chum answered. “Say, do you think we could get Josephine to do us one favor? Just once.”

“I doubt it. You could ask her.”

“She hates me.” Chum made a face. “I wouldn't stand a chance. It's just one teeny little favor.”

Nardis and Mycroft listened in silence, simultaneously turning from one girl to the other. Their confused expressions made them look like the audience at some bizarre tennis game where the players make up the rules as they go along. Nardis cracked first.

“What? What favor?” she asked, pleading for clarity.

“Chum probably wants me to talk to another tree, or breathe underwater,” Bea remarked sarcastically.

“So?” Nardis was still confused. “What's the big deal?”

“So do you think,” Chum finally said to Bea, “we could get Josephine to carry a teeny tiny little cell phone over here? She'd only have to do it once.”

“Sure,” Bea answered. “Just one teeny, tiny, little cell phone and a very, very, very long power cord. Honestly, Chum. I thought I was the one in charge of harebrained schemes.”

Chum shrugged. “Yea, but my harebrained scheme is technological. Besides,” she said, exchanging her look of anxiety for a silly grin, “I'm desperate.”

Bea looked hard at her best friend and relaxed. “I think we're ready to go now, Mycroft,” Bea said. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“It already is okay, Tweedletwit,” Chum said. “Remember? We fixed it.”

“Yeah, I know,” Bea said, putting her arm around Chum. “Let's go. We have things to do.”

Once they were alone with Mycroft, back in the forest, they saw groups of dryads dancing in every clearing they passed. Their soft singing carried through the trees and touched the hearts of the two girls. They felt content.

“Mycroft?” Bea asked. “How come you didn't send us home with Josephine?”

"I was too weak," he answered. "After you left, I couldn't even leave my tree anymore. It was all I could do to send one little cat through."

"But you can now, can't you?" Chum said.

"Is that the way we'll go home," Bea added, "the way Josephine went?"

"We can do that," he sang. "But I found the opening you first came through. If it is still there, I think it would be better to send you back the same way."

They came to the clearing around Mycroft's tree. Even in the dim light they could see that it had changed. There was still grass growing, but only in occasional tufts. Most of the ground was covered with moss and scattered leaves. There were also big clumps of wild violets, drifts of yellow trout lilies, and tiny, white spring beauties. It looked just like it was supposed to look.

"Think of it as a late spring," Mycroft warbled.

"A very late spring," Chum said with a crooked smile.

"Over there." Mycroft pointed to the far end of the clearing. "It is still there." There was a place, about six feet up in the air, where the air looked fuzzy and they couldn't see through to the trees behind.

They walked over and Mycroft, taking each of them with one arm, as if they were no more than bits of fluff, lifted them up to the opening.

"Goodbye, Chum. Goodbye, Bea. Thank you for your help, and for your good company," he sang as he pushed them through the hole in the sky.

## CHAPTER 34

### THE TIME-TRANSPORT EFFECT

They landed at the foot of Bea's bed, exactly where they had started that morning. Only it was still morning. The digital clock on the dresser said 6:27AM.

"Is it tomorrow already?" Bea said.

"I don't know," said Chum. "It's either tomorrow morning or this morning, but it's definitely not now."

"It most definitely is now, and I have been waiting long enough. It is about time you two got back. I have places to go and things to do."

The pillow was on the bed, right next to the opening into Fairyland that had just spit them out. Sitting crosslegged on top of it, with her hands in her lap, was a small person with long, fluffy, honey-colored hair, clothes that looked like they could have been made out of flower petals, and a double pair of iridescent dragonfly wings.

"You look just like a flower fairy," said Chum.

"Well, as it happens, I am a kind of flower fairy. So that is very convenient," the small person answered.

"What are you doing on my bed?" asked Bea.

"Waiting for you to come back so I can go home." She held out her hand. "Hand it over, please."

"What?" said Bea.

"What!" said Chum.

“The tooth, please.”

“Oh...You're the Tooth Fairy,” said Bea.

“That's right. Not quite awake yet, are we?”

“This is my last stop for the night. I was already under the pillow when you got up. Fortunately, I am very quick, and managed to hide under the sheet when you were scabbling around under your pillow. Otherwise you might have grabbed me instead of the tooth bag. If you had waited till morning like you are supposed to instead of getting up in the middle of the night, this whole mess could have been avoided.”

“But it was morning,” Bea protested.

“Yes, we could see light,” Chum added.

“That...was a streetlight.”

“Oh!”

“Oh!”

“Surely, somewhere in your education, you girls were taught the difference between sunshine and streetlights?” When they didn't answer, she held out her hand again.

“This is all very irregular. You are never, under any circumstances, allowed to see or speak with a tooth fairy. Well, what's done is done. Just give me the tooth and we will pretend that this never happened.”

Bea put her hand over the pocket in her T-shirt, as if to hang on to her tooth a little longer.

“Wait,” she said. “Wait a minute. Did you do that? That...that big suck-hole.” She pointed to the spot at the head of the bed where the bed wasn't.

“I most certainly did. It was either that or get eaten by that horrible monster that lives here. Fairies are edible, you know. You think being the Tooth Fairy is easy? This kind of thing happens all the time.

“Then you two stupidly let yourselves get pulled through the portal. Another five minutes and I would have had to come and get you out myself.”

“Five minutes?” said Chum. “But we were gone all day. We watched the sunset.”

“All day, fiddlesticks,” said the fairy. “I have been sitting here watching that idiotic clock. You have been gone for exactly two hours and ten minutes. Don't you know anything about the Time-Transport-Effect?”

“No, we don't,” said Bea.

“You mean that you were here the whole time,” Chum said. “We just spent the entire day looking for you.”

“Well, I wasn't there, was I? I was here. And now, I have got to go. The tooth, if you please.”

Bea took her tooth out of the bag and gave it to the fairy in whose hands it became smaller and smaller until it fit in the bulging bag tied to her waist.

“Well, that is settled now, I'll be off. Remember, you never saw me.”

“Wait, what about my tooth money?” Bea said.

“That's not my department,” she answered, and in one and the same moment, she disappeared into the hole from which Bea and Chum had just emerged. The hole disappeared as well. The bed was solid again and the bottom sheet had its pattern back.

Chum leaned forward and very gingerly touched the spot where the hole had been. “It seems okay,” she said, pushing a little harder on the spot.

“Good,” said Bea. “You can sleep there tonight.”

“Me?” Chum squeaked. “I’m not sleeping there. It’s your bed. You can sleep with your head at the other end if you’re nervous.”

“Great. I’ll just be sucked in feet first instead of head first.” She felt the spot where the hole had been.

“It’s really gone,” Bea said. “I can’t believe it really happened. I miss Nardis already.”

“And Mycroft,” Chum said. “He was neat.”

Then, because she wasn’t holding it very tightly, the weight of the tooth bag pulled it out of Bea’s hand and it fell to the bed.

“Bea, look! There’s something in your bag.”

Inside the bag in addition to the orange and apple seeds, they found four quarters and a note. Bea read it out loud. It said:

Sun – body around which planets revolve.

Street light – a light, usually supported by a lamppost, for illuminating a street.

Warning! Never get up too early on the morning of a Tooth Fairy night.

Bea put the note and the coins back in the tooth-bag and grinned at Chum.

Chum grinned back. “I wonder whose department that was?”

## EPILOGUE

“Good morning. You two are up early,” came a voice from the door. Bea and Chum jumped about a foot in the air.

“Mom!” Bea said, her voice shaking. “Don’t do that. You scared us.”

“I am sorry. I thought you both heard me knock,” her mother answered.

As soon as the door was open, Josephine came into the room, curling herself around Bea’s mother’s ankles.

“I guess we were talking,” Chum said. Meanwhile, Bea quickly wiggled sideways so that her tush covered the tooth-bag with its incriminating note.

Josephine was circling the room warily, with her head raised, as if she were testing the air, or looking for something.

“It’s okay now, Josephine,” Bea said, patting a spot next to her on the bed.

The cat jumped up and settled onto Bea’s lap, giving a perfunctory hiss in the direction of the pillow from the relative safety of Bea’s lap.

“How about some breakfast?” Bea’s mom asked, oblivious to Josephine’s skittishness.”

“Pancakes?” Bea asked.

“Fine.”

“Chocolate Pancakes?”

“I have chocolate chips. I can add them to the batter. Will that do? What would you both like to do today?”

Chum shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know,” she said. “What do you want to do?”

“I know exactly what I want to do,” Bea said. “I want to buy a new bed.”

“Oh, Beatrice,” her mom said. “I’m so pleased. That old one is really falling apart and you’re really too old for me to pick out these things for you. But maybe we should do it later in the week so it doesn’t interfere with your time with Tanchum.”

“Oh no, let’s do it today,” Chum said. “I would like to go. I could help Bea pick something.”

“Fine, then,” Bea’s mom said. “Let’s do it. We can go right after breakfast.”

“Great,” Bea said. “I know just what I want. I want a white iron daybed with gold knobs and lots of curlicues.

“There’s just one thing. It’s really important. Do you think we could get it delivered today? So I can sleep in it tonight? And I think we should put it in a different spot. Don’t you think it would look nice over there, next to the dresser?”

“I think it would look great over there,” her mom answered. “And I have seen that style of bed in lots of different stores. I’m sure we can find one that does same-day delivery.”

Bea’s mother came over and sat down on the bed with the two girls and put her arm around her daughter. “You know, Beatrice, I am really proud of you. You have grown up so much this year. And I don’t mean things like getting pierced ears—”

“—Mo-om,” Bea whined. “Is this a lecture?”

“Not really,” her mother answered, squeezing her a little tighter. “I think it’s more like a ‘love’.”

“I’m not different. I just want a new bed. That’s all,” she said, wiggling free from the hug.

“Okay,” her mother said with a smile. “I get the point. You get dressed. I’ll make breakfast, and then we’ll go shopping,” she finished. She got up and started to head for the kitchen and pancakes.

“...and tomorrow...” Chum said, just as Bea’s mother was closing the door.

“Yes?”

“We were wondering,” said Chum. “We were wondering if we could do some gardening.”

“Gardening?” said Bea.

“Yeah,” said Chum, rolling her eyes meaningfully at Bea. “You know...seeds. Maybe we could plant some seeds.” Bea finally got the hint.

“Oh, yeah. Gardening. We really want to do some gardening. Can we, Mom?”

“That would be great,” Bea’s mom said. “I have been so busy this summer that I am way behind in the garden. There’s lots of weeding and cleaning to do.”

“Okay, Mom. Okay. We don’t mind helping with the weeding. But can we plant something, too?” said Bea.

“Of course, you can,” she answered. “It’s a little late in the season, but we can still plant chrysanthemums and winter pansies. Why don’t we get some this afternoon, after we buy the new bed. You can pick them out together.”

“Yes!” said Bea as soon as her mother was gone.

“Double yes!” said Chum and they high-fived each other. “I told you this was going to be a great sleepover.”

“Not great,” said Bea. “The best! The best ever.”

“Agreed and double agreed,” said Chum.

“So, what do you want to wear today?” Bea asked.

“I don't know?” Chum mumbled. “What do you want to wear?” She had almost her whole hand stuck in her mouth making it hard to understand her.

“Hey, Chum, take your fingers out of your mouth. It looks really dorky.”

“I can't help it,” Chum said. “I've got this loose tooth. It's really bothering me.”



Dear Reader

If you enjoyed this story, please tell your friends. If you have questions or comments, I would love to hear from you. I don't have a website, but you can write to me at [susha.g@bellsouth.net](mailto:susha.g@bellsouth.net).

## OTHER BOOKS BY SUSHA GOLOMB

There are four books so far in the middle-grade series called *The Fairy Gifts*.

### BOOK ONE MAGIC SUCKS



Some people control their destinies. Some people are called by destiny. Some people are called by their cat. This is the story of a girl and her cat

Desperate to escape a life of shame after being conned by her best friend, Tefnut (the cat) picks Miriam (the girl) to take her place in the cat world so she (Tefnut) can spend the rest of her life hiding in the human world.

When she discovers that Miriam's family has elf ancestry, well, that just clinches it. Miriam's fate is sealed. Miriam Mermelstein gets three fairy gifts, and she gets told exactly what to do with them. Everything begins from this...

Magic Sucks is about miscommunication between young people and adults. Not all of the adults in this story are human.

## **BOOK TWO OUT OF PLACE**

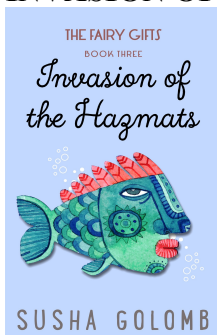


It's hard to fit in when you are not even the same species.

Getting kidnapped was not on the list of things that Miriam Mermelstein had planned for her first underwater trip. She will need to be really creative about how she uses her magic gifts if she is going to escape

Out of Place is a story about choices. Miriam's most important life choice may have been co-opted by her cat, but there is still plenty of room for her to mess up.

## **BOOK THREE INVASION OF THE HAZMATS**

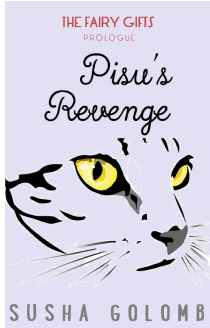


Anyone who can eliminate their enemies by eating them is a formidable foe. Anyone would be the Hazmats, insaniac shapeshifters whose mindless greed is threatening the continued existence of the Abyssmal Cities. Is Miriam Mermelstein doomed to follow in their footsteps?



Invasion of the Hazmats is a story about getting along with difficult people.

## **PREQUIL TO THE FAIRY GIFTS PISU'S REVENGE**



What happens when a group of obligate carnivores decide to live in a place where no one is allowed to eat anyone? The place is Ailuria, and what happened is that Tefnut, the less than willing DFOA (Dominant Female Over All) got stuck with the job of keeping the rest of the cats from killing each other

Pisu's Revenge is Tefnut's story, her life in Ailuria (The Kingdom of the Cats) and why she eventually left Ailuria for the human world

## **BOOK FOUR ???**

There is one book remaining to be written in this series. The story will be set in Ailuria, (The Kingdom of the Cats). When Miriam arrives in Ailuria she finds out what Tefnut really expects of her. So far, it doesn't have a title, but I am open to suggestions. (susha.g@bellsouth.net)



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