



Once There Was a Girl...

Hold still. I just want to help you.” I keep my voice calm yet firm. If she moves too quickly, she could do more damage. I need to be careful not to spook her.

“That’s a good girl,” I coo, taking a step closer. “Stay right where you are. You’re safe now.”

Crack! My bare foot snaps a twig, startling her. She hobbles farther into the brush, making it hard for me to see anything but her panicked eyes. If she moves any deeper into the branches, I won’t be able to reach her.

“It’s okay,” I tell her as some of our friends quietly gather around to watch me work.

I step deeper into the thicket, the chittering of the insects intensifying in the shady trees that surround me. The air is

hot, and I'm sweating despite having left my jacket and skirt back in the clearing. I snag a vine from above me and use it to tie back my pale-blond locks. She's watching with interest as I fix my hair.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I promise, my voice barely more than a whisper. Slowly, I pull something from my pocket I know she'll like. I place the handful of cashews I swiped from last night's dinner onto the ground between us. She eyes the nuts for a moment, then quickly eats one. Nice!

As she crunches on the nuts, I stay very still, listening for any sounds. I hear an owl hoot in the distance and water babbling in a nearby brook, but for the most part, the forest is unusually quiet.

"Good snack, right?" I ask, trying to make her feel at ease. "I know I look young, but I have a lot of experience doing what I'm doing, so don't be nervous."

She tilts her head at me.

"It's true! Just last week, Nox came to see me for a sore throat, and I mixed him a tonic that cleared it right up. And when Peter lost his sense of smell after having a bad cold, I made a broth that fixed everything." I inch closer to the tangle of brambles where she's perched. She doesn't move so

I keep talking. “And when Deirdre sprained her ankle after running from a bear in the Hollow Woods, I made her a splint, and now she’s walking just fine.”

I hold out my hand. She doesn’t recoil, but she doesn’t move any closer either. Time to bring out the big guns. I strain my neck toward my friends below me. “Deirdre? Can you please back me up here?”

Deirdre takes a flying leap, landing on the tree branch next to me.

Did I mention she’s a flying squirrel?

Or that the “she” I’m trying to help is a songbird?

Lily, my bearded dragon, pokes her head out of my shirt pocket to listen to Deirdre’s mix of clicks, clucks, and high-pitched squeaks that will hopefully get through to the little red bird with the injured wing. I can only make out parts of what she’s saying.

I’m not fluent in squirrel yet.

Not like other humans! Really cares... Knows medicine! She can help... Trust her. We do! Friend!

I smile at that last word. I don’t have many friends. When you tell the kids in the schoolyard you can talk to animals, most call you a liar. Or a freak. Some even say you’re evil.

Hey, I get it. It's an unusual, uh, "talent" to have, but it's a big part of who I am. Besides, I am really good at this "helping animals" thing.

I notice her wing is sagging. She might have snagged it taking off from a tree, or maybe she bumped into a giant. My animal friends say it happens a lot. The songbird curiously sniffs my fingers with her beak.

"That's it now. Climb in," I say in a soft voice. Deirdre chimes in too, squeaking her encouragement.

Finally, after a moment of hesitation, the bird steps into my steady palm! Below, I hear the chattering cheer of my friends.

"What's your name?" I ask the little bird as I carefully cradle her fragile body.

She chirps in a small singsong voice.

"Scarlet? How lovely to meet you, Scarlet." I stand up and walk her over to my office.

My office is really just a quilt I stole from the maid's quarters. (Mother wanted it tossed anyway.) On the blanket, I have my satchel of herbs that I pinched from the kitchen and mending tools I've gathered from our sewing kits. I store everything in a hollow log near the clearing so no one

questions what I'm up to when I go on my "daily walks" beyond our garden gates.

I rinse my hands with the little jug of water I've brought with me, then open my satchel and pull out the small fabric slings I've been making while Mother thought I was practicing my needlepoint. Finding one that looks to be the right size, I get to work, setting the bird's wing as best I can. Scarlet tweets excitedly when I'm finished. Then I mix basil, chamomile, and willow bark seeds together with the water.

"This should help with the pain," I tell her. "Come see me again in a few days, and we'll see how your wing is mending. If you want, we can help you find a safe place to sleep in the meantime." I place the mixture in a tiny thimble and encourage Scarlet to drink. After a few sips, she tweets at me excitedly, and I know she's saying thank you. She has a sibling that lives in a hollowed out old oak three trees over so she'll be safe there while she heals. That's a relief.

Everyone is so excited about Scarlet's new sling that they can't keep quiet. Between the neighs, snorts, and chittering from other animals, I'm worried a big, bad wolf—or worse, the main house—will wonder what's going on.

"Keep it down!" I say with a laugh. "You're going to give

us away!” The noise decreases slightly, and I lean back and soak in the sunlight filtering through the trees.

I live for moments like this. Being a creature caretaker is all I’ve wanted to be. Mother thought it was a phase I’d grow out of, which is why she didn’t pay Father any mind when he bought me a leather satchel filled with “animal doctor” supplies. But ever since, I’ve been pulling spiders out of drinking jugs, mending birds’ wings on my bedroom windowsill, rescuing wayward kittens from hungry foxes, and getting an occasional visit from a unicorn that has lost its sense of direction.

I won’t be “growing out of it” anytime soon. I don’t know how I’m able to talk to animals or know what they need, but I’m smart enough to know I don’t want to give up a gift like that. In time, as I increase my studies, or...um...learn where I can get actual studies in this area, I have a feeling that even woodland creatures beyond the borders of Cobblestone Creek will hear about me and seek me out for help.

“Devinaria!”

I sit up straight. The birds stop chirping. Lily pokes her head out of my pocket again, and we stare at each other worriedly. No one should be looking for me out here. Not when

I swore I was going to Mother Hubbard's Tea Shoppe with some girls from class.

"Devinaria! Where are you?"

Drooping dragons! As the voice grows louder, I hear trumpets sounding. It's as if a royal procession is about to roll right through the forest. I hear footsteps, then heavy breathing, as if someone's running in our direction.

I jump up, trying to put all my supplies away before someone sees them. Then I remember what I'm wearing. I look down at my undergarments and torn shirt and spin around in a desperate search for my skirt. The shirt and bloomers I'm wearing aren't much different from the outfits the boys in the village wear, but the ensemble is definitely not—as my mother would say—"princess appropriate."

"Princess Devinaria!" Our footman Jacques sounds out of breath as he stumbles into the clearing. "There you are!"

I cringe. I *hate* when people call me that. "Devin is just fine, Jacques." I try to maintain an air of dignity as I grab my skirt from a bush and quickly wrap it around my waist, pinning it on the side where I've cut it for easy on-and-off situations. With a ribbon tied and draped down the side, no one can tell I sliced the skirt open (other than Jacques, who

has just seen my little trick and looks quite alarmed).

“How, um, did you even find me out here?” I run a hand through my hair and pull out a leaf. “Did you need something?” I ask him.

“Miss, it’s urgent!” Jacques’s eyes widen as the trumpets in the distance sound again. “Your mother...father...the trumpets... Miss, *it’s* coming, and...”

I inhale sharply and stumble backward. Lily flicks her tongue wildly. “No,” I whisper.

“Yes!” Jacques insists, grabbing my hand. “Your invitation is here!”



ROYAL ACADEMY

From the desk of the Fairy Godmother

Headmistress Olivina would like to cordially welcome*

*Devinaria Nile of Cobblestone
Creek, Enchantasia*

to Royal Academy for her first year of princess training! Please arrive with a training wand, mini magical scroll, several quills, and no fewer than three ball gowns, two petticoats, and three pairs of dress shoes. (Please note: Glass slippers should have scuffed soles to prevent injuries due to heavily waxed floors.) Personal stylists and tailors will be on-site to assist all students in creating their signature royal style. We look forward to seeing you one week from today!



**The word welcome is only a formality! Attendance at RA is mandatory for all young royals in the kingdom. Questions should be sent by magical scroll to the Fairy Godmother's office.*



You Are Cordially Invited

Jacques pulls me through the clearing, and I let him because I'm numb, numb, numb. I've been dreading this day for a long time. My heart pumps harder as we near the grounds of the cottage.

Okay, it's not really a cottage. I just call it that. It's a castle. The word *castle* just sounds so obnoxious. Like, "Sorry I'm late. It's a long coach ride from my castle." I hate when some of the kids at school say things like that. I hear the village kids talking about us sometimes. *Fancy-schmancies* they call our type. If only they could see what I'm wearing right now.

Mother is already pacing at the garden gate as we approach, and that's when I realize I have a bigger problem than the invitation to end all invitations. Such as the fact that

my clothes are torn and I'm covered in dirt and leaves when I said I was going to Mother Hubbard's. I dig in my heels on the grass, and Jacques falters.

"Princess!" He strains to keep me moving. "We must... go... Wow, you're strong."

Hanging from tree branches all day is great for upper body strength.

"I can't go, Jacques." I pull back. "I'm sorry."

"Your mother is waiting!"

"I can't let her see me like this!"

He pulls.

I yank his arm back. We could play tug-of-war all day.

"Devinaria?"

We both turn to the garden gate, where Mother is peering through the ivy that clings to the fence. Her hair is styled in an elaborate updo even though it's just a regular Tuesday afternoon, and I spot her tiara nestled among her curls. Seeing her makes my stomach start doing cartwheels.

I wave. "Hello, Mother."

She steps through the gate with a look of horror on her face. "You? You! *You!*" She's pointing and stuttering as she takes in my appearance. She touches my torn skirt and

cries out. Jacques lets go of my arm and slowly steps away from me. He can sense a teakettle about to whistle when he sees one.

“You look lovely today, Mother! How was your luncheon with the royal court?” I curtsy clumsily.

“I left early when I heard what was happening. Get in the house this instant!” She grabs my arm and starts walking. “If we’re lucky, we can clean your face and hands before they get here. They’re already one chateau away!”

“How do you know they’re coming here?” I ask as Mother pulls me through the garden gate where my lady-in-waiting, Anastasia, is...well...waiting. Her eyes widen when she sees my ragged appearance.

“The dove delivered the preliminary invitation to our doorstep an hour ago so you could be ready.” Mother pulls a scroll out of her pocket and hands it to me. “And you’re clearly *not* ready.”

As I skim the scroll, I get a sinking feeling in my chest. “They need me there next week?” Now my voice is shrill. “That’s not enough time! I...have nothing to wear.” There’s no greater travesty in Mother’s life than not having the right gown, even for something as informal as a trip to the village.

She waves her hand around. “Of course you have things to wear! Darling, I’ve been packing your trunk for Royal Academy all year!”

I should have known. “But my hair and my nails... They’re a mess!” I falter.

“Done and done!” Mother ticks off each concern with a joyous laugh. “I have maids inside now waiting to help. Devinaria, the *Enchantasia Insider* gives us hints on the week invites will go out, so I’m prepared.” She pulls a twig out of my hair with a frown. “I’m sure they can do *something* with this bird’s nest of yours.”

My heart is pounding faster. It feels as though the garden walls are closing in. I pull away. “But I don’t want to go to Royal Academy.”

Mother’s jaw begins to quiver. “That’s nonsense! We’ve talked about this path for you since you were a toddler. This is your chance to move up the royal ladder! There hasn’t been a widespread plague or dragon outbreak in years, so we both know being twelfth in line for the throne will get you nowhere. With any luck and perhaps some fairy magic, you’ll meet a prince at Royal Academy so you can rule a small province or kingdom.”

“Mother!” I sputter. I can see some of my forest friends now, peeking through the garden gate. “You’d want a whole village to be wiped out just so I could be queen?”

My voice is louder than I intended, and I realize all the servants are looking at us. Mother’s face is crimson. She smiles brightly at them all, then turns back to me. “Don’t be ridiculous, Devin. I was just pointing out how difficult your prospects are! What I’m trying to say is that going to RA will give you the best chance of becoming a queen.”

“Who says I even want to be a queen?” I counter. “Maybe I’m meant to do something else with my life. Look at all the good work I’ve been able to do for the creatures of Cobblestone Creek.” I motion to the fence. “I know you don’t want to admit it, but I’ve got a way with animals. I can understand them and help them.”

Mother turns me away from the servants. “Would you stop saying that?” she whispers. “You sound deranged! It’s your destiny to become a ruler!”

“Ah, I see you found Devin,” Father says, walking up behind us. He’s dressed in his finest threads, a sash across his chest showcasing the many gold medals he’s earned as a commander in Enchantasia’s Royal Infantry. He kisses my

cheek, even though it's sweaty. "Ready for your invitation?" he asks me, but before I can answer, Mother cuts in again.

"Devin, sometimes I just don't understand what you're thinking. We have put up with this childish animal infatuation long enough."

Father puts a hand on her shoulder and says, "Belinda, you can't deny she has a gift."

"Gift? It's a *hobby*." Mother looks at the two of us as if we're conspiring against her. "You must stop encouraging her!" she says to Father, then turns to me. "This is not your future, Devinaria. Royal Academy is! Just look at your cousin, Penelope Claudine. She went to Royal Academy, and now she's married to a king with three castles!"

"I don't want three castles!" I protest. "I don't even need the one castle we have. It's too big."

"Oh, Devin, you're so charming." Mother takes my hand in her free one. She is smiling so earnestly that for a moment I feel bad about how hard I'm fighting her. "What is this really about? Are you nervous about going away to school? Because I am sure you're going to love it there. Royal Academy was created just a few years after your father and I were married, so I never got to go, but it sounds like a dream! Can you

imagine having a royal tailor on hand to make you any ball gown you want?"

"But I don't want..." Never mind. I pull my hand away and fold my arms across my chest, ready to restate my case. Mother knows she's lost me again. I hear horses galloping in the distance. The trumpet sound is growing nearer too. I don't have much time.

"Fight me all you like," Mother finally says. "Let your official royalty profile portrait be one of you looking like this! The truth is, you don't have a choice concerning whether you attend or not." She points to the fine print on the bottom of the scroll and makes sure Father sees it too. "All royals of your age must attend RA. It says so right here."

I bite my lip so hard I taste blood. The trumpets are growing louder. Suddenly, the servants open the back doors, and I see men wearing wigs and gold-trimmed white jackets. They're carrying my official proclamation as they march into our garden. There's also a painter with them who immediately begins to sketch my image.

"Her royal portrait!" Mother cries.

I can feel her wiping my face and trying to tame my hair, but my eyes are only on one person: my father. He's my one

hope for avoiding a future that involves Royal Academy. “Father?” I say questioningly. *“Please.”*

I watch his expression closely. It wavers between sadness and an emotion I can’t identify. He places his hands on my shoulders as Mother tries to fluff my skirt. I watch her pull the ribbon out of her own hair and try to tie it around mine.

“Devin, I tried. I really did,” Father says. “But she wouldn’t budge on the matter. Even after I explained your extraordinary gift. If anything, it only made her want you more.”

She? “You mean Mother?” I question.

Father shakes his head as more guards arrive. If they’re surprised by my appearance, they don’t say.

“Olivina,” Father explains in a whisper. “Royal Academy’s headmistress.” His eyes search mine. “She says she can see the future, and you, my child, are destined for great things.”



ROYAL ACADEMY

Student Supply List for Young Ladies



If you don't have these books at home—and I expect many of you are well-versed in these teachings already!—please purchase and bring to the first day of orientation. I look forward to many fruitful discussions this school year.—Headmistress Olivina

Reading List

- ✧ Royal Academy Rules by Fairy Godmother Olivina
- ✧ Beyond the Glass Slipper: How to Nab a Prince without the Right Shoes by Cinderella
- ✧ Cursed Childhood: How to Avoid Being a Target for Sleeping Curses and Poison Apples by Fairy Godmother Olivina, forward by Princess Rose
- ✧ Rescue Plans and Other Things a Princess Should Never Leave Her Castle Without by Fairy

Godmother Olivina

- ✧ Ten Ways to a Happier Imprisonment by Rapunzel
- ✧ Mirror Image: Finding the Royal Within by Snow White

Optional Reading

- ✧ From Rags to Royals: 1,001 Beauty Tips from Princesses compiled by Marta Marigold, RA's Official Beautification Expert



Don't Be Late for an Important Date!

Ever since my invitation arrived last week, it has been chaos at home. Mother has been running around confirming I have everything I need for school, and I've been making checklists to ensure my animal friends are well taken care of while I'm gone. I'm busy writing out my final creature care instructions for Anastasia when a dove lands on my windowsill. It has a scroll held tightly in its beak. The familiar pink-tinted parchment tells me what I already know: it's yet another decree from Royal Academy. So far I've gotten:

1. An invitation to First Knight Out, which is apparently a ball held on our first night there.
2. Information on how to book ball gown

fittings. “Appointments fill up fast!” the scroll blared in glowing red letters. (I crumpled that one up and used it as kindling for my fire.)

3. Details on new lady-in-waiting assignments. I’m appointed a “fully trained” one after arriving at RA and can’t bring Anastasia. (She’s been sniffing all week.)
4. Biographies on my new roommates. I haven’t read those yet. (I cringe, thinking of the one Mother must have written for me.)

What could RA have left to tell me? Do they need to know my glass slipper size?

“Greetings, Demetris,” I say to the dove. “What’s new?” I gently pry the scroll from the bird’s beak, then slide over a small bowl of water I have ready for such visits. Demetris sips politely as I open the scroll. This one is a reading list from Olivina herself.

“Holy harpies!” I say to Demetris as Anastasia stares at me strangely. “Why would I want to read *Beyond the Glass Slipper: How to Find a Prince without the Right Shoes?*”

“Oh, miss, I loved that book!” Anastasia pipes up.

Both Demetris and I look at *her* strangely.

“I know I’m not royal, but every girl should know the way to a prince’s heart.”

I stare at her blankly.

“Surely, you’ve read it, miss.”

I shake my head.

“You mean, you’ve got your first ball tomorrow night, and you don’t know how to act?” Her jaw drops as she moves toward me, retying the bow on my skirt. “Thankfully, I remember the book well. The most important thing to do is keep your eyes lowered the whole time so he can see your lashes. And only dance with him *twice*. The third time, run away and say you have a curfew or your coach is about to turn back into a pumpkin. That will keep him guessing.”

What am I going to do with this girl?

“Anastasia, that sounds like terrible advice! Besides, I can think of plenty of reasons to run away from a boy that have nothing to do with dancing.” I pull a worn book out of my drawer. “You should read something really helpful like *Red-y for Anything*. Have you read it?”

She shakes her head.

“It’s the story of Red. You know, Little Red Riding Hood?”

It's about how she went from almost being eaten to becoming the fiercest warrior in the Hollow Woods. She's one of my idols. I'm sure this book is much more interesting than some boring book on balls and princes." I drop it into Anastasia's hands, and Demetris tweets his thanks before flying back to school. "Now let's go over those instructions I gave you one more time."

"I'm to go into the garden at least twice a week, maybe more if the weather is bad," Anastasia repeats. "I should replenish your supply of medicinal herbs and slings in the hollow tree near the large pine, and if the animals come pecking at your window while you're gone, I'm to tell them you're at school, then read to them from this scroll you've compiled of ailments and possible cures." Anastasia's eyes widen. "But, miss, what if they try talking to me? You know I don't understand them."

"It's okay," I tell her again. "I've already spoken to them, and they're just thankful you're going to try to help them while I'm gone." I glance at the packed wardrobe and trunk sitting near my door. "Which hopefully won't be long."

"But, miss..." Anastasia begins to say.

"Devin," I remind her. "We're the same age. You can call me Devin."

Anastasia lowers her eyes. "It doesn't feel right, miss. You're royalty."

When she makes comments like this, I want to hit her over the head with my shiny new training wand (which is so not as fun as a mortar and pestle). "That's just a title. We're the same, you and me." I squeeze her hand. "I know I'm asking a lot, between taking care of the animals and sneaking around my parents, but I promise you, if I can find a way to get you into RA with me, I'll do it."

Her face crumples, and I'm afraid I've made her cry again. Instead, she curtsies. "That would be most wondrous, miss!"

We're back to *miss* again.

"Devin!" Mother's voice echoes through the palace. "They're coming! You should be waiting at the door!" I hear trumpets and know it's time.

Anastasia fixes the hairdo of braids atop my head, which I wanted instead of a normal updo. (Hey, all Mother said was that my hair had to be up.) But Mother won the battle over what I'm wearing. She says she heard Olivina puts a lot of emphasis on first impressions, so she has me in a baby-blue corseted gown. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to breathe or wave. (Mother says it's all about the carriage wave on the

procession into school.) I'm changing out of this contraption as soon as I get to my new room. But before I head out on my journey, there is still one thing I have to do.

"Can you stall my mother for just a moment more?" I beg Anastasia.

Anastasia nods and hurries off, and I run to my window and look out. As I'd hoped, several of my animal friends have gathered in the garden. "Don't worry," I tell them, trying not to get choked up. (Anastasia's crying has thrown me off my game.) "I'll be home for holidays, and Anastasia is going to take good care of you till I find a way back myself." Deirdre glides from the tree to my windowsill.

"Miss you! Olivina! Won't be back! Princess!"

I'm still not fluent in squirrel so I only understand some of what she's saying, but I can sense her panic. "Don't worry. I'm not going to get distracted by all those princessy things at Royal Academy," I assure Deirdre. "I'll be back. You'll see!"

"Devinaria! They're almost at the door!"

"Goodbye!" I say as Deirdre keeps chittering. I give my bedroom one last look, then head downstairs. I stop short when I see what's going on. The castle's staff is lined up in our entranceway in front of the open door. Outside villagers are

gathered on our lawn, cheerfully clapping along to a band. I can see someone from *Happily Ever After Scrolls* is also here, reporting on the occasion. Drooping dragons! This is all for my send-off to school?

I hear a neigh and run down the steps to the doorway. My eyes widen. There are eight—*eight!*—horses attached to a ginormous pumpkin coach. A real pumpkin! I always thought Princess Ella was embellishing that vegetable transportation story, but here is an exact replica. I watch as a footman hoists my luggage onto the back, then turns and opens a door for me.

“Make way for the princess!”

I whip around. Gretchen, my neighbor, is holding a banner with my name on it:

*Princess Devinaria of Enchantasia.
Long may she reign!*

Reign? For Grimm’s sake. I open my mouth to say something to Gretchen, but Father and Mother have appeared and each taken one of my arms to lead me to the coach. People begin to cheer, Anastasia waves a tearful goodbye, and the trumpets grow louder. I dig in my heels.

“Father?” I hesitate. I hate that I sound nervous.

“You’re going to do fine,” he assures me. “Just be yourself.”

“But better!” Mother adds. “Be the princess we know you are.”

Father gives my hand a squeeze and whispers in my ear. “I made sure to add a few of your favorite things to your trunk after your mother finished packing. Have fun.” He winks as he hands me off to the footmen standing in front of the carriage. “You are special. Always remember that.”

“And brush your hair a hundred times before bed each night,” Mother adds. “It will really add luster to your locks.” She touches the coach. “Now, don’t forget to smile when you arrive. Everyone will be watching you—the *Enchantasia Insider* says pumpkin coaches are reserved for Olivina’s most promising new students!”

I’m one of Olivina’s most promising new students? The fairy godmother doesn’t even know me. If she did, I’m pretty sure she would not consider me princess material.

Mother starts to cry, and Father hands her a handkerchief.

“Good luck, darling,” Father says as the footmen help me inside. The cheering increases as we begin to move. “Write often! Send Pegasus Posts!”

“Always listen to Olivina!” Mother adds. “She knows best! Oh! And, Devin?” She runs after the coach. “Don’t forget to call for a...before you reach school!”

“What?” I shout. I can’t hear what Mother is saying, but it must not matter if she only remembered to tell me now.

The coach is already speeding me away from the only life I’ve ever known and barreling me toward a new one full of uncertainty.