

Magic Sucks

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PART I
THE FIRST JOURNEY



PROLOGUE
TEFNUT REMEMBERS

It is not true that cats can't see colors. It's just not that important to us. A cat's world is filled with exciting movements, sounds and smells. I mean, who cares what shade of gray a mouse is?

This is why, for me, the charm of dragonflies is in their mouth-watering quick, darting movements and the appetizing crinkly noise I can hear their wings make. But I have to admit, watching the iridescent shine their wings take on in the light is one of the times that I do enjoy color as part of an overall food display. The group of dragonflies that I was watching that day, almost ten years ago displayed all of these qualities and were very pleasant to watch.

I had been stalking my family. Fun, but not very challenging. They had no idea they were being followed. It was a warm afternoon and their walk had been hijacked by a nap under an impressively large oak tree. Baby Miriam was in her carriage, her parents, heads touching as they leaned against each other, were sitting on the remains of a stone bench that had once wrapped all the way around an ancient triple trunked oak.

Because dragonflies are so much creatures of the open air, I noticed right away when several of them flew into the shade. I saw how even to me, the colors of their wings seemed to intensify in the shade. In fact, in the shade, instead of losing their sun-colors, I was able to see that each of the dragonflies was actually a different color.

Soft snores came from Miriam's parents who didn't see another unusual dragonfly quality...Curiosity. The 'dragonflies' who, on closer inspection, looked suspiciously like tiny winged people, flew around the humans as if examining them and then flew over to see what was in the carriage. The faintest whisper drifted to my sensitive ears.

"Look at her ears. She must have elf ancestry."

"Hush, Poppy. You'll wake the humans."

"But Farthingale. She's one of us. Can't we keep her?"

"Husshhh," they all chorused together, like a rustle of falling leaves.

"Elf ancestry," I thought. "I knew I was right about this family. This is perfect."

CHAPTER 1 GET A LIFE

Yesterday may have been my tenth birthday, but today was still a school day. I left my wet sneakers and socks at the front door and tiptoed down the hall. The Do Not Disturb sign was hanging on the door of Mom's study. Good. She was still working. That meant there was just Dad waiting for me in the kitchen. Maybe he wouldn't notice.

"Miriam, get in here," he bellowed. The risotto is ready NOW." He noticed. I sighed and followed Dad's voice into the kitchen. Having a TV chef for a father is not as great as my friends think it is.

"Here, try this." Dad held out his silver tasting spoon.

I put my school bag on the kitchen table and looked in the pot. Your basic rice, little pieces of tomato, and 'other vegetables', mixture, but I knew better. Nothing Dad makes is ever ordinary.

I forbade him from making me any more school lunches when I was in the second grade. It's bad enough I have to eat this stuff at home, but in the school cafeteria, Dad's fancy food is a recipe for ongoing public humiliation. Of course, he's always allowed to slip a little of any desert he's working on into my lunch bag. That's different. In my world, sugar is power.

I brought the spoon a little closer and sniffed. Nothing terrible yet. I sipped a little. Still acceptable and not too hot or too spicy. I've been burned plenty of times. I ate the spoonful and pursed my lips.

"So, do you like it?"

"It's okay."

"Perfect. I'll use it for Sunday's show." 'It's okay' is the highest rating I ever give to sugar-free food.

"Do you want some more?"

"Mmmm. I guess," I said diffidently, looking around to see if there was anything better going. He ladled some of the rice stew into a bowl, added a fork and handed it to me with a dishtowel. Dad always anticipates the worst.

I wandered back to my room, bowl in hand, my homework-filled knapsack accidentally-on-purpose left behind.

Mom was finished working and out in the hall, waiting to pounce.

"Hi, Mom." I tried not to sound too resigned. From the time I get off the school bus, to the moment I open the front door, my life is my own. But that's about it.

"Did you taste the risotto?" she asked. "How did you like it?"

"Fine." I said carefully keeping my voice as flat and noncommittal as possible. Any hint of enthusiasm and she demands details.

Mom is a syndicated newspaper cartoonist. Everyone in my class reads Ishtabibel, Mom's cartoon, every day. Everyone knows that the skinny kid with the frizzy hair is me. Some days it's really hard to make myself get on the school bus.

On the other hand, some days it's really hard to make myself get off the school bus. Mom is always waiting for me to do something funny. She hovers without mercy around deadline time. Both of my parents work at home. They are there ALL the time.

I could feel Mom staring at me as I carried my rice-bowl the rest of the way to my room full of new stuff that was already old. Hard to believe that yesterday was my

birthday. Even turning ten had already lost its zing. I had made my usual birthday cake wish. The one thing I wanted more than anything else in the world. And as usual, it didn't come true. I don't know why I bother.



Good, she's here. I jumped off the beanbag chair, let my claws sink into my favorite carpet, the one I'm not supposed to scratch, and relaxed into a good, long, spine-tingling stretch. I was ready.

Miriam put her food dish on the floor, went to the closet and took out a couple of old Barbies. Must be The Sister Game. That's the only thing she does with those dolls any more. It's a cute game, but I think she plays it too much.

It was The Sister Game, all right. Very private. I'm the only one allowed to watch. This is a major point in her favor. She's a kid who instinctively knows that cats can be trusted.

While Miriam taped cutout cardboard wings to the backs of Barbie and Kelly, I lurked over to the bookcase. Silently, I jumped to the top shelf and stationed myself next to a big, heavy flashlight ready to push and jump.

CHAPTER 2

FOLLOW THAT CAT

I put Dad's risotto on the floor and got out a couple of old Barbies to play The Sister Game: two sisters go for a picnic. They eat; they talk. Little sister talks; big sister listens. There are no secrets between these two. Big sister always understands. After lunch, little sister gets into trouble; big sister comes to the rescue. That's it. Simple, but satisfying.

I don't use names, because I don't know my big sister's name yet. She's a real person with a real name. I just don't know what it is. It would be too weird if I thought of her as one person and after I met her she turned out to be another.

This time, I skipped the picnic and got right to the adventure. I twisted Kelly's wings so they pointed straight down and put her into my inflatable wastebasket. Then I put Barbie next to the miniature picnic basket that I use with this game.

Barbie has just finished putting the picnic things away when she realizes that little sister isn't there.

"Where are you, little sister?" she calls out. Little sister doesn't answer, because she's too far away. Her teeth are chattering. Her wings are soggy and useless. She can't keep treading water much longer, but the steep slippery mud bank is like glass. Again and again, she digs and pushes her fingers into the mud and tries to pull herself out. But each time clumps of mud come away in her hands and she slides back into the water.

Big sister is getting worried. Her dear little sister who she loves more than anything in the world is gone. Her heart pounds. My heart pounds. She starts to sweat...

Just when I was getting to the good part...

...my cat fell off the bookcase.

She hit the floor with a crash and a bloodcurdling yowl that stopped my heart-pounding in mid-beat.

"Oh my god! Tefnut!" I gasped. "Are you okay?" Apparently not, because she raced out of the room so fast her gray stripes blurred to plaid.

"Tefnut. Wait. I'm coming." Tefnut threw herself through the cat door into the warm spring drizzle, held up one paw and mewed pitifully.

"Ooooh," I said using the squeaky tones of my best cat-talk voice. "Tifi-poo, you're hurt. Let me see." Pushing open the screen door with one hand, I reached out to pet her with the other.

I always suspected Tefnut didn't really like my mush-talk. That cat was halfway down the street before the screen door swung shut behind me. Three feet, moving at top speed.

Run, run, run. Hop. Run, run, run. Hop. If I hadn't have been so worried, I would have been impressed.

"Hey, Tefnut, not so fast," I hollered. I broke into a barefoot jog, trying to keep up and watch where I put my tender toes at the same time. We crossed over to the next block where the creek started.

Her tail started to twitch with excitement and she raced ahead like a kitten.

No limp.

Suddenly, Tefnut cut a sharp right and bounded with all four paws onto a little bridge.

I slid to a halt and stared at my cat. She was sitting at the center of a small, wooden footbridge over the creek, concentrating on her rear end, which apparently was in immediate need of a bath.

I could feel my jaw dropping into fly-catching position. There had never been a bridge or a path through these woods before. I knew that. “More importantly,” I thought. “Why did it look so familiar?”

There was a moldy-but-nice smell in the air that I almost recognized. And the bridge. I loved that bridge because of the wonderful clacking sound the planks would make when the wheels went over it. Wheels? What wheels? I was barefoot and bike-less.

Past the bridge, the new path kept going straight through the trees, making the woods look a lot bigger than I remembered.

Tefnut stopped cleaning and walked over, rubbing my ankles and purring her approval. I barely noticed her. I was so surprised by the bridge, not to mention my cat, who was acting like Lassie Come Home, that my brain had fuzzed over. I walked distractedly through the woods, herded along by Tefnut with an occasional ankle rub that kept me on the path and moving.

The bright sunshine that hit me when I stepped out of the woods put a brake on the whole process.



Miriam is basically a nice kid. A big mouth and a rotten temper, but a good heart. That’s why I like her. Also, she lets me sleep on her feet at night. That counts for a lot when you’re a cat.

Now if I can just get her moving again. Years of planning and just when we get to the important part, the one thing I want more than anything else in the world, she acts like she’s been super-glued to the ground.

CHAPTER 3

CATS RULE

When I was eight years old, I found a big pile of plastic-covered photos on Dad's desk. My parents always made two copies of photographs to send to grandparents. One copy each was sent to Mom's and to Dad's parents. The third was covered with clear plastic to keep the water out, and put aside for my adopted grandparents.

"You told me these pictures were for Grandma and Grandpa Mermaid," I said to Dad. "Why haven't you sent them?" I was suspicious.

"There's no mail under the water," he explained. "We usually bring them when we visit."

"When can I visit?"

"When you can swim like a fish," he replied.

I asked for and got swimming lessons that year but I never got invited to visit Grandma and Grandpa Mermaid. There are no pictures of them in the family album either, and underwater cameras have been around for years.

It took a whole year and a major discovery for my youthful suspicions to grow into full-fledged disbelief. I can be awfully naive.

Recently, I discovered that if I yawn a lot, whenever one of them tries to tell me another boring Grandma and Grandpa Mermaid story, they will stop and talk about something else.

Most of my friends think their parents are weird. But I know mine really are. Nice people, but not all there when it comes to the parent thing. I wouldn't be surprised to find out that Mom dressed up as the Tooth Fairy every time I lost a tooth. Now it looks like the family curse of extreme weirdness extends to my cat.

I don't know how Tefnut did it, but I was looking at a dandelion dotted meadow. Big patches of queen-anne's-lace and purple chicory, where there used to be houses. A new path is one thing, but these are whole houses that are missing. I don't think yawning will bring them back. My feet, no longer willing to work unsupervised, waited for instructions.

I guess Tefnut was beginning to lose patience with me. She bounded ahead, and went into her limping act again. It was too ridiculous, but she probably knew that. I started to giggle.

"Hic."

My own giggles had turned on me. I was trapped in hiccup mode.

"Tif-hic...Tif-hic...Tif-hic..." Now it wasn't just my feet that were out of order.

Giggles, hiccups, whatever... it worked. I seemed to have hiccupped myself back to sanity, or as close as I could get under the circumstances. As long as I didn't try to talk, the hiccups stayed quiet. I gave up on my voice, took charge of my feet and followed the cat.

Tefnut trotted down the path, head erect, tail straight up. No limp. I had to move fast to keep up as I dutifully followed that cat through the tall grass that was driving my ankles crazy with tickling.

There has to be some kind of explanation for this, I thought, trying to make what I saw fit with what I know.

All right, so my cat is a little smarter than I thought she was. That's okay, she's not really doing anything that a very smart cat, like Tefnut is, couldn't do.

It's sort of a Homeward Bound kind of thing, I thought. Yeah, that's it. Cats rule and dogs drool. Except, that I'm the dog here.

I guess I can live with that, I thought, gumming around for some spit, so I could look the part. I was taking aim at an extra big dandelion, when my nose...I'm really getting into this dog thing... noticed a change in the air.

The moldy-but-nice smell was losing ground to a serious flower smell. Roses, and lots of them.

I did a little hop-skip through the grass, holding onto a recently prickle-wounded toe, and trying not to lose ground to Tefnut who was still plowing ahead through cat-high meadow grass.

I found the roses, a few minutes later. Roses in bushes, roses in bowers, roses pruned like little trees. They were all over the place in a fancy garden that was on the other side of a tall hedge at the far end of the meadow.

Tefnut led me down the garden path to a broken stone bench that went partway around a huge old tree. When she jumped up and began cleaning her face, I took the hint and sat down next to her.

We waited.

Looking around at the tidy paths and flowerbeds. I had to admit that this was a big improvement on the houses that were here yesterday. But that didn't change the fact that this place was not supposed to be here at all.

I fished through my brain for something, anything that would make it okay and keep me out of the loony bin. Time travel? Dimension hopping?

Face it, dum dum, you've been watching too many Star Trek reruns. There had to be a simple explanation. Something that worked in my world. Not the bedtime-story world. That was not where I lived. Not anymore. Those dumb stories went down the drain with Grandma and Grandpa Mermaid and the Tooth Fairy.

I had it! It's because I had been worried about Tefnut. Of course! I was so focused on Tefnut, that I didn't notice how far we had come.

Therefore, I am not where I think I am, but somewhere further out than I usually go. That's why I've never seen the bridge or the meadow. There never were houses here. I'm confusing this place with a spot closer to home.

Just because I grew up here, doesn't mean I know every nook and cranny of this neighborhood. I carefully ignored the little voice in my head that said `yes, you do, and this isn't part of it' and moved to a different compartment in my brain.



Well, I got her here. Now I can relax and let The Six take over. I forgot just how great this place smells. Complex...challenging...always fascinating, with just a hint of delicious. It's good to be back.

CHAPTER 4

BIG EYEBALL TO LITTLE EYEBALL

My mind wandered back to its usual resting spot -- my mother's underwear drawer. That was where I found the milk carton last year. I was going through my parents' drawers for the umpteenth millionth time. No matter how often I looked, I always found something interesting.

This time it was a milk carton. It was squashed flat and stuck under a pile of T-shirts. The bottom half had been torn away and what was left was so old that all the milk smell was gone out even when I put it right up to my nose.

This has to be the weirdest thing I ever found in here, I thought, turning it over in my hands. Then I saw the word MISSING on the other side, and I saw the picture that was under it.

My stomach rolled over and kicked me in the chest. I shoved it back under Mom's t-shirts so fast that my brain didn't get to register what the rest of me was doing.

The details must have been with the missing bottom half of the milk carton. There was no name. No date. Just the one word and the picture.

It didn't matter. I didn't need words. I knew this picture. It was like looking into the mirror of who I used to be. Except for the straight dark hair, it could have been a slightly younger photo of me. Same stupid smile. Same boring brown eyes. It could only be a sister.

A sister. I had an older sister and my parents never told me about her. They never told me what happened to her. How could they? With shaking hands, I closed the drawer and left the room.

My parents were married for ten years before I was born. They'd always said they weren't in a hurry to have kids. They lied. No matter how terrible it was for them, they should have told me. Lying to make someone happy is still a lie.

At least now I understood why Mom and Dad were so crazy. All those stories about magic in our family. Of course they're not true. No wonder Mom and Dad make things up. Anybody would prefer living in Fairyland to living in a real world with a missing child. And look at how overprotective they are with me. It all fits. That's my Mom and Dad, all right. Sweet. Lovable, and flaky. Very, very flaky.

The next day, I came home from school and found Mom's rear end, dripping dust balls and sticking out of the closet in her bedroom. On the floor behind her was a stack of paper bags from Purple Heart. The closet was practically empty. All the drawers were pulled out and there were loose hangers and piles of clothes everywhere.

"Hi, Mom, I'm home," I said to her tush.

"Hi, honey," the tush answered. "I'm spring-cleaning."

"In January?"

"It's the best time. Who wants to go outside?"

Spring-cleaning lasted about a week and when it was over, the milk carton was gone. Lost in the mounds of trash that left my parents' bedroom that week. It wasn't in the newly reorganized underwear drawer or anywhere else in my parent's bedroom. I searched through the oldest family photo albums I could find. No pictures. I looked through the even older junk in the attic. No old report cards, health reports. Nothing. My sister had been erased.

Sitting on the bench in a rose garden that wasn't... couldn't be... I suddenly wondered if this is what had happened to her, the sister I never met. The sister no one ever talks about. A big sister who would never lie to me like my parents do...like our parents do. Maybe Tefnut fell off the bookcase on her birthday, too. Maybe she followed Tefnut to this place and never come back.

"I should go home," I said to Tefnut, reaching out to stroke her fur. I had this bad feeling we were waiting for something to happen and I wasn't sure I wanted to be here when it did.

Tefnut lifted her chin for a scratch. "I shouldn't be here," I said, running my stubby nails through the short fur under her chin. "It's against the rules... all of them." I leaned a little closer for a two-handed scratch. Both sides of the jawbone at once. Tefnut closed her eyes and started to purr.

"Did you really bring me here, Tif, or did I just follow you?" Tefnut opened her green eyes just a little and angled her chin to get my fingers to the right spot. It was clear where her attention lay at the moment and it was not with my little problem.

"I guess I should be grateful you're not answering," I said with a sigh. "It's okay for me to talk to you. But if you answer back, I'm in major trouble, right?" She didn't answer. "Of course, this," I waved my hand towards the sweet-smelling scenery, "is not major trouble. This is only minor trouble. Right, Tiffytoes?"

I knocked on the hard stone of the bench with my knuckles. It made a good, solid, thunking sound. I looked out at the garden. All the regular flowers. Nothing too weird. It was a totally normal bench in a totally normal garden. It just happened to be in the wrong place.

Leaning back, I made myself relax, taking another good look around the garden, leaving one hand resting on the silky fur of Tefnut's back, like a kind of security blanket.

There was a tree shaped fountain in the middle of the garden, water streaming out of its leaves. I leaned a little to the left to see the smiling face carved into the top of the trunk where the branches began. There it was, just where I remembered it.

Whoops.

So maybe I came here when I was little, and forgot. That would explain why it looks so familiar.

We waited some more. Tefnut curled up and went to sleep.

"Don't do that, Tefnut. Wake up. Don't leave me alone."

"Hi." The small voice came from somewhere near my left shoulder. Startled, I jerked my head to the left. Out of the corner of my eye, I could just make out a really big flying bug zooming in on my head.

"Eiewww!" I started to reach up to swat. Tefnut, who I thought was asleep, was suddenly sitting on my hand.

"Hi, Miriam." This time the voice was in front of me. Turning to face the blur at the end of my nose, I pulled back my neck and squinted it into focus.

Turns out it wasn't a bug. I was big eyeball to little eyeball with a tiny person of the female persuasion. She had a double set of wings like on a dragonfly, and was about the same size.

"You can't be real," I whispered. "You're a fairy."



I listened from my spot on the bench with half-closed eyes, feigning sleep. I didn't want to interrupt this special time for Poppy. She's waited so long to be able to talk with Miriam.

CHAPTER 5

POPPY

The small person hanging in the air three inches from my nose looked me over carefully before she spoke. Fairies in the garden were most definitely not what I had in mind yesterday when I blew out the birthday candles and wished for my sister to come back.

My carefully built theory about what was happening here collapsed into little pieces in my head. I could almost hear the tinkle of broken glass.

"I'm Poppy," she finally said, and I snapped back to the present. Not necessarily to reality, just to the present.

Cute name. I thought. Too cute. Animatronics, I second-thoughted, suspiciously. Any minute, the head would start bouncing around on a long spring. The movie cameras would stop while somebody screwed the top back on. I looked out past the tall hedges that surrounded the garden. No cameras. Nice try.

Poppy's red and black wings positively vibrated with excitement. That makes two of us, I thought. I was practically hyperventilating myself.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you," she said. "Awake, I mean."

Poppy settled down on the back of my hand, straightening the folds of her short red and black dress nervously. Robot or real, this was not only a fairy, this was a color-coordinated fairy.

She was narrow and long like the dragonfly her wings resembled and very elegant in spite of her nervousness. You could tell that she had taken a lot of time with her clothes and her bright red hair, as if this were some kind of special occasion.

Whatever she was, compared to this tiny, perfect creature, I was a huge, ugly slob. I wanted to at least smooth out my hair a little, but I was afraid to move.

Late as usual this morning, I had just enough time to pull on a pair of black bike shorts and shove my sneakers into my knapsack before the school bus came. Messy does not describe what my long, curly hair looks like when I don't comb it, which I hadn't, and I was still wearing the over sized T-shirt that I had slept in, my skinny arms and legs poking out like a spider in a sack.

There was an awkward silence while I tried to think of something to say other than what I was actually thinking about.

"So..." I started out, fishing for time. "Does this mean that we've already met?"

Like in my dreams, I'm thinking, or some kind of out-of-body experience, which is what I'm probably having right now.

"In your dreams," she said, smiling sweetly at me.

"In my dreams?" I said in dismay.

Not telepathy too, I thought.

"Well, not really in your dreams," she said more seriously. I guess she noticed I was a little upset. "More like while you dream. I only visit when you're asleep."

All right, I'm thinking, as I take a deep breath. This is not telepathy. That's good. Instead, I'm sitting here talking to the Tooth Fairy. But I didn't have the nerve to say it out loud.

Seeing as there were no movie cameras, the out-of-body experience theory was starting to look better and better.

“Oh,” I said, awkwardly. “So, you visit my room.”

Oh, no, I thought. That sounded awful, like I didn’t think she should do that or something. Probably because it was true.

“I mean, it’s okay,” I lied. “It’s all right that you visit my room, or me or... you know...” I trailed off weakly.

“I know.”

“Good.”

“Yes.”

Poppy fidgeted and stared at her hands. I tried not to fidget, since there seemed to be a fairy sitting on me, and stared at Poppy.

“If anyone told me that I was going to meet you today,” I finally said, “I would have had a million questions. But I can’t think of anything.” I tried to smile.

“Me, too,” she said. “I had a whole list of things to tell you. But I can’t seem to remember any of them just now.” She reached out and stroked my hand, staring down at the skin and the bone bumps.

“So?” I finally asked. “What do you do in my room?”

“Oh, nothing much,” she said nervously. “Hang around and play with Tefnut. Once in a while...” Poppy turned her head away from me and concentrated on the nearest rose bush, “...if I think you need some extra help, I’ll kind of hint things to you while you’re sleeping.”

She put her hands together and started twisting her fingers. “Like... Don’t forget to hand in your homework, or... Be careful when you cross the street. Regular stuff. The kind of things your parents tell you.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.”

Subliminal advertising wasn’t exactly the traditional format for the fairy godmothers that I knew from the Brothers Grimm. I didn’t know what to think, so I didn’t.

“Well, uh, what am I doing here, anyway?” I hoped this was on the list of things she was supposed to tell me.

“That’s easy,” Poppy answered with obvious relief. “It was an accident. The gate was left open by accident.”

“It didn’t look like an accident to me,” I said. “Tefnut led me right here, like she knew exactly what she was doing.” I glanced down at Tefnut who was doing her dead cat imitation, sleeping stretched out on the bench, belly up to the warm sun.

“No. Not now. The first time. When you were a baby.”

Suddenly, my head was filled to bursting with a flood of long forgotten memories.

“I remember,” I cried, sending poor Poppy spinning in the air from the force of my voice. “I remember.”

“It’s one of the stories my parents used to tell me when I was little,” I told her. “They said that magic runs in our family and that I had been touched by fairies when I was a baby.”

“I loved that story. It used to make me feel so special. But I thought that’s all it was. Another lie. You know, something they made up, like the story about my mother having been a mermaid, or that...”

I paused. It didn't feel right mentioning the other lie, the big one, the one they told me the day I asked them about my sister. The big lie that made me see all the other little lies for what they really were.

"...But they told me all about the bridge," I said instead, "and the path and this garden, everything."



So Miriam thinks her parents have been making things up? Well, that explains her cynical streak for the last year. Her mom and dad have been worried sick. They knew something was bugging her. But every time they asked, she clammed up tighter than a can of cat food with no can opener. Surprise, Miriam. Welcome to Fairyland.

CHAPTER 6

THE DAY MOM AND DAD FLUNKED THE HONESTY TEST

“What you didn’t know from the story your parents told you,” Poppy said, “was that there were more than a dozen of us that had met you in the garden that day and that we decided to keep you.”

Keep me? My heart skipped a beat. I half stood up. I think it was time to go home.

“Didn’t you say that your parents used to tell you that magic runs in your family?”

“Yes, but...” I bumped back down again, leaving Poppy temporarily airborne.

“Well, it does.” She automatically drifted back down to my hand. “At least on one side, probably your mother’s, since you said she used to be a mermaid.”

“My mother was not a mermaid,” I said emphatically. I’m not usually this easily distracted, but that story is as old as I am, and it pushes all the wrong buttons.

“My parents are weird. They think I still like those stories. They think I’m the same person I was when I was five years old. They even pretend to save photos for my mermaid grandparents.

“Anyway,” I said, putting the conversation back where I wanted it, “Just what did you mean when you said you decided to keep me?”

“I don’t see why it shouldn’t be true, considering your background,” Poppy said, ignoring my question. My extremely important question.

“How... how can you be so sure?” I said. I was starting to feel very confused. That is to say, more confused than I already was. After all, it hadn’t been that long since I figured out that this garden was one of the many stories Mom and Dad had invented.

I thought a lot about asking my parents about the milk carton I found in their room, but it was no good. I knew they would just make something up, like they did with everything else. Either that or, more likely, they would lose it completely and I would be the one who had to cart them off to the loony bin.

No, they had to pass the test of telling me on their own, or at least with a little prompting. So I prompted.

They failed.

It was about a week after I found the missing-kid picture of my sister. I went as far as I could. I asked them point blank if I had ever had a sister. An older sister. That was the day Mom and Dad flunked the honesty test. They were good. They even managed to look confused.

No. No sister, they had insisted. I was an only child. Then, they changed the subject.

They have a list. I’ve heard it before. I got the standard lecture on how they knew I always wanted a little sister or brother, but that I had to accept that it was never going to happen and look at all the good things about being an only child.

Talking is how we deal with bad things in my family. We talk so we don’t have to listen to the scary stuff and boy, did they talk. By the time they finished, the only thing I knew for sure was that it was a waste of time telling them anything.

I think I knew what their answer was going to be even before I asked. It’s not like they’re dishonest or anything, it’s just that their honesty is based on insanity, just like their reality is based on fantasy. It’s their protection.

The truth is, I never minded being an only child. I don't want *a* sister. I want *this* sister. The real person who already belongs to me. It took me a long time to forgive Mom and Dad. But I did. I still love them. I just don't trust them anymore.

Now, after all that, I have to rethink everything again? I mean, I can see that the story about the bridge and the garden could be true. I'm here, aren't I? But mermaids? That's not real. That's a Disney thing. I don't think so.

"You have elf ears," Poppy said as if that was all she needed to prove anything.

"I do not! Everyone knows that elves have long, pointy ears like Mr. Spock. Next, you'll be telling me that I'm a Vulcan or something."

Poppy, who had been jarred off my hand, flew around to my ear.

"Not the top, silly," she said. "The bottom." I felt a sharp tug on the flat space where most people have regular earlobes. Mine are tiny. Multiple piercings are out of the question.

"It makes us cousins," she said, giving my ear another tweak.

I wondered if my big sister had elf ears, too. I got that bad bumpy feeling in my stomach that I always get when I think of her. I never figured out how I can miss someone that I never met. But she is so real to me. A lot more real than this little person that I could see and feel.

"Why earlobes?"

"Feel how your earlobe is attached to the side of your face all the way. No flap. That's the sign."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"Okay," I said. "So, what did you mean when you said you decided to keep me?"

"Well, the first thing we did," said Poppy, ignoring me again, "was to anchor the gate."

"A gate?" I was puzzled. "What gate?"

"Here, everything. The tree, the meadow, it's an in-between place. The footbridge you crossed over is kind of like a door. Of course, it's kept closed when it's not in use. But every once in a while..." She shrugged.

"You mean, like when somebody forgets to lock the door?"

"Yeah, basically."

"I guess it was really lucky that only my parents wandered in."

"Not really. Most people wouldn't have noticed it."

"How could they not see a whole bridge so close to the sidewalk?"

"There's a tendency for humans not to notice fairy things."

"You still haven't told me what you meant when you said you decided to keep me?"



What is it with this kid? Why is she so nervous? This is the part where she's supposed to be all bubbly and excited ...and grateful. Especially grateful. I need her nicely softened up when we discuss my plans for her future.

CHAPTER 7 FARTHINGALE

“So, anyway,” Poppy continued, ignoring me again, “we opened the new gate in your backyard.”

“My yard! Really? Where is it?” This was getting interesting.

“You know that big triple-trunked beech tree past the deck?”

“You mean where my tree house is?”

“The very one.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it, because we come through it all the time.”

“I can’t believe it. How come I came this way when the tree is so close?”

“I don’t think you can use the tree on your own. You have to know their names.”

“Names? Trees have names?” Before she could answer, a new voice came from behind us.

“Poppy!” it said. “Poppy! What are you doing? Everyone is waiting!”

Another dragonfly-fairy dive-bombed my lap. She had one of those ‘I’m in charge’ kind of voices. She also had long hair that rippled like liquid silver. I was dying to touch it.

The veining in her wings was silver, too. Even her shirt had silver buttons, although it was hard to be sure. They were very small buttons.

“Is it time to go already?” Poppy asked.

“We expected you twenty minutes ago,” the new fairy commented dryly.

“I’m sorry, Farthingale,” Poppy said. “I didn’t realize we had been talking so long.”

Farthingale was standing on my other hand, both of which were in my lap. Fairy chairs. I wondered what else my hands could do that I didn’t know about.

“We need to move quickly if we’re not going to be late,” Farthingale said, glancing down at her wrist. She was wearing a watch. Silver, of course. Dragonfly fairies must all be color-coded.

“Come on Miriam,” she said impatiently. “Let’s go.”

I stood up. It was like school. I didn’t even think about it.

“Hurry along,” Farthingale said. “This way.” She flew over to the solid wall of shrubbery running along the edge of the garden.

I looked down at Tefnut. She was dream-twitching. Still sound asleep.

“Don’t worry about her,” Farthingale said. “She’s fine. Just hurry.”

Wake up, Tefnut, I thought at her as hard as I could. Wake up and show me what to do.

She twitched again. Aha. A sign.

No, not really. I was on my own.

“Excuse me, but where are we going?” I said summoning up my courage. I didn’t understand how someone so small could be so intimidating.

Hanging in mid-air like a bumblebee, Farthingale put her hands on her hips and looked at Poppy reproachfully.

“Oh, Poppy,” she said, shaking her head. “Haven’t you told her anything.”

“I was just getting to it.” Poppy said defensively, her cheeks turning red. “We were still talking about Miriam’s ears.”

“Well, never mind. Let’s get moving. We can talk as we go.”

I watched them argue while I made up my mind. Cousins, I thought. If these little people are my family, they must be my sister’s family, too.

Maybe she really did come here before me. Maybe my birthday wish is about to come true after all. I swallowed hard before I spoke.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go.”



I stretched and rolled onto my side to enjoy the full benefit of the sun-warm bench, but kept my eyes closed to maintain the sleeping cat guise. It sounded like Farthingale was on the rampage. I decided not to wake up just yet.

CHAPTER 8

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE DARK

Looking anxiously back at Tefnut, still asleep on the bench, and with considerable reluctance, I followed Poppy and Farthingale to an elaborate wrought-iron gate guarding a three-foot high opening in the tall hedge around the garden. I was positive it had not been there before. The gate, not the hedge.

Poppy and Farthingale sat on my shoulders, as I pulled open the gate and crouched down to fit inside. I may not be very tall, but I passed three feet a couple of years ago. After a few long minutes walking bent over through a leafy tunnel, the path began to slope downward and into the ground.

“Where are we going?” I asked nervously. We were moving from the dim light that the bushes let in to no light at all. “Are there any lights in there?”

“Don’t worry,” Farthingale said from my right shoulder, “It won’t be dark for very long.”

There are no lights in there, I translated.

“We’re going to Ardu,” she said. “It’s in the southeast corner of The Greater Elf Kingdom.”

“It’s where we live,” Poppy interjected. She was sitting on my left shoulder, and a lot more comfortable than I was. “We’re going home.”

It has been my experience that when people say ‘don’t worry’ it’s a good time to start. So I did. Besides, my home wasn’t ahead of us. It was back the way we had come.

The bushes were just a roof over my head now. My top half was still above the ground, but from my waist down, the sides of the tunnel were earth and rock. A few more steps, and I would be completely underground.

I stopped.

“Speaking of home,” I said, remembering everything I was ever told about not talking to strangers, not to mention not following them into dark places. “What did you mean when you said you decided to keep me?”

“I mean, how permanent is all this stuff? Will I be allowed to see my parents? Ever?” And can I believe anything you tell me, I wondered?

“Poppy! What kinds of things have you been telling Miriam?” my right shoulder said to my left shoulder.

Yeah, I thought, and are they true?

I’m sure that Poppy was about to say something that would have reassured me, but she and Farthingale were knocked off my shoulders when my head hit a thick branch as my crunched-up body tried to spin around, straighten out and leap into the air all at once.

“Ay, ay, ay,” I cried, jumping up and down in pain and hitting my head a few more times.

“Something touched me,” I cried. “There’s something in here.” I squatted down on my heels, straightened my spine, and started to move slowly backwards, duck style.

There was a dark shape in front of me. I desperately wanted to turn around, and run, make that waddle, away, but I was afraid to take my eyes off the Thing. Unidentifiable dark shapes in strange places may be scary, but things you can’t see at all, but know are behind you, are terrifying.

“Hi, Tefnut,” I heard Poppy say.

“Excellent,” came the sound of Farthingale’s voice. “I’m so glad you’re here. Now we won’t be nearly as late as I expected.”

Then she said something else, but I couldn’t understand it. I’m not sure I was supposed to.

All I know was that one minute I was squatting in the semi-darkness looking at a shape that may or may not have been Tefnut. The next minute a strong whoosh of air unbalanced me and my tush made firm contact with the ground.

Just great, I thought. Now it hurts at both ends.

My perspective was all out of whack. Between my squatting and my sitting, the shadows had somehow shifted their places. Even the air smelled different, fresher. I couldn’t put my finger on what it was, except that I knew that nothing was the same.

Then Farthingale walked over to me and as I looked up at her everything became clear. She was about the same height as my mother. Since there wasn’t enough headroom for her to grow to my size, I must have come down to hers. I was small. Very small



Five inches suits Miriam. She looks positively edible. I sat down and waited for them to decide what to do. So much for following discreetly behind.

CHAPTER 9

EAU DE TEFNUT

I should be going nuts right now, I thought. But for some reason, being the same size as Poppy and Farthingale somehow was an improvement.

“Climb onto Tefnut,” Farthingale said. “We can ride the rest of the way. It will be much faster.”

Now I saw the elephant-sized figure move out of the shadows and take shape. Everything was so different from this angle. If that was a cat, then I was a mouse--and not a very big one either. Was this really Tefnut? I especially didn't remember her teeth being so extremely large.

The monster moved closer and opened its mouth. I could see that I was too big to swallow whole. It would have to bite me in half.

I closed my eyes.

It wasn't wet, but it wasn't dry either. And not nearly as sand-papery as I expected.

I wasn't being consumed. I was being tasted.

“Cut it out, Tefnut. I'm not a kitten.” I put my arms in front of me to protect my face. This was Tefnut, all right. She was giving me the traditional pussycat greeting.

“Get off me and stop licking,” I said. Tefnut had me pinned down with her paw and was licking madly away at what little was left out. This is not the way I like to have my ears cleaned.

Tefnut lifted her paw, flopped down on the ground next to me and started her engines. Poppy and Farthingale flew over and landed on her back.

“Come on, Miriam,” Poppy said, waving me over. “Hop on.”

Shrinking like that had been disorienting, but Tefnut's bath-time greeting brought me back down to earth, which was good, because I was now a lot closer to it than I used to be.

Okay, I thought, getting up, I'm small. But I'm still me. Everything is... okay... probably. I stood extra straight and tall to make sure I got every millimeter that I was currently entitled to.

I climbed onto Tefnut and grabbed two big handfuls of fur to keep from falling off. Bending forward and burying my face in her fur, I breathed deeply. Ahh, I thought, Eau de Tefnut. I would know that wonderful Tefnut smell anywhere. Tefnut wouldn't take me anywhere bad.

“Sit up, Miriam,” Poppy said from behind me, as Tefnut padded forward into the darkness. “We want to fix your hair before we get to Ardu.”

I relaxed a little more as Poppy sat down behind me and began combing my hair. My mother used to comb my hair.

I closed my eyes, the world was not so different with the lights out. I let my mind drift and pretended that She was behind me, combing my hair. She had black hair just like Mom's. We were finally together. Tefnut was taking us home.

I could feel my sister's gentle hands, working carefully, slowly picking the knots out of my hair with her fingers, combing out the leftover tangles, then starting on a new spot.

“You look just like I imagined you would,” I said to her. “I love your black hair.”

“Are you kidding? It just hangs there. I am so jealous of your curly hair. I love combing it and watching it go all fluffy.” I let myself feel the rush of pleasure that her

compliment would bring, feeling her warm breath on my head when she leaned in to examine a knot.

“Ahemm.” Farthingale cleared her throat breaking the spell. Big sister became Poppy again. I could feel a lecture coming on. My fourth grade teacher last year would clear her throat the same way. We used to time it.

“Miriam,” she started. “Did Poppy finish explaining to you how we first found you? Do you understand the connection that brought us together?”

“You mean about us being cousins?” I said.

“Cousins? Wherever did you get that idea? Never mind,” she said, giving Poppy a dirty look.

Poppy kept combing.

“It’s obvious,” Farthingale continued, “that there is at least one ancestor in your family who was a fairy, but...”

“Because of my ears?” I interrupted, wondering how much of what Poppy said could be believed.

“Naturally,” she answered. “But I seriously doubt that your ancestor was one of us. I mean, look at me and look at you. That is...it would be extremely difficult...” she said with evident embarrassment, “...having children, I mean. It’s just that... Well, probably, your ancestor was an elf. They’re about the same size as humans, if you get what I mean.”

“So, we’re not cousins,” I said.

“No. Not really. What you are, at least in part, is magic. By virtue of your unknown elf ancestor, of course. Are you following this?”

“Yes,” I said.

No. I thought. Not really.

“Look at it this way,” Farthingale said. “Because you are part magic, you are genetically able to join our community.”

“Isn’t that another way of saying that we’re related, like cousins?” I asked.

She let out an exasperated sigh and put her hand to her forehead. “Maybe you’re right, Poppy. Maybe cousins is the easiest way of putting it.”

“That’s what I thought,” Poppy said, from behind me.

“But, if you knew since I was a baby, why now?” I asked. “Why is this happening?”

“Young children can be terribly indiscreet,” Farthingale said. “We waited as long as we could...” I could hear the embarrassment in her voice. I’ll bet anything her face was all red too. “You were supposed to explain all this to Miriam,” she said angrily to Poppy.

“I was just getting to it,” Poppy said again. Apparently there were a lot of things she was ‘just getting to’.

“Well, Miriam,” Farthingale said, taking a deep breath, “I’m sure your parents have already explained to you about, hemm, hemm, the changes you will be going through as you grow and your body, hemm, hemm, develops.”

“You mean puberty?”

“Hemm, hemm, yes, that.”

“Yeah, I know about that stuff.” My friends and I had discussed breast development and periods extensively.

“Well,” she said, “it’s important that your wing buds are well established before your hormonal balance begins to change.”



This fairy ancestor stuff wouldn't be such big news to Miss Know-It-All if she weren't so stubborn. Her parents have been telling her for years. Too bad she hasn't learned to listen as well as she talks.

The big news is when we get out of this tunnel and she finds out that she hasn't had one babysitter for the last ten years, but six. Six babysitters and a very large fan club.

It's been a pretty good system. The Six kept her out of trouble while she was growing. Now she's ready for me.

CHAPTER 10 WING BUDS

“So, just how is this wing bud thing going to happen?” I asked, trying to sound casual. There had just better be a sister at the end of this rainbow, I thought. I was holding tight to Tefnut with my hands and legs while Poppy worked through my tangles.

“It couldn’t be simpler,” Poppy said, tugging at a particularly nasty knot. “It’s just like grafting a new branch onto a tree.”

Uh oh. I knew what grafting was. You had to cut a hole in the tree to do it.

“Will it hurt?” I could hear my voice tremble.

“Poppy!” The combing stopped. Farthingale sounded annoyed again. “When will you learn to watch what you say? No, Miriam it will not hurt. We don’t even break the skin when the wing buds are attached.

“It’s true,” Poppy said with a grin in her voice. “Getting these knots out has to hurt.” She started in on my hair again. “But when we do wing buds, you won’t feel a thing.”

“Ouch!” There was an extra hard pull on my hair as Tefnut came to a halt. My hands were still holding on to her fur, but the rest of me bumped up into the air and back down.

“Ouch, again,” I gasped when my tailbone connected with Tefnut’s spine. “What’s happening? Are we there yet?”

“No, we’re not,” Farthingale, said. “What’s the matter, Tefnut?”

Tefnut didn’t answer. Which was okay, I mean, who ever heard of a cat who could talk? What she did do was sit down.

I lost my grip and slid backwards down her backbone, landing on Poppy and Farthingale who were already on the ground, trying to stand up when I knocked them back down again.

I looked up at Tefnut’s dark shape against the darker darkness of the tunnel, as we struggled to get to our feet. She was turning her head around to reach her shoulder. Then she chomped down on the exact spot where I had been sitting.

Don’t be silly, I said to the shiver running down my spine. Tefnut would never have bitten that spot if I was still sitting on it.

She chomped again and a shape the size of my fist separated itself from her fur and jumped high into the air, landing back in her fur just a few feet –actually, inches-- from where I was standing.

I got a better look at it just before it disappeared into her fur. It was a flattish oval shape, and... it had legs. Five or six skinny little legs hanging down from its bottom.

“My god!” I gasped. “Run, I mean, fly for your lives. It’s a flea. A giant flea.”

Poppy giggled. “Don’t worry, Tefnut,” she called out into the darkness. “We’ll poof it for you.”

“It’s just a regular-sized flea, Miriam,” Farthingale said. “It won’t hurt you.”

“Weee!” Poppy cried as she half jumped and half flew into the air, landing on the spot where the giant flea had disappeared.



Will it hurt? What a wimp! Come on Miriam. We’re talking wings here. Every kid’s secret wish. I tensed up and gritted my teeth. Hurry up, Poppy, before that little tickle of a flea drives me completely nuts.

CHAPTER 11

CAT MAGIC AND THE FLEA-POOFING SPELL

The flea popped out again.

In two incredible leaps, it was back on Tefnut's head. Her ear, I think.

"Did you see that jump?" I said. "It was, like, straight up into the air. How does it do that?"

"It's a flea," Farthingale said dryly. "It's what they do. It's all they do. Eat and jump."

"And have baby fleas," Poppy said cheerfully. "Come on, Farthingale. Let's get it." She flew up to Tefnut's ear and stuck her head in.

"Yoo-hoo, Mrs. Flee-ea? Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Tefnut shook her head and twitched her ear. Poppy fell off, catching herself midair.

"Sorry, Tefnut," she said.

"I'll get it," Farthingale called. "You poof it." She held a long stick out in front of her and flew up to join Poppy.

Farthingale half disappeared into Tefnut's fur and came out again holding the flea in a kind of bag on a stick. Oh, of course, that's what it was, a butterfly net. I could only see shapes in the dark and was half guessing at what was going on.

"Got it," Farthingale cried, holding the net away from herself. "Poof it, Poppy. Quickly, before it gets away," she said happily.

"Poof!" Poppy said, and it was gone, net and all. At least I think it was. It was so dark, maybe Farthingale had just put it behind her back to fool me.

"Is it dead?" I asked.

"No, of course not," Poppy said. "It's just gone."

"But, where did it go?" I pressed.

"I don't know where it goes," Poppy said. "But it's not here."

"You mean it could be on the other side of the world or something?"

"No, it doesn't go far," Farthingale said. "It's probably still somewhere in your neighborhood."

"Yeah, lying in wait for poor Tefnut to come walking by again," Poppy giggled.

"Climb up, Miriam," Farthingale said. "We must be almost there."

Using her fur, I half climbed and half pulled myself up. My climbing must have been a lot more annoying than a flea, but Tefnut didn't seem to mind.

"Hurry up," Farthingale said. "Can't you climb any faster?"

"Of course, I can." Reluctantly, I sped up. The thought of accidentally bumping into another flea gave me the creeps.

Poppy apparently included mind reading among her skills.

"It's really hard to get close to a flea," she said to me. "They always see you first. The only reason Farthingale caught that one so fast is because she has a lot of practice. Besides, Tefnut hardly ever has fleas."

"Are all fairies good at catching fleas?" I asked, relieved.

"Most fairies don't have cats for friends," Farthingale said as I hauled myself up next to them on Tefnut's neck.

Tefnut was purring again. It was like sitting on the hood of a car with the engine running, only friendlier. I lay quietly as she walked, enjoying the familiar furry warmth.

Everything was happening too quickly for me to sort out. Farthingale and Poppy were straight out of a picture book. They were so nice. Too nice. Real fairies should be... would be...well, more real.

They talked a lot, but what did they tell me? I don't really know where I'm going or why. Something about wings. No, wing buds. What the hell is a wing bud? It sounded painful.

And why haven't they said anything about my sister yet? Is it a surprise? Maybe this wing bud thing is a kind of initiation I have to do before I'm allowed to meet her.

In less than a minute the darkness started to fade. It got brighter and I had to close my eyes. When I opened them again, we were out. Completely out.

"Welcome," Farthingale said. "Welcome to Ardu."



I looked out from the mouth of the tunnel onto a sea of meadow grass, not unlike the stuff I had to wade through to get Miriam to the garden. Nothing unusual to look at, but gourmet in the smell department. That same old magic that I knew so well. My whiskers haven't tingled like this since I left Ailuria for good, ten years ago.

Not that the last ten years haven't been pretty good. I have my house, with its windows, pillows, and warm spots. Outside, my own private hunting preserve. It's true that nights can be boring for a house cat, but not where I live. Miriam's room always had kitty TV. Real living things that I could watch, smell, and occasionally have a conversation with. Not to mention the great flea removal service.

My adopted home is nothing like my homeland. It's better. Ailuria is for the young and the ambitious and as long as I have any say in the matter, I'm never going back.

CHAPTER 12

FOUR AND A HALF MORE FAIRY GODMOTHERS

The misty drizzle I had left behind when I walked over the bridge was back. Warm air rising off the forest of wet grass smelled good and felt even better.

All around me, things were growing. The tiny nodding flowers of the blue-eyed grass seemed as big as grapefruits to my little eyes. Wild pansies trailed along the ground like giant stepping stones in the spaces between the grass plants and in the distance, I could see a lone dandelion plant as big as a house, its flowers looming up over the grass forest like an anorexic giant redwood tree with a bad haircut.

“Hurry up, Miriam,” Farthingale said, launching herself off Tefnut’s back. “We’re almost there.”

Tefnut lay down so that I could slide off. Deep, fresh puddles were all over the place. My toes wiggled with anticipation. But reinforcements showed up before my feet even touched the ground.

Four more dragonfly fairies, flying fast, came barreling out of the mist and landed in front of us before I had a chance to stomp a single puddle.

Four more tiny people, all bigger than I was, landed in front of me. We stared at each other for a moment.

One of them stepped forward. She was dressed in floppy blue pants and had curly black hair that was cut short, showing off a graceful neck.

“Miriam,” Poppy said, in a shy-excited voice, “This is my husband, Amber.” I did a double take. The she was a he?

“You mean there are boy fairies too?” I blurted. “I didn’t know that.” Amber raised his eyebrows and smirked at me.

I squished my lips together before something worse came out, trying to smile at the same time and ending up with a sort of shrunken grimace.

“How was he?” Poppy said to Amber.

“Fine,” Amber said. “Mostly, he napped.” Reaching around to a knapsack that fit between his wings, Amber brought out the prettiest little baby I’d ever seen.

Nothing like the round and chubby human babies I was used to, this little one had a slim, delicate body, a narrow face like his parents’ and his father’s jet-black eyes. He was so lively that all the other babies I had ever seen seemed fat and lumpy by comparison.

I instantly ceased being the center of attention. Everyone turned to play with the baby, making silly noises and sillier faces.

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“Yofie,” Amber said, handing him to me.

“Ooooh,” I cooed. “He’s sooo nice. Thank you.” I held him close and breathed in the soft, clean baby smell while he melted me with his eyes. Then he saw Poppy, and reached out. I knew when I wasn’t wanted, and handed him over with a lingering touch.

“I’m old enough to baby-sit,” I said.

“That would be nice,” Poppy answered, smiling. But the smile was for Amber and Yofie. I doubt she actually heard me.

“Yofie always wins the popularity contest wherever we go,” one of the new fairies said with a rough happy laugh. “It’s because we hardly ever have babies.” Poppy looked away from Yofie long enough to give her a really dirty look.

“Of course,” the new fairy added still laughing, “Yofie would get all the attention even in a roomful of babies. Right, Poppy?” The speaker was head-to-toe yellow, from her hair to her dress to her wings. Even her skin looked lightly tinted with sunshine.

“Ahem.” It was Farthingale taking charge again. “Miriam, we would like you to meet the rest of The Six:

“This is Shadow,” she said. A fairy with green cat’s eyes gave me a quiet smile. Her long gray dress was flecked with silver.

“Augusta...” Farthingale nodded at the fairy who had just spoken. Augusta was wearing a bright yellow one-shoulder job. Tons of stiff yellow silk flared out from a sparkling gold belt and kept going until its heavy swirls hit the floor. I wanted that dress. It had Prom written all over it.

I reached down self-consciously to tug at the hem of my T-shirt, remembering that I probably looked like Cinderella before the Ball.

“May I help you with that?” Shadow said, stepping forward. She reached out tentatively and when I didn’t object, let her hands come to rest on my shoulders. The eye contact was intense. I could feel my faded purple T-shirt start to go with the flow.

“How’s that,” she said, stepping back after a moment. I stared down at myself. I was still wearing a T-shirt with a pocket on the chest and it was still purple, but nobody would ever call this dark, rich, plum color faded.

And it was still cotton, only now it was the sheerest, silkiest cotton that I had ever felt. And... it was still growing, longer and wider, even after Shadow had stepped away.

My comfy old t-shirt felt like a silky snake slowly winding its way around my body. Snakes are not my favorite pets. Even purple ones.

“Hey, make it stop,” I said, when it started to creep out onto the floor.

It stopped.

“Here, Miriam. Catch.” Augusta took off her gold belt and tossed it to me. Once I had the belt on, the dress got shorter and I could see my toes again.

“Take this, too,” Poppy said. She handed Yofie to Amber and took off her necklace, a black velvet choker with one big ruby-red jewel and handed it to me.

“Thank you, Poppy,” I said, tying it around my neck. “It’s beautiful.” Everybody was dressed up, now I was too. I couldn’t see how I looked, but I felt beautiful. I relaxed.

I did the twirl thing, just a little. “Do I look like a real fairy? Except for the wing thing of course,” I added.

“Well, we’ll see what we can do about that later,” Farthingale said. “Say hello to Dragonbreath, and let’s go.”

“How do you do,” I said to the last fairy. She had on a short green tunic that matched her wings. But she also had short, dark hair like Amber, so I wondered.

I must have been staring too hard at Dragonbreath because Farthingale answered my unspoken question.

“Dragonbreath is my son, Miriam.” I think I blushed. I looked from mother to son, and they definitely looked more alike than different, although I couldn’t have told you why.

“Why don’t I walk with Miriam?” he said, stepping up to me. “The rest of you can fly ahead and we’ll meet up with you at the Speaking Rock.”

“Are you kidding?” Augusta said, linking her arm in mine. “This is the first time any of us have talked with Miriam since she was a baby. We’re all coming.”



Miriam being still wingless, I should offer them a ride, but my tail was twitching relentlessly, not letting me forget that I am descended from a long line of superb hunters. I ducked back into the mouth of the tunnel and switched into my best sneaky stalking mode.

Pleasure first, duty later. Besides, I've already been introduced. The Six and I are old friends.

The first year, all they did was play with Miriam. Never missed a night. All I did was stand guard. Fairies are gaga about babies. If you ever want to see someone go ballistic with happiness, watch fairies, any fairies, around babies.

I never figured out why. Nothing but a bunch of boring lumps as far as I'm concerned. Not like kittens. Couple of days, a week at the outside, kittens talk; play; fight; argue. You want adorable, lovable, it's kittens all the way.

The six kept Miriam up all night every night with their silliness while I watched out for anxious parents. Every middle-of-the-night bathroom trip was an excuse for a 'I-just-want-to-make-sure-she's-still-breathing' visit from the new Mom. Rose and Harry never wondered why Miriam slept so much in the daytime. They were too grateful.

Once Miriam grew into toddler-hood, The Six couldn't trust her not to blow their cover. They only came while she was asleep. Visits became less frequent and more sedate. I was their best source of how she was doing and who she was becoming.

The seven of us watched her grow. Even I grew sort of fond of her. I really like my humans, but with Miriam, it's something that's a little more than like, not that I would ever admit this to another cat.

The last couple of years they kept coming, but less and less often. Mostly it was just Poppy and Farthingale. I think it's because they're both parents. My theory is that they secretly think of Miriam as a baby sister to Dragonbreath and a big sister to Yofie.

It was Poppy and Farthingale who pushed for Arduian citizenship for Miriam and for that I will be forever grateful. I couldn't have done it without them.

CHAPTER 13

THE BIG QUESTION

“I guess I’ll lead,” Shadow said when no one else offered. She drifted up into the air, looking completely relaxed, except for her wings, which were set to bumblebee speed. “This way,” she called, as soon as she got her bearings. The rest of us set out on foot through the tall grass, pushing the damp blades out of the way and keeping an eye on Shadow.

I smiled and nodded whenever anyone seemed to be talking to me. It worked. No one noticed that I wasn’t really there. I was thinking hard about how to ask a certain question.

Augusta was still holding my arm, so I gave it a tug to get her attention. She turned to me with an absent smile, still listening to the others.

“Augusta?” I started out, choosing my words carefully. “This place we’re going to. Will there be a lot of other people there?”

“Hmm? People? Oh, yes, everyone will be there.

“No, they didn’t,” she called out to Dragonbreath who had moved ahead of us. They were still arguing about something that happened when I was a baby. I gave her arm another pull.

“Who’s everyone? I asked. “Just dragonfly fairies, or will there be other people? You know, like me.” Augusta turned to me with a big grin on her face.

“See for yourself, Miriam.” She stepped in front of me and pushed aside a thick tangle of grass.

“We’re here.”

The grass ended abruptly and was replaced by a moss-covered clearing filled with dragonfly fairies. The air was thick with their colors. And the moment I stuck my head out into the open, it was filled with their cheering, as well. In the middle of the clearing was a big flat topped rock, also moss covered.

“That’s Speaking Rock,” Augusta hollered. Beyond the rock, on the other side of the clearing was a big triple-trunked beech tree with a tree house in it.

“Hey, wait a minute. That’s my tree house. It’s my tree. But this isn’t my yard. Where’s my house.”

Everyone was making so much noise by this time that I didn’t think anyone heard me. But Farthingale stepped up next to me and spoke into my ear.

“Don’t worry, Miriam, everything is okay. Just come this way. We’re ready to start.”



I heard the cheering and hurried to catch up. I am really looking forward to this, I thought. If everything goes well at Speaking Rock, Miriam will have safe passage into Ardu and The Greater Elf Kingdom for life, and from Ardu, it’s only a hop, skip and a jump to Ailuria. My life of leisure will be secure and I’ll never have to go back there again.

CHAPTER 14

THE WING BUD CEREMONY AT SPEAKING ROCK

The noise got noisier as Tefnut stepped out into the open just behind us.

“Look, here comes Tefnut!” someone called out and a second later, they were all over her like mosquitoes at summer camp. I guess she’s been here before.

Tefnut dropped her head in a queenly gesture of modest acknowledgment just before being bombarded by dozens of fairies who all wanted a good seat for the ceremony. No wonder they were glad to see her.

There must have been a hundred little hands all scratching at once. That had to be one happy cat.

“Shhh!” someone said. “They’re starting.” Farthingale had flown ahead to the Speaking Rock and was trying to shush the crowd.

Tefnut shook her head, and three or four fairies flew off her face. I guess she wanted to be able to see what was going on. They obligingly found seats further back.

Augusta and Dragonbreath moved in on me like a pair of well trained drill sergeants each of them grabbing an elbow. I tried to step forward and noticed that my toes were no longer touching the ground.

I was hurried through the crowd and deposited on the rock next to Farthingale before I could complain. The silence that corresponded with my touchdown was sudden and deafening. Farthingale gave me a long, warm smile. It looked like one of my mother’s mush-smiles. I got ready for one of those ‘let me tell you how much we love you – in great and boring detail,’ speeches.

“Well, Miriam,” Farthingale said, turning to speak to the hushed crowd.

“On the occasion of your tenth birthday, we wish to publicly acknowledge our great affection for you, and welcome you into our community. We all hope that a true friendship will grow between us and, in anticipation of that tie, we wish to present you with two gifts.” She reached into a pocket in her skirt and took out a small drawstring bag.

“Every dragonfly fairy,” she said, “has a sampo. They get it when they’re ready to begin their education to encourage them to study hard, because the more you know, the better it works.

“Miriam,” she said, “we want you to have one, too, and we hope that your sampo will help you to make yourself into everything you wish to be.” Farthingale held out the plain, gray bag that looked like something made from an old bandanna, a very old bandanna.

It took a moment before I realized that the bag was the “sampo” she was talking about and that everyone was waiting for me to take it. I did.

The sun was in my eyes, so I wasn’t sure, but as soon as the sampo was in my hand, the color seemed to change from gray to blue-gray and purple. I guess I looked a little confused as I tried to mumble the requisite thank you.

“I think she wants to know what it is,” I heard someone say. This was followed by a chorus of stifled giggles.

“It’s in the bag, Miriam,” someone else called out, followed by a lot of good-natured laughter.

“What?” I didn’t understand.

“Anything,” answered another voice from the crowd. “Anything you need.”

`Anything' takes up a lot of room. I knew that. I also knew from the feel of it that `anything' was probably not in this bag. `Nothing' sounded like a much better answer to me.

"Don't worry, when you need it, it will be there," Farthingale said.

There was a quiet minute while Farthingale showed me how to tie the sampo around my waist like a fanny pack. I took the opportunity to scan the crowd for you-know-who.

Quite a few fairies must have thought I was looking to see if they really all had sampos and held theirs out for me to see.

Everyone cheered when Farthingale finished and straightened up. She held up her hands for silence... and got it.

"Miriam," she said loudly. "There's one other thing that every dragonfly fairy has." There was more cheering.

"PLEASE! EVERYONE! QUIET!" Farthingale's voice was so loud, I looked over to see if she had a microphone. "THIS IS THE IMPORTANT PART." There was no more noise.

"Miriam," she said. "Please turn around."

"Is this the grafting part?" I whispered to her.

"Yes, it is. I mean no, no, it isn't," she whispered back. "It's not grafting. It's magic. The only thing you'll feel are my fingers."

I nodded, turned and stood arrow-straight, letting my gaze skim the faces in the crowd. If there was someone out there who looked like me, I couldn't see her from where I stood.

I couldn't help a slight twitch when I felt Farthingale's fingertips start to move lightly across my back. For one long minute, it was the quietest I have ever heard. I believe they were all holding their breath. I know I was.

Then Farthingale dropped her hands and relaxed. I turned to face her, feeling a sheepish grin spread over my face. The decibel level became instantly painful as hundreds of excited dragonfly fairies took to the air, whooping, hollering and doing somersaults.

Hardly anybody noticed Poppy fly down and land on the Speaking Rock with us. She stood there looking out at the crowd with the expression of someone who would rather be anywhere else.

Farthingale put a reassuring hand on Poppy's shoulder and used her foghorn voice again.

"QUIET!" she hollered, and quiet she got. "Poppy has something to say," Farthingale said in a more normal voice.

"Miriam," she began. "This coat..." She held out her hand. There was something in it, but it hardly qualified as clothing. It was smaller than her palm.

"Louder," somebody yelled from the back.

"This coat," she repeated only slightly louder, "has been in my family for six generations. It's made of fern seeds. No one remembers who gave it to us or why, but it has always made us feel special. It's also very useful for sneaking around. Because it makes you invisible. Anyway..."

"Speak up," someone shouted. Too shy to look the crowd in the eye, she had lowered her head and was getting hard to hear, even for me.

“Anyway,” Poppy said a little louder. “I want you to have it.” She seemed to have run out of things to say, so she pressed the small black package into my hands and started to fly away.

“OUCH!” That, everybody heard. Farthingale grabbed Poppy by the tips of her wings and pulled her back. She put her arm around one of Poppy’s shoulders. I took the hint and put mine around the other. Farthingale pulled me close and we went into a huddle.

“Miriam,” Poppy said. “Everyone’s waiting for you to speak.”

“What should I say?” I pleaded, hoping for an answer that made more sense than Farthingale’s description of the sampo.

“You are now officially a citizen of The Greater Elf Kingdom,” Farthingale replied. “It would be appropriate to demonstrate gratitude.” Poppy and Farthingale moved to stand on either side and a little behind me facing the crowd. I wasn’t at all sure that gratitude was the appropriate response for this unasked-for honor, but I did my best. I looked out at the crowd trying to look grateful.

“Thank you all very much.” I spoke as loudly as I could without screaming. “I have been asked to announce that everything is okay and official. The population of The Greater Elf Kingdom has just been increased by one new member. Me.”

Pandemonium broke loose, as everyone took to the air, all talking at once. The other four companions flew over to the rock. Dragonbreath and Augusta settled on either side of me and once again, I felt myself walking on air. I was flown through the crowd, over to the beech tree and set down in the tree house. When I looked out from the tree house Tefnut was sitting on the grass washing her face. Just Tefnut and my own backyard. The clearing and the dragonfly fairies that had filled it were gone.

PART II
THE FAIRY GIFTS – WHETHER YOU WANT THEM OR NOT



CHAPTER 15
THE KEEPING PART

“You mean I get to go home?” I said.

I could see Mom waving to me from the back window. I have no idea how it happened, but I was sitting in the tree house in my own yard. I was my right size again, too.

“Of course,” Augusta said to me with a puzzled expression.

Augusta, Dragonbreath, Farthingale and Shadow were perched on the tree house railing like a row of butterflies. Poppy, Amber and Yofie were cuddled together on my lap. Now that I was big again, they looked a lot more like bugs than people.

“That’s it?” I said. “That’s the whole thing? What about the keeping part?”

“The keeping part?” Augusta asked. Everyone looked at me funny. Everyone except Poppy. She just looked funny.

“Yeah,” I said. “Remember, Poppy? When you told me that you decided to keep me.”

“Well, we did,” Poppy flustered. “We did keep you. I mean we do. It just means that...”

“Poppy!” Farthingale said. “You did it again. Didn’t you?”

“We don’t *keep* you Miriam,” she said to me. “It’s just Poppy’s unique way of expressing things. When you’re grown, you can visit or stay with us as often and as long as you please.”

“...and the best part,” Augusta added, “is that we don’t have to ask Tefnut how you’re doing anymore. You can tell us yourself.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all?” Farthingale said, mistaking my relief, for disappointment. “That’s quite a lot, I should think. Do you know how often a human is invited to be part of our world? Did you see any other humans while you were there?”

“No, I guess not.”

“You guess right. And you won’t.”

I let that one sink in for a while. It looked like there wasn’t going to be a sister at the end of this particular rainbow.

“Relax, Farthingale,” Amber said, “I think Miriam is just relieved. You thought we were kidnapping you, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah,” I mumbled. “It kind of seemed like a possibility.” I lowered my head to try and hide the rising color that was heating up my face. With my head down, I could see that Poppy wasn’t doing much better in the face-color department.

“Poor Miriam,” Augusta said, laughing so hard I could hardly understand her.

“Poor Miriam! Dragonbreath said, drowning out Augusta’s laughter with his own. “Poor Poppy is more like it.”

“Oooo Poppy too.” Augusta said. “Double blush. Good teamwork guys,” and she laughed even harder. “Farthingale will never let you forget this one, Poppy.”

“She was right. Farthingale was not laughing, and that look on her face... I was glad it was for Poppy and not me.

I wondered what really happened to my sister, since she clearly hadn't gone the kidnapped-by-fairies route. My stomach started to feel funny. I was getting that bumpy feeling again. I wanted to be alone.

“My Mom looks worried,” I said, exaggerating only slightly, since Mom was always worried about something. “Maybe I'd better go in and let her know what happened.”

“It's okay to tell them, isn't it?” I asked, carefully moving the little family off my lap so I could stand up.

“It's more than okay,” Amber said, settling himself comfortably on the rail. “They already know. They must be dying to hear the details.”

Great, I thought. Everybody knows everything. Except me, of course.

“See you tonight, right?” I said, in my pretend perky voice. I swung my feet over the edge and grabbed onto the rope ladder.

“That's one spacey kid,” I heard Dragonbreath say when I got to the bottom of the ladder and turned to face the house. Mom was still glued to the window.

“She'll be okay.” Shadow's voice was faint but audible as I kept moving away. “She just needs a little down time to process.”

“Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad,” I said stepping through the patio doors and into the house. Mom held the door open for me. Dad was sitting just behind her on the couch. They were both grinning their heads off.

“Later, okay?” I said, walking past them towards my room.

“Okay, dear,” Mom said in her teeny-tiny voice that pushes almost all of my buttons. Dad grunted his annoyed sound, the one that pushes all the rest.

I gritted my teeth and sped up. I knew I had exactly ten seconds before they switched over to pursuit-mode and came after me.

Dad could go from happy to angry in about one millisecond. Anyone would think that he was the one going through puberty. Mom would use her 'nice' voice, like I was still five years old. I preferred Dad's temper.

I had to escape. I made it to my room, closed the door and relaxed. Once my door was closed, I was semi-safe.

“Miriam, dear,” Mom said, softly knocking on the door five seconds later. Whoa, I didn't even get the full ten. They were really anxious.

“I just need some down-time to process,” I said, leaning against the door. “Okay?” I heard whispers. Then Dad spoke.

“That's all right, he said. “Come out when you're ready. We'll be in the kitchen.”

Wow. Thank you, Shadow, I thought.

The dolls were still on the floor where I had left them after school. I sat down to play The Sister Game. It always relaxes me.

Big sister and little sister go on a picnic. Little sister goes for a walk and gets into trouble. Big sister rescues her. They all live happily ever after. I like it.

I took Kelly out the wastebasket and straightened her wings. Then I bent the dolls' legs into a sitting position and propped them up against my dresser. Big sister and little sister have finished eating and they're so full they can hardly move. They sit quietly,

leaning against the big oak tree – that’s what my dresser is made of – sipping pink lemonade. They radiate warm and happy. I could feel their contentment.

“I had a really strange day today,” little sister says.

“Tell me about it,” says big sister. “It can’t be any weirder than mine.”

“What do you mean? Were you at Speaking Rock too? I looked everywhere, but I couldn’t see you.”

“I was there all right but I was hidden so that I could protect you...”

... There was a crumply sound behind me. No big deal, it’s the noise that the styrofoam pellets in my beanbag chair make when Tefnut settles down for a nap. She must have snuck in behind me. I dropped the dolls and leaned over for a deep, scratchy two-handed pet. I felt better.

I got up and went into the kitchen. I know Mom and Dad try really hard to be good parents. So what if they’re not totally honest. No one’s perfect.

CHAPTER 16

PROBLEMS WITH PARENTS

Mom and Dad were sitting at the kitchen table looking at me with their heart-beating mushy half-smiles that mean we were about to have a meaningful conversation. Usually they were in charge of the meaningful part. I was in charge of listening. This time, however, they wanted details.

“We’re very pleased for you, Miriam,” Dad announced as soon as I sat down. “Farthingale told us they wanted to bring you out for a visit, but we didn’t know exactly when it would happen. How did it go?”

Right on, Dad, I thought, despondently. Start me off with an easy one. I had no idea where to begin.

“Well, I have this bag,” I said, after a while. I took it out and laid it on the table.

“It’s very nice, dear,” Mom said. Her tone was hyper-polite, but her look said, ‘what’s that rag doing on my clean kitchen table.’

“Does it have any special meaning?” she asked. This is standard parent-speak for ‘There can’t possibly be any *practical* reason for the existence of that thing.’ I thought about that for another minute.

“It’s an educational tool,” I said more confidently than I felt.

“How exciting.” She perked up right away when I used the ‘E’ word. “How does it work?”

“I’m not sure. I think it just gives you stuff.”

“Stuff?” Dad asked. “What kind of stuff?”

“Anything, I think. I haven’t tried it yet.”

“Do you want to try it now?”

“Okay. What do you want?”

“Well, right now,” Dad joked, “I’d like a bagel and cream cheese.” I reached into the bag. From the look of it, I could have sworn it was empty, but I could feel something inside.

Out came my hand. It was holding a bagel. With cream cheese. The smell said it was onion-garlic. Dad’s favorite. I put it on the table. Nobody said anything for a long time.

The smell of garlic and onions wove in and out of our silence. Dad started to get red in the face. This was a good sign that he was about to speak ...and that I didn’t want to hear it.

“Rose,” he said, ignoring me. “Nobody said anything about this. Nobody told us they were going to give her this bag.”

“You can’t keep it, Miriam,” he said.

“You have to give it back. You can’t have anything you want. You have to earn it.”

“Besides, Mom and I are in charge of what you can and can’t have. When you grow up, then you can have anything you want. While you’re a kid you have to get it from us.” He glared. I cringed.

“Wait a minute, Ben,” Mom said. “Miriam,” she said to me. “Pick up the bag again. Take out a pair of jeans that fit you exactly the way you like.”

I reached into the bag and started to pull out a denim pant leg. I kept pulling until I was holding one complete pair of jeans. Girls size 8, slim fit, extra long. My size.

Mom was beaming. "I hate shopping," she said with passion. "Hmmm. How about a tube of ultra marine blue." I reached into my sampo and pulled out a tube of ultra marine blue watercolor. Mom took it into her cupped hands, hugging it to her chest. "Paint!" she whispered reverently.

"Miriam," Dad said. He didn't sound too thrilled about the shopping thing. "Take out a hundred dollar bill."

I did.

"My god." Mom blanched. "The mortgage."

"Not the mortgage, Rose. An ten-year old with an unlimited supply of hundred dollar bills."

"Maybe they're counterfeit."

"Worse. An ten year old with an unlimited supply of counterfeit hundred dollar bills." They stopped talking and just stared at each other.

"I guess you don't want to see what else they gave me," I said.

"What!" they both shouted at me.

!!!!!!

I had gone into the kitchen with the best of intentions. I came out, totally shattered. Mom and Dad were so freaked when I started taking things out of the sampo that I never even got to mention the wing thing. Apparently, my bag and coat are not on the Consumer Report list of approved toys.

I went into my room and put the sampo and Poppy's coat in the dresser. My parents had extracted a promise most solemn that I wouldn't touch them without permission. I had the distinct impression that permission would not be coming before age 21. I don't care. What good is a bag that can give you anything except what you really want?

CHAPTER 17

THE MANDATORY, TOO CUTE FOR WORDS, FAIRY TEA PARTY

Whoop-de-do. A tea party. This is all I need. But that's what's happening tonight after supper right in our very own backyard. Mom and Dad are already so mixed up that I don't think they know what's real and what isn't anymore. Less than twenty-four hours after my flight to Fairyland, Poppy showed up to let us know that company was coming. Everybody, I mean everybody, the entire two or three trillion little bug people are coming over. They all want to meet my parents and see where we live. Mom's so excited she's practically peeing in her pants.

Right after dinner, we carried the party food out to the picnic table. Dad turned on the floodlights and the backyard lit up like daytime. My tree house looked like a giant birdcage with a hundred hummingbirds in constant movement. The moment we stepped outside, dragonfly fairies started pouring out.

I cannot believe the neighbors are not going to see all this activity, but nobody seems worried, so maybe what Poppy told me is true, that it's almost impossible for most humans to see fairy things. Apparently, my family doesn't fall into the category of 'most humans'.

We were surrounded by the swarm before we got halfway across the patio. This was supposed to be a celebration, but the dragonfly fairies hung in the air, almost painfully quiet. I had the feeling that they were waiting for introductions and that I was supposed to do it.

I cleared my throat but couldn't think of anything else to do with it, so I cleared it again. Everybody who wasn't already staring at me did so. Meanwhile, Dad and Farthingale silently peeled off and headed for the tree house while poor Mom, stood there nervously shifting a carton of banana berry ice cream from one cold hand to the other.

"Won't you have a seat?" she said to the immediate horde. Not what I would call an icebreaker, but, hey, every little bit helps, especially when I'm not the one who has to do it. The fairies drifted down settling onto the table, backs of chairs, flower boxes, even the wind chimes. Mom and I were the only seats left empty. Except for an occasional nervous titter, the dragonfly fairies remained silent.

Mom put the ice cream on the picnic table next to a half-gallon bottle of Root Beer and a plate of blue and yellow sugar cookies. Dad had spent the entire afternoon squeezing tiny dots of his secret recipe cookie dough out of a pastry bag. They were half-inchers and there were hundreds of them.

We had two bowls of fruit, one filled with early season blueberries that Dad got from a special source, the other full of pomegranate seeds. While Dad was busy with the cookies this afternoon, Mom and I spent our time painstakingly picking the juicy slip-and-slide seeds out of the pomegranates.

I was grouchy, because every time I got hit in the eye with one of those slippery little suckers, I thought about how much easier it would have been to take everything out of my sampo, pre-seeded and ready to eat. But, oh, no, Mom and Dad would have none of that. If I couldn't use the bag, then they wouldn't use it either. Dumb, stupid parents.

I sat on the bench placing myself strategically in front of a plate of kid-sized sugar cookies with rainbow sprinkles. I was determined to eat as many as possible before one of my parents made me stop.

“Rose,” Dad hollered, “come and give me a hand.”

“Oh, that must be the cake,” she flustered and hurried over. Now was my chance. I reached out for the largest, softest cookie on the plate.

“Shouldn’t your wait till your parents come back?” someone said into my ear. It was Poppy. I had forgotten that I was surrounded by adults.

“Where’s Yofie?” I asked, feeling a sudden need for the presence of someone, anyone else in the non-adult category.

“Right here,” Poppy answered flying down to the table where I could see her. He was asleep in a baby carrier on her chest. As she landed, he opened his eyes, looked up at me and smiled. There was a communal ‘awww’ as hundreds of hearts melted faster than the banana berry ice cream. Everyone started talking at once. My shoulders finally became fairy chairs and the party was on. I was pelted with questions.

“Did you try the sampo yet?”

“How do you like being invisible?”

“Your parents seem really nice!”

“When are you coming to visit again?”

“Where’s Tefnut?”

“I...uh...huh...” Where was Tefnut anyway? “May I offer you something to drink?” I said, doing my best to sound like my mother. I poured the Mountain Dew into Mom’s best cut glass salad bowl.

Dozens of dragonfly fairies dive bombed the soda bowl at once, skimming over the surface and scooping up the soda with mugs that must have come out of their sampos. I had no idea what the point of this was, but there was a lot of cheering, more for some, less for others, so I’m pretty sure that there was a purpose other than mere drinking involved.

Owning a pair of wings seemed to have a few interesting possibilities beyond merely resting your feet. I could get into this.

“Careful, Rose.” Dad’s voice came from the the tree house. Uh-oh. Caught playing with our food. Me and what must have been nearly a hundred fairies, all stopped, turned and looked. Dad was lying on his stomach on the floor of the tree house, carefully lowering a large layer cake down to Mom, the kind where the layers get smaller as they get higher. Even from across the yard, it looked impressive. Farthingale was supervising.

It must have been heavy, that cake, because Mom and Dad carried the platter between them. When they got to the table and put it down, I saw that the top layer had an icing figure on top. A fairy...with fluffy brown hair wearing a long purple t-shirt.



I woke up instantly trying not to let my surprise show as Pussytoes and her apprentice Runcible sauntered into Miriam’s bedroom. My old friend Pussytoes was a long-bodied cat, yellow of fur and eye. Runcible was a half-grown black with an exquisite white star on his chest.

The two cats blocked the only exit, leaving me cornered, trapped in my favorite nap-chair. I bristled. An aggressive display was called for to offset this disadvantage.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded. “The family will see you.” I could hear them in the kitchen getting ready for the party. I happened to know that they were too busy to notice a herd of cats, but Pussytoes and Runcible didn’t.

“You and your precious family.” Runcible countered. “So what if they see us?”

“Jealous, are we?” I said to the budding young diplomat.

“What, me, leave Ailuria to live with humans? Never.”

I found it hard to believe that this youngster had been selected for the diplomatic corps. The new generation of born-and-bred Ailurians liked to think of themselves as tough and hardy. What they were, was naive.

“Respect, please, Runcible,” Pussytoes said. “Remember who you’re speaking to. Besides which, you’re too young to know about these things.” Pussytoes wasn’t. Her name was a dead giveaway to a youth spent growing up with a human family. Apparently she left under very tragic circumstances. No one ever teases Pussytoes about her name.

“Tefnut,” Pussytoes turned to me, simpering in a way that was most unbecoming to her age and rank, “You’re our family, our Main Cat, our DFOA. We need you.” Her voice lost its softness. “Also, your grace period is up. We’ve come to take you home.”

“Not yet, it’s not. I have till the end of the summer. All my plans are in place... I have chosen.”

“Who? Who did you pick?” Runcible said eagerly, “Everyone’s dying to know.” His tough facade was overwhelmed by an all consuming curiosity.”

I turned my head away with feigned indifference.

“There isn’t anyone, is there?” he sniffed.

“Perhaps,” I said, adroitly changing the subject, “we should continue this conversation outside, where we will be undisturbed by humans.”

I took my time getting off the chair, squeezed past as if I had all the room in the world and moved in front of them so as to lead rather than follow Pussytoes and Runcible to my cat door and out of the house. Rotten timing, I thought. I was going to miss the party.

CHAPTER 18

MONKEY IN THE MIDDLE

“Hey, it’s me, with wings,” I exclaimed.

“Do you like it?” Farthingale said. “Shadow and I made it together.”

“It’s wonderful,” I said, truly impressed. “It looks like it should be in a museum.”

The fairy was the only actual icing I could see. The entire surface of the cake was covered with real pansies, so many, and so close together, that I could only assume there was actually a cake under there.

“Make a wish,” Amber said. “Make a wish and blow.”

“But there are no candles,” I said confused.

“It’s a backwards cake. Blow first, lights second,” he said. Everyone took up the chant.

“Make a wish. Make a wish and blow,” their collective voices filled the yard. I glanced over to the neighbors again. Nothing.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I can do this. Backwards is okay.”

Two fairies, blue wings and brown wings with the usual matching outfits, flew down and lifted the icing fairy off the cake.

“Blow, blow, blow, blow.” The chant got louder. For such little people, they sure made a lot of noise.

I closed my eyes and took a breath. Halfway filled with air, I remembered to wish. I was having so much fun, that I forgot to make my usual wish and wished for a pair of lavender wings like the ones on the icing fairy instead. Then I opened my eyes wide with effort and blew.

Flowers flew everywhere to the music of rhythmic hand clapping. I automatically glanced next door, positive the neighbors would be watching, bug-eyed and open-mouthed. These guys may have small hands, but when that many of them are clapping, you don’t have to be real close to notice.

Meanwhile, I seem to have set something in motion on the cake. Pansies were swirling around like feathers in a dust devil. Then they began to blow away in every direction except down, revealing an empty plate. There was nothing, no cake, not even a toothpick tower to hold up the flowers. The only thing left of my unbirthday cake, was a shiny silver tray and three fairies, one of whom was made of icing and had lavender wings.

Someone switched off the backyard lights. I looked up and watched the flowers melt away like snowflakes, leaving behind a core of something brighter. Pansy-sized globes of light bobbed gently in the air like the shooting star-sparkles that finish off fireworks.

“Ahhh.” We all let out a long sigh of pleasure. The little lights didn’t fade away. They hung there penetrating the night with a hundred points of light. I felt like the stars had come down for a visit.

“What did you wish for?” somebody called out.

“I can’t say,” I said in the general direction of the voice. “It won’t come true.”

“It’s got a much better chance of coming true if you tell us than if you don’t” Farthingale said from her seat on my shoulder.

“Well, if you must know,” I said, “I wished for wings like those.” I pointed at the icing fairy in front of me.

“Hey, no problem there.” The brown-winged fairy said.

“I think we just may be able to accommodate you on that one,” the blue fairy added, grinning from ear to ear. They had lowered the icing fairy to the table and were standing on either side of her with their elbows on her shoulders.

“Be careful of my fairy,” I said noticing their casual treatment. “She’s too pretty to mess up.”

“Don’t worry, Miriam,” Blue said, rapping her knuckles on the head. “She’s solid.”

“China,” Brown said. “Solid porcelain china.”

“Ooo,” I said with pleasure. “Does that mean that I get to keep her?” Blue and Brown stepped back to let me pick up the little figure. “Look, Mom. Look how perfect she is,” I said holding the tiny statue out for inspection. But Mom didn’t hear me. She was staring at the china doll in my hand with a confused look on her face.

“Miriam,” she said slowly. “You never said anything about wings.”

Uh-oh. Apparently Mom had just made the transition from wishes to china dolls.

“Uh, yeah. You were both so excited yesterday that I kind of forgot.”

“You have wings?” Dad asked, also not smiling, as he scrutinized my back for evidence.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. Do I?” I said, turning to Farthingale for help.

“Not yet,” Farthingale answered matter of factly, “but she will eventually. We added the wing buds yesterday.”

“Ha ha!” Mom’s laugh came out high and squeaky, like she was trying real hard to be polite. “I’m afraid Miriam didn’t mention that little detail to us. She hasn’t said much about her visit. Our little Miriam never tells us anything.”

I? Never tell *them* anything? I took a big gulp of my soda to hide my anger. Bad move. In the mouth and out the nose. I hate it when it does that.

I’m coughing. Mom and Dad are both pounding me on the back. Everybody else is looking. Never tells them anything! Who can get a word in edgewise?

My parents finally stopped abusing my poor back. They smiled their best company smiles and nodded politely.

“We’re so pleased about all the wonderful things you are doing for Miriam,” Mom said stiffly. “We’re just a little surprised. We didn’t realize just how much our lives would be changed.”

“I think,” Dad said, and his face was dark, “I think that it would have been appropriate to check with us before you made any permanent alterations to our daughter.”

I sat there red faced, feeling like a home decorating project gone wrong. There was a lot of nervous tittering from the assembled masses. Polite remarks were exchanged. Fairies started to drift back towards the tree house. Well, that was fun, I thought. Weird, but fun.

Years of fallen evergreen needles under the Norway spruce that grew next to the front gate had made a deep soft bed. The ends of the Spruce’s droopy branches sat right on the ground all around the tree. I could see out. Nobody could see in. It was my favorite outdoor napping spot and that’s where we were headed.

“Oh, by the way,” Runcible said from behind, “Pisu sends his regards.”

Just the mention of That Name was enough to make every hair on my body stand on edge. Before I could blink, I was puffed up like a giant hairball.

“What’s bristling you, Tefnut,” Runcible asked. “I thought you and Pisu were like litter-mates?”

“We were,” I answered, trying to think fast while the rest of me focused on getting my fur to hurry up and get back where it belonged. “Why, Pisu was here just last year for a visit.”

“So, what happened? Did you two get into a fight?”

“As a matter of fact, we did have a small disagreement,” I conceded, stretching the truth whisker thin. “I assume that this is Pisu’s way of apologizing.” Not likely that Pisu would be letting me off the hook, but... you never know.

“Right,” Runcible drawled inserting all his youthful skepticism of the adult world into that one short word. More worrisomely, Pussytoes remained silent. “So, what did you fight about,” Runcible demanded. “Tell us.”

“Nothing important and it was all over a long time ago.”

“Doesn’t look over to me.”

“Well, it is,” Pussytoes interjected. “If Tefnut says it’s over, it’s over.” Pussytoes was nobody’s fool. She would expect payback for this, big time.

She settled down under the spruce in the paws-tucked-under position that announced relaxed but alert. The only thing that topped that was an aggressive posture. Completely inappropriate under the circumstance. The best I could do was affirm her choice by also assuming a relaxed/alert stance. Point for Pussytoes.



She came back, late that night... alone.

Before Pussytoes said anything, she padded over politely and began grooming the hard to reach spot in my ears.

“Look, Tefnut,” she finally began, rubbing her cheek against me affectionately, leaving the lingering perfume of her scent. “I can accept that you’re not returning. It’s clear that there’s something you don’t want to tell us. Pisu is too pleased with himself. Very pleased...and not talking.

“I don’t care about that. Pisu is an ass. I always wondered why you were such good friends. But I do care about who is coming after you. There’s very little time, and a great deal that needs to be done. We don’t even know what species the next DFOA will be.”

I sighed. She was right.

“Who else will need to know,” I asked.

“No one,” Pussytoes answered. “If I know who’s coming, I can influence the preparations without letting anyone realize that I have inside information...and I’m probably a lot better than Pisu at keeping a secret.

“Very well,” I said, and told Pussytoes whom I had chosen.

CHAPTER 19

TEFNUT'S REQUEST

It has now been exactly two weeks since my non-kidnapping. Thirteen lucky days since the disastrous tea party. I truly believe that parents exist only to humiliate their children. The Six came to visit me the next day. They totally did not get why my parents were so pissed off and I haven't seen them since. I haven't looked at the sampo or Poppy's coat either. They're at the bottom of my sweater drawer, and they can stay there for all I care.

Mom and Dad tried to talk to me a couple of times, but I figured that as long as I kept my promise about the sampo, I didn't owe them anything.

Otherwise, life was pretty normal. Dad was fooling around in the kitchen and Mom was wandering around the house, looking harried and muttering about deadlines. Tefnut was curled up on the giant teddy bear beanbag chair in my room and I was sitting on the floor next to her doing math homework – fractions – ugh. It was easy to believe that nothing had ever happened.

Naturally, with her usual instinct for perfect timing, this was when Tefnut decided to let me know that she could do a lot more than purr.

"You know, Miriam," Tefnut began, apparently not noticing my expression of complete and utter shock. Visits by little bug people with a mass fairy godmother complex... maybe, but talking cats... no, I was not ready for this. Not where I live.

"I'm really happy here," Tefnut explained. "I like being part of your family. I like the way your parents made me feel welcome when I was just beginning to find my way around the human world. And I love my house," she nattered on. "It's always warm and there are lots of windows."

I waited with superficial politeness while Tefnut took the long way around to say what was on her mind. Meanwhile, my brain was burning with a single question.

"Unfortunately," my furry friend continued, "I'm supposed to go home this year to settle a few loose ends. It's not that I feel guilty or anything. I'm a cat. But a promise is a promise."

Home, I thought? She has another home? Tefnut must have seen my confusion. She seemed to be trying to clarify the situation. She did not succeed.

"You see," Tefnut elaborated, "I'm Comfortable here and Comfort, as you know is one of those basic non-negotiable necessities for cats. It's right up there with Food and Entertainment."

"Entertainment?"

"That's right, Entertainment. It has everything to do with being at the top of the food chain. It is the very essence of what we are."

My brain clouded over. "Why are we talking about the food chain?"

"Never mind," she said, picking up where she left off. "Basically, I'm not really interested in all the hullabaloo of a big visit, but you would love it. It's a great place. Very Entertaining. You should go." I had no idea what Tefnut was talking about. All I knew was that she was talking.

"Tefnut." I couldn't hold it in any longer. "I didn't know you were a fairy."

“I am not a fairy,” she answered, “and I am not, not a fairy. All cats are Halfandhalfs. Part of us is magic, and part isn’t. It’s better than being all fairy because we can live wherever we want and we don’t have to stay hidden when we’re in the human world.

“Anyway,” Tefnut continued, “I’ve been thinking, now that you’re older, and have your fairy gifts, how about if you go this summer instead of me? You could be my official representative and I could stay here.” She extended one front paw and stretched, resettling herself on the beanbag chair where she preferred to spend most of her day.

My eyes narrowed. I still didn’t know what she was talking about, but I smelled a set-up. “Go where, Tefnut?”

“To Ailuria, of course. That’s where I used to live. In Ailuria. It is a small but extremely important independent state in Fairyland. Populated and governed completely by cats, naturally. Real fairies couldn’t be depended on to be in charge of anything so critical.”

“Any *what*, that is so critical?” I asked.

“Actually,” she continued, daintily leaping over my question, “I was more or less in charge. I guess you could say I ran the place... all of it. I’m retired now. I did it for a long time. It was enough. I don’t, don’t, don’t want to do it anymore. Not ever. Not even for a little while. I am so fed up with bickering cats...”

“Now don’t get me wrong.” Tefnut reversed herself. “It was nice. Very nice. You would love it,” she said again. “Cats may not always get along, like cute, little dragonfly fairies, but life is never boring for us. You’ll love it.”

“Is it Comfortable?” I asked, trying to understand not only what she was talking about, but why.

“Ah ha. Yes. That. Well, from a human point of view I think you will find it extremely comfortable. Luxurious, even.”

I doubted it, but said nothing.

“As I was saying,” Tefnut went on, “my current preference is for a quieter, more contemplative sort of lifestyle. And with a little help from you...” She gave me a long meaningful look. “...I plan to continue enjoying it.

“You understand, don’t you Miriam?” I didn’t. This has been happening to me a lot lately.

“Well, it’s like this. Officially, I am still the Catalyst; Chief Catastrophe; Supreme Ruler of the Cats of Clarity; Tie Breaker; Rule Breaker; Number One Tooth; Major Tooth and Claw Cat; and the DFOA. That’s Dominant Female Over All.

“In other words, in Ailuria, I’m in charge. The queen of the cats. And as such, I have one final teeny little obligation to fulfill. That loose end I mentioned. You’ll love it.”

Tefnut paused to make herself more comfortable, crossed her front paws, and looked me straight in the eye. It was the same look my parents give me when they are about to tell me something they know I don’t want to hear. I braced my brain.

“It’s traditional that the rulers of our kingdom choose their successors. I was here when you were born. I sat on the high dresser in your room and watched you in your crib and wondered what you would be like when you grew up.”

“Even though it will be many years before you are old enough,” Tefnut continued.

“Old enough for what?”

“Ahem.” Clearing her throat, Tefnut was obviously preparing herself to say something that was either very important, or something I wouldn’t like... probably both.

“I am now sure of my decision,” Tefnut said with great formality, “and I have chosen you to be the next ruler of Ailuria.”

There was a long pause. Tefnut seemed to be waiting for me to speak. From the smugness of her last comment, I presume, she expected me to say thank you. I didn't.

“Excuse me?” I finally said. “Aren't we missing something here? Like the fact that I happen to be human?”

“Like the fact, my dear child, that we cats have had both fairy and human leaders in the past. It makes no difference to us as long as they do the job.

“Do you think I just wandered into your life one day? As it happens, I chose your family for my retirement specifically because you have a distant ancestor – on your father's side – who was one of our most successful queens.” Meanwhile, I'm not talking because my mouth is hanging open.

“You didn't know that, did you,” Tefnut said, cat-smug. “Neither does your Dad. Her name was Dana and she ruled from 1497 until she retired in 1546. The fact that you also happen to have elf ancestry...well, really, that just settled everything, didn't it.”



For a while, I traveled back and forth to Ailuria on an occasional, semi-secret basis. Just enough to let everyone know that I was still around. Keeping my options open as it were.

My final trip to Ailuria was almost ten years ago to visit to an old friend. On my way to her den, I stopped to enjoy the sight of a caboodle of kittens pestering their mother.

“Mommy, tell us again, the story of when we were born,” they demanded.

“Ah. Well,” she began affectionately, lingering on her opening. I heard a good story coming up and settled down to listen.

“You were born on the night that the journey-cat was treed by a mouse. Everybody knows about that. All night long that cat was afraid to come down. All because of a little mouse. Isn't that the silliest thing you ever hear? The whole village of Southend was there to see it, but no one ever discovered who the journey-cat really was...”

Burning with shame, I cringed away. Even if they never found out, how could I, the DFOA, knowing what I know, endure the humiliation of listening to mothers all over Ailuria telling this story to their kittens?

That was the last time I ever visited Ailuria, or ever wanted to.

CHAPTER 20

NOT A HAPPY QUEEN

“Okay. Hold it! Stop right there. We’re not talking fairy friends here. This is major responsibility. I don’t do responsibility. I don’t have to. I’m a kid. It’s in the rules somewhere.”

“Of course, it goes without saying” Tefnut said, her voice dripping with courtesy, “that I have already discussed this with The Six. At considerable length,” she added, as if that somehow made it all right.

“Oh, really! Don’t I have any say in the matter? Or am I just a loose end to be tied up?” I could feel my anger building.

“Every morning, I wake up and look to see if I still have two little wing bumps on my back. I am invariably surprised to see that I do.

“Do you think it’s all hearts and flowers? All my friends are growing breasts. I’m growing wings. When do you think I’m going to my next pajama party? Try, never!

“Now, on top of all this, I’m supposed to show up in some tra-la-la fairy place full of cats, curtsy, and wait for them to queen me? I don’t think so.

“Relax, Miriam,” Tefnut purred at me. “No one can make you be anything. It’s your decision. Completely. Utterly.

“What we think – the Six and I – would be a good idea...” She spoke slowly, as if she was searching for the right words. “Since school will be out in a few weeks... Perhaps, the time is right for you to take your fairy gifts and go for a visit to Ailuria.

“No strings. No obligations. Just a nice little trip. Say hello. Check things out. See what you think.”

Finally it dawned on me that this was not something Tefnut thought of last week. We’re talking long-term planning here.

“Tefnut! Did you have anything to do with the dragonfly fairies finding out about me and my family when I was a baby?”

“Oh, Miriam! You’re so suspicious.” Tefnut stood up, stretched and cat-casually walked out of the room.

“Is that an ‘Oh, Miriam, yes’, or an ‘Oh, Miriam, no’,” I said to her tail as she disappeared around the corner.

“Stop arranging my life for me,” I hollered to the empty air. “First, I have to grow up. Then you can arrange my life for me.”

I stomped out of the room to find my parents. How dare they connive with Tefnut like that and then let her dump everything on me?

I could hear Mom humming in her studio. I stormed in and confronted her.

“How could you let Tefnut do this to me?” I challenged her. She turned abruptly to face me with a worried expression and a paint-smudged face.

“Darling. Are you okay? What did she do?”

“You don’t know? What did she tell you?”

“Tell? Don’t be silly, dear. Cats don’t talk.” This coming from a lady who claims she used to be a mermaid. I rolled my eyes heavenward. Give me strength.

“Tefnut does,” I said. “Nonstop. I could hardly get a word in edgewise.”

“Well, no cat ever spoke to me,” Mom said calmly. “Although I don’t know why they shouldn’t,” she mused, absently pulling out a chair and sitting down. I gave out with another eye roll. Typical, I thought.

She put her hands under her chin, elbows on the big-paint covered drafting table, watching me, waiting for me to speak.

CHAPTER 21

COFFEE BREAK

“So, what did she say?” Mom finally asked when I didn’t.

“She said,” I announced, “she said, she wanted me to be the queen of the cats.” I snorted for emphasis and plopped myself down in the chair opposite her.

“That’s ridiculous. You’re not a cat. How could you be a cat queen?”

“She didn’t tell you about this?” I asked suspiciously.

“Not a word. Not even that she could use words,” Mom commented. “Maybe you had better tell me exactly what she said.”

I did.

“My goodness!” Mom murmured when I was done. She put a hand to her chest and took a big breath. “Are you sure she talked to you?”

“Mo-om.” I dragged the whine out extra long for effect.

“Well, she never spoke to me before.”

“I know that,” I said through clenched teeth. “You already said that.”

“My goodness. Talking cats and fairy friends. Why it’s almost like when I was a girl. I remember...”

Why can’t grownups stay on the subject? Why does it always take them so long? Cats, fairies, parents. They’re all the same.

“Listen, Mom. I don’t want to hear that stuff.”

“I don’t understand. When you were younger, you used to love hearing stories about when Dad and I were kids.”

I glared at her and said nothing. I still did. I still liked the *true* stories about what they really did when they were young. But after I found out about my big sister, I stopped asking because I never knew what they were going to come up with.

Sometimes, late at night, I worried about our family. Mom and Dad always acted like they really believed everything they said. I was afraid that if someone found out, they would take them away. I couldn’t let that happen. They were mine. I loved them and they needed me to love them.

“When you told me that story about being touched by the fairies, you never told me it was true.” I said, accusingly.

“I always did.”

“But only in a story way. You made it sound like make-believe.”

“You were a little girl. You loved hearing it that way.”

“Well, I’m not little anymore.”

“But, we don’t talk about those things anymore. You’ve been so... uninterested. I didn’t want to push. I thought maybe when you were older...”

“When Farthingale approached me last month,” Mom said, “I was as surprised as you must have been. But I was pleased, too. I thought it was a perfect way to let someone else show you what you didn’t seem to want to hear from us anymore. I thought you would be thrilled to see the garden we had told you about.”

“Try terrified.”

“But she was such a sweet little thing.”

“Sure, she was sweet. You were probably all cozy-comfy talking right here in your studio like we are. Your world didn’t get turned upside down.” I hit a nerve. She winced.

“Well, now that you mention it, we were in the kitchen. I got your old toy tea set out of the cupboard, and we had coffee.

“But Miriam? It’s over. It was okay, wasn’t it? Why are you so angry?”

Because, I thought without telling her. Because you tell me things that aren’t true and now I don’t know which is which. It’s embarrassing.

I wanted to ask her again about my sister. Maybe this time she would tell the truth. Nah. She doesn’t know the difference.

Anyway, I had a better idea.

“I gotta go,” I said through clenched teeth. “I told Rachel I’d come over when I finished my homework.”

I walked out, leaving Mom shaking her head. The only thing wrong with her studio is that it has a sliding door. There’s nothing to slam.

CHAPTER 22

GOODBYE, MR. GOOD GIRL

It would have saved me a lot of grief if I had known that the garden story was true. I thought I was being kidnapped by friends of Roger Rabbit. The way I acted, the fairies must have thought I was a complete jerk. And after that stupid party, it's no wonder they haven't come back for another visit. Now they know that not only am I a jerk, I am a daughter of jerks.

Back in my room, I went to the dresser and pulled open the top drawer. There was the sampo and Poppy's coat.

Mom and Dad let me keep them in my room because they knew I wouldn't touch them once I gave my word. I'm always the person they want me to be.

'Miriam is so nice. Miriam is so polite. Miriam is so thoughtful. Such a good student. Such a good girl.' Blah, blah, blah, blah.

My teachers all like me. My friends think I'm funny. My parents think I'm great. Just great. I'm somebody for everybody. All because of a bunch of little bug people who have been telling me how to walk, talk and chew gum while I sleep.

I probably don't even exist, I muttered, putting on Poppy's coat and becoming invisible. I'm just a collection of everyone's wants. Even my cat's.

I am seriously ticked off. I want me back and I want me now.

Well, this is for me, I thought, tying the sampo around my waist. It's my turn.

Goodbye, Mr. Good Girl.



"Tefnut, we need to talk." Miriam's mother caught up with me when I stopped in the kitchen for a snack. She lifted me up and put me on the counter so we were eye-to-eye.

"Exactly what's going on? Since when have you had a voice? What is this queen business and why haven't Ben and I heard anything about it?" She pounded me with her questions. It was painful. I turned my ears away in self-defense.

Gentle Rose sounded anything but. She even smelled angry. In this case, silence was the better part of discretion. I turned around to lick my back and avoid direct eye contact.

Humans have the power. They can out-stare anything at twenty paces. Even I didn't have a chance if I let her look me in the eyes.

She put her hand under my chin and started to scratch. Ooo, that felt good. Without even asking me for permission, my chin followed her hand around until I was looking at her again. Sneaky. Very sneaky, Rose.

I sighed. This is exactly why letting humans know you can talk to them is a really bad idea.

"When an Ailurian ruler chooses to retire," I began, giving in to the inevitable...

"Which, by the way, almost never happens, because it's such a great place to live," I said, hoping to forestall some of the more difficult questions Rose might choose to ask me...

"They have a ten-year grace period to choose their successor. If they don't find anyone, or if they return to Ailuria, however briefly during the grace period, then, poof, retirement is over. They automatically revert to power. If Miriam doesn't show up in

Ailuria by the end of the summer, I am officially unretired and have to move back... forever.”

“First of all, Tefnut, you’ve already been with us for more than ten years...”

“Not full time, I wasn’t,” I interrupted. “Remember how I used to disappear for two or three days at a time? I didn’t fully retire until I was with you for more than a year.”

“Hmmpf.” Rose nodded her understanding and rolled on. “Second, since you seem to know what’s going on around here, you should have better timing.

“Miriam’s been having a tough time lately,” she said. “I think she’s angry at us for not having any more children. And right now, she’s extra mad at us, because we won’t let her use the sampo. She is using it as an excuse to be even more difficult than usual.

“Third, you can’t make decisions for my daughter. That’s my job.”

“I didn’t decide,” I said slowly, formulating my response to garner maximum parent points, “I chose. It’s different. Just because I chose Miriam doesn’t mean she actually has to do it.

“All I really need is for her to show up before the ten years are up and let everyone see the girl I picked to be their queen. That will get me off the hook. Then she can do whatever she wants with her life. She doesn’t have to be queen, she just has to be chosen to be queen.”

“Is that how you explained it to Miriam?”

“Of course not. How could I know that a ten year-old girl would be anything but thrilled to the core to have such an honor bestowed upon her?”

Rose’s eyes narrowed without releasing their grip on me. “She’s at a friend’s house. As soon as she gets home, I suggest you explain it to her the way you just told me.

“And Tefnut...”

“Yes?”

“It had better be true.” She stalked out of the kitchen, probably to find Miriam’s dad and start the whole thing all over again. It was time to go. As soon as Rose was out of sight, I headed for the cat door.

PART III
THE SECOND JOURNEY



CHAPTER 23
THE RUNAWAY

I was so ticked off at Tefnut and Mom and Dad that it was easy to leave. Sitting with my invisible nose pressed against the airplane window, I watched us take off. Goodbye, earth. Hello, clouds. I was having trouble staying angry. Being invisible is too much fun.

Grandma and Grandpa don't know it, but they are about to get a houseguest. They live in Bigwater Beach and so did my parents until just before I was born, so that's where my big sister must have grown up.

It's for sure she wasn't in Ardu. No one there even knew what I was talking about. They thought it was the dumbest thing they'd ever heard.

My current theory is that she disappeared from Bigwater Beach. I know she's alive somewhere. I can feel it.

Grandma and Grandpa will know what happened. And they'll tell me, even if Mom and Dad won't. But first I plan to have a little look around for myself. Other people will remember things. There will be traces.

I leaned back into the seat and closed my eyes, trying to imagine what it would be like when we finally met. Not that I hadn't ever thought about it before. This was my favorite daydream, so I knew exactly where to pick up the threads.

She's sitting next to me, of course, and we're on our way home at last. Mom and Dad are already at the airport, waiting. They get so excited about things like this. But for now, it's just the two of us. My sister is beautiful, an almost-adult with a figure to die for, long hair that shines like a shampoo ad, and that swings side to side when she walks. We are quiet. Today, I don't have any questions. I don't need any advice. Today, everything is right.

!!!!!!

Sneaking on and off the airplane was easy. Figuring out the bus schedule after we landed at the airport was not. I wiggled my shoulder blades, wishing the two little bumps on my back were more functional. I decided to ask.

Since there were phones but no phone booths around, I went into the nearest Women's Room. Good. It was empty. I took off my fern coat and emerged from the bathroom a la Superman.

Positive that everyone was looking at me, I discovered a new definition for the word naked as I walked self-consciously over to the information desk.

There were three clerks behind the desk. One was a bored-looking woman with her jacket hanging open and an 'I don't care' look on her face. The second was a man who reminded me of Mr. Bergman, the strictest teacher in school. No way, Jose. The last clerk

was kind of young looking with reddish hair and a nice face. He looked okay. I stood in front of him and waited until I had his attention.

“Excuse me,” I said. “My dad is getting our luggage. He asked me to find out what bus to take to Bigwater Beach.” There was a scary empty moment while he looked me over. Then he reached behind the counter and pulled out a bunch of bus schedules. He smiled at me, so I knew it was all right.

“Where in Bigwater do you want to go?” he asked.

“To Nightsbridge Road,” I answered. He started to flip through a big book.

“Here it is,” he said. “Let’s see, you need number 271. You can get that at the airport bus terminal in about twenty minutes. Then you transfer to 68, then... Here,” he said handing me a bunch of leaflets. “You’d better take the schedules. You’re going to need four different buses. I’ll write it down for you. You know how to get to the bus terminal?” he asked when he was done.

“My dad knows,” I lied.

“Tell him to just follow the signs,” he said handing me the paper he had written the directions on.

“Thanks,” I replied and headed for the bathroom. The sooner I was invisible again, the safer I would feel.

I put on my fern coat and walked out. Sure enough, there was the redheaded man. He was standing right outside the bathroom door talking to an airport security guard.

“She may have been telling the truth,” he was telling the guard, “But she looked like a runaway to me. I thought it would be better to check, just in case.”

Phew. I thought, tiptoeing carefully past them. That bathroom doesn’t have any windows. They are going to be totally freaked when I don’t show up. That settles it. This is the last time I go visible until I get to Grandma and Grandpa’s.

It took me over three hours to get to Nightsbridge Road. Except for one close call when I forgot that I could see cars but that they couldn’t see me, they were three extremely long, boring hours.

It was almost dark, and the lights were on in Grandma and Grandpa’s house. It was easy to see inside. I walked around the house peeking in every window until I found them.

They were in the den, reading. So I snuck in the unlocked kitchen door at the opposite end of the house and headed straight for the guest room. They didn’t use this room for anything but company. I could probably live here for days without being discovered.

Pulling the bedroom door quietly closed behind me, I flopped down on the bed. I’ll start looking for my sister tomorrow, I thought, closing my eyes.



“What do you mean, she’s gone?” Farthingale said.

As the unofficial feline seventh member of the Six, I had called an emergency conference. We were in our usual meeting place on the roof of Miriam’s tree house.

“I’m afraid my little conversation with Miriam didn’t go as well as I had hoped,” I said to them. “It seems that she felt just a tad manipulated. I really don’t know why she should. I let her know in no uncertain terms that the final choice was completely up to her.”

“Tefnut,” Dragonbreath said from his perch on an overhanging branch. “You’ve been planning this for her whole life. She *is* being manipulated.” Lately, he’s been sounding more and more like a junior version of his mother.

“Hey, I’m under a lot of pressure here, too,” I said. “All of catdom is expecting to see their new queen this summer. If Miriam won’t go, then I’ll have some heavy explaining to do and I’ll have to go there to do it.”

I refrained from mentioning the small detail that if I did go, I wouldn’t be coming back. There’s nothing more pitiful than a desperate cat.

CHAPTER 24

THE SISTER SEARCH

I didn't wake up until late the next morning. Grandma was outside weeding the garden. Grandpa must have been at work. Going into the kitchen, I sat at the table and took an egg salad sandwich and a Sprite out of my sampo. While I ate, I looked over the bus schedules to figure out how to get to the library.

After breakfast I changed into clean clothes. I was dying to shower and wash my hair, but I didn't want Grandma and Grandpa to know I was here yet, so I settled for brushing my teeth and taking fresh underwear and a T-shirt out of the sampo, hiding the dirty stuff under the bed. I put my cloak back on, grabbed the sampo and headed out to the bus stop.

I walked up the steps to the library feeling pretty good about myself. I had come all this way without anyone's help, and now I was about to start doing something that was really important. Not just for me, but for my whole family. When I was done, there would be no more secrets and we would all be much happier. Especially me.

I ducked behind a bookshelf and took off my fern coat. Whatever it was made of was so thin that I could crumple it up to the size of a ping-pong ball. If I folded it neatly it was even smaller. But that took forever. I stuffed it in my pocket and went over to the reference desk.

"Excuse me," I said to the librarian. "Can you tell me how to look something up in the newspaper?" Flicking an imaginary speck off her pink jacket, she bent her head to smile at me over the top her glasses.

"The newspapers are all over there," she said pointing. "Anything in particular you're looking for?"

I looked along her arm to a table covered with papers and magazines. There were a few people sitting in big soft chairs reading magazines.

"I mean really old papers," I said.

"Well... we keep back issues of newspapers on the shelves for a month," she replied, warming up to her subject. "The last seven years are digital, but before that, they are on microfiche. How far back did you need to go?"

"About ten years, I think." My guess was that whatever happened was just before Mom and Dad moved away

The librarian showed me how to use the microfiche machine and where to find the microfiche filmstrips. One month of newspapers was stored on each roll of film. I decided to start from the time Mom and Dad left town and work backwards.

Twenty-four rolls of film later, I had nothing. My shoulders ached and my eyes watered.

It has to be here somewhere. I must have misjudged the time. The story was probably older than I thought. I can't believe a missing kid didn't make it to the local newspaper.

Or maybe it was there, but I missed it. Should I go back over the same films again? Or should I keep working backwards? My head hurt. I went outside to eat my lunch. Later. I would look more later.

Later turned out to be another twenty-four rolls of film with no results plus a brain and body that were even achier than before. Not only that, but now I could add depressed, which is what I was, to the list.

My whole plan depended on finding a newspaper article. It would have given me names of people to talk to and a date to talk about. I had no idea what to do next. I just wanted to go home.

I rolled out of the library and over to the bus stop. I was so spacey from staring at filmstrips all day that I forgot to put on Poppy's coat. Fortunately, the sampo provided me with the bus fare. But there was no way I could put the coat on now without causing a riot on the bus. I guess I'll have to sneak into Grandma and Grandpa's house without it. Oh, well, I thought dully, staring out of the bus window. I'll deal with that when I get there.

By the time the bus turned onto Grandma and Grandpa's street, I knew what to do next, but I didn't like it. Tomorrow I would go to the police station to ask about missing people. I'm going to need a really good story for this one.

Uh oh. I sucked in my breath hard. Pulling the bell cord, I jumped out of my seat as the bus passed Grandma and Grandpa's house.

Looks like I won't have to go to the police station tomorrow, after all. They were already here.



"I believe I know what's happened to Miriam," I said quietly. It took exactly one second for my words to penetrate the desperate quarreling among The Six. Heads turned. Words were left hanging in the air.

CHAPTER 25 UNCLOAKED

There was a police car parked in front of Grandma and Grandpa's house. I raced down the aisle and was out of the bus the moment the door opened. Before the driver had a chance to close it up again, I had shaken out my fern coat and thrown it around me. I could see him staring wide-eyed at where I wasn't as he automatically shut the doors and began to drive off.

Running as fast as I could, across the street and up the walk, I got to the front door just as Grandpa opened it. Standing next to the policeman, and trying not to breathe too loud, I listened.

"We're looking for a runaway who may have been headed for this neighborhood," the officer said. "She was at the airport yesterday afternoon asking for directions to Nightsbridge Road."

I didn't have to concentrate on not moving anymore. I was frozen. I can't believe that that guy at the airport actually called the police.

"A missing kid, huh," Grandpa said. "That's too bad. What did she look like?"

"Eight or nine years old..."

What! He must have been a real jerk. Anyone can see that I'm at least ten.

"...about four and a half feet tall," he continued, "and about sixty pounds. Light brown hair, dark eyes, medium skin, and, oh yeah," he squinted down at the note pad he was holding, "...and a nice smile," he read.

"I haven't seen any extra kids around, officer. But I'll tell my wife and we'll keep our eyes open."

"Please call us if you see any children you don't know in the neighborhood," the officer said. "These descriptions aren't always accurate. Thank you for your help." He turned and cut across the grass to the next house.

I sucked in my stomach and squeezed through the door before it shut. Grandma was sitting on the recliner with a basket of laundry on her lap. She was on the phone, nodding and uh-humming.

Whoever was at the other end was doing all the talking, and from Grandma's expression, they were not telling jokes.

"Now calm down, Rose," she said. "I'm sure she's all right."

Oh, my god! It's Mom.

"What was she wearing?" Grandma said. "...New Orleans?" Grandma picked up a shirt from the top of the basket. It was my New Orleans T-shirt.

"It's okay," Grandma said. "She's with us. ...No I haven't, but I've seen her T-shirt. ...Uh-hum. Under the bed in the guest room together with her socks and underwear. ...No, dear, I'm sure she's not naked." Grandma looked up at Grandpa and mouthed the words, 'she's hysterical,' at him.

"Doesn't she have that invisible coat thing with her? ...Well, that explains it. She's a sensible child. She'll let us know when she's ready. Trust her, Rose. She's a good kid."

Thanks, Grandma, I thought, collapsing on the couch and letting my fern coat fall away so they could see me.



“How many of you,” I asked, “How many of you have had Miriam ask you about other humans living in Ardu?”

It turned out that everyone had heard some version of the same question. I already knew this, because I had been in hearing range for most of them. I lifted my right front paw in preparation for a little face washing. I could see from her expression that Farthingale was ready to pick up the ball.

“Just because she didn’t find who she was looking for in Ardu,” Farthingale said, “doesn’t mean that she gave up looking. If she asked her parents, then they either didn’t know or wouldn’t tell her,” Farthingale said, still speaking quietly.

“She’s gone to look for a missing family member. And I’m pretty sure,” I said, thinking about her special game, “that the missing person is a sister.”

“But, Tefnut,” Poppy protested. “There are no missing sisters, are there?”

“None that I’ve heard of,” I replied.

CHAPTER 26

DECEIT AND DENIAL

“Hi, Grandma. Hi, Grandpa. Thanks for covering for me,”

“You look tired, honey,” Grandma said, without batting an eyelash. “How about something to eat?”

My skinny frame always sends Grandma into a feeding frenzy. In my family, tired equals hungry, sad equals hungry, and happy equals a feast. We subscribed to the “food is love” philosophy of life.

“Thanks, Grandma. I’m starved.” Two glasses of milk and a large piece of chocolate cake later, I was ready to talk. Grandma and Grandpa listened quietly while I told them who I was looking for and why I thought this was the right place to look.

I kept expecting them to interrupt me, but Grandma and Grandpa were almost unbearably silent. They were staring at each other across the kitchen table. Grandma was crying softly.

“Sweetheart,” Grandpa finally said. “You never had a sister.”

Was I surprised? No, shocked was more like it. That was absolutely the last thing I expected him to say. Mom and Dad, yes. Grandma and Grandpa, no. These were the two people in my family who have always been completely honest with me.

I looked at Grandpa. His face was frozen, just like mine got when I was totally embarrassed by the size of the whopper I was telling. I felt like such a jerk. I trusted them. Now I would get sent home. With nothing. No, not nothing, I would get sent home with a major punishment.

“You can’t fool me, you know,” I said evenly. “I saw her picture on a milk carton. She looks just like me. You promised Mom and Dad you wouldn’t tell me, didn’t you?” I lashed out. “You’re part of the secret, aren’t you?”

“Nobody ever kept any secrets from you, Miriam,” Grandpa said. “That picture looks like you, because it’s your mother.”

“No!” I gagged on my own spit and started to cough. Grandpa pounded me on the back. Grandma just sat there quietly dripping. The front of her shirt was getting wet from all the tears.

Lies. All lies. I could feel the anger rising up through my chest, my neck, my face, till it felt like bursting out of the top of my head.

Words failed me. I left.



We found Miriam sprawled across the bed in a dimly-lit room at the back of the house. She was crying her eyes out. Poppy flew over to the pillow to comfort her. Miriam, however, was not in the mood.

CHAPTER 27

MAGIC SUCKS

“Go away,” I said to the bug on my pillow. “You’re not real .You don’t exist.”

“Don’t be silly,” Poppy said. “How can I not be real? I’m a mother. Here, touch me.” She held out her hand. “I’m as real as you are.” I shrank back from her touch with a shiver.

“This is crazy. You’re a fairy. Straight out of a picture book. Somebody invented you. They drew you. Like a `Toon’.” Poppy’s face fell. She looked shattered.

“Oh, Miriam...” she started.

“Go back to the TV set where you belong. You’re a figment of my imagination. That’s why no one else can see you.

“My sister is real,” I announced. “I just have to find her.” I buried my face in the pillow. Maybe if I shut Poppy out of my sight I could shut her out of existence as well.

I tilted my head just a touch and peeked. The little fairy looked so dejected that for a minute I thought she was going to pull a Tinkerbell on me and start to fade away.

“Miriam? May I come in?” came a gentle voice from the other side of the door.

“Go away,” I gurgled, without taking my face out of the pillow. I guess my response was muffled enough to be a yes or a no, so the door opened and Grandpa came in. He sat down next to me at the foot of the bed and scratched Tefnut under the chin. She stretched her neck out to help him find the right spot.

“I didn’t know you brought Tefnut with you,” he said to Miriam.

“I didn’t. She came with Poppy.”

“Poppy? Isn’t she one of The Six?”

“Yes, but you can’t see her because she doesn’t exist.”

“Nonsense. Of course, she does. Just wait a second for my eyes to adjust. Where is she?”

“She isn’t on the pillow,” I said, raising my head and pointing with my chin. Grandpa stared at the pillow and squinted.

“Oh, there she is. I can almost see her. How do you do, Poppy?”

“Nice to meet you, too,” Poppy said with a wan smile.

“Come on, Grandpa. Cut it out. You know you can’t see anything.”

“That’s a lovely red dress you’re not wearing,” he said to Poppy.

“Thank you,” she said, perking up. “It’s my favorite color.”

“Okay. Okay. So you can see her. But you shouldn’t be able to. If there really was magic in the world, I would be able to find my sister.”

“Listen, Miriam,” he said, stroking Tefnut’s fur absently. “I have something more important to talk about than my eyesight.”

“Yeah, like when you’re sending me to the loony bin.”

“No. Stop acting up and listen for a minute. This isn’t easy for me to talk about.”

“You just don’t understand. I couldn’t feel this way about someone who doesn’t exist. I love her. How can she not be out there somewhere?”

“I don’t know, dear. What you say makes sense. But the picture that you saw...it’s a picture of your mother, not your sister. I just can’t believe that they never told you.”

I sat up and folded my arms in front of my chest daring him to prove it.

“Grandma’s lying down and resting. She was too upset to come in. I must say that I’m surprised. I always thought your parents had told you about the time that Rose was missing for six years. Grandma and I, well, we never talked about it, not because it was secret, it was just too painful.”

“Oh, they told me, all right. But they told me that Mom was a mermaid. Naturally, I assumed they had just made it up.”

“Miriam,” he said slowly. “Read my lips. Your mother *was* a mermaid.”



Miriam sat there with her biggest skeptical smirk to date. I folded my feet under me and tried to look inconspicuous.

CHAPTER 28

EVELYN X

“Would you like me to say it again?” Grandpa said. “Your mother was a mermaid. For six years, she lived under the ocean with an adopted family.

“Miriam,” he said, sounding seriously frustrated. “You’re walking around with wing buds and a magic coat. Why is this so hard for you to accept?”

I knew the answer but I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear it out loud. Big sister would know what to do, but how could I ask her if she wasn’t there.

“Because,” I finally mumbled, still mad, and not really wanting him to hear, “if everything Mom and Dad said was true, then they were telling the truth when they said that I didn’t have a sister.”

I let my voice go so low by the end of the sentence, that even I had trouble understanding what I was saying. Grandpa sighed and began to speak.

“It happened,” he said, “because we didn’t know that magic ran in our family and neither did Evelyn X. Not only that, but I don’t think Evelyn ever figured out that she probably had a fairy ancestor in her own closet as well.”

“Evelyn X?” I said. Come on, Grandpa, I’m thinking. You can do better than that.

“X isn’t her original name. Evelyn was a college friend of Grandma’s. She changed her name when she decided to become a witch.”

“Witches and mermaids,” I muttered. “I can’t believe I’m listening to this.”

“Just be quiet and listen,” Grandpa said sharply. “I don’t like talking about this anymore than you like hearing it.”

I kept my mouth shut, but I let him have my biggest, my-god-adults-are-such-morons, sigh.

“It was right after Woodstock,” he continued, clearly choosing not to notice my non-verbal signal. He went back into that story-telling way of talking that always makes me suspicious.

“People were doing lots of strange things. Evelyn happened to think witchcraft was the ultimate cool. It was fun, and it annoyed the older generation. That was all that mattered in those days.”

“So you’re telling me this person was really a witch?”

“There are no witches, Miriam. At least not in the Halloween, wicked witch, broomstick tradition. What there are, are people like you and your mother – and Evelyn – who because of their histories, are more susceptible to magic.

“Even so, when Evelyn started messing around with magic spells the only time it really worked was when she tried it out on Rose. She thought she was doing a parlor trick. No one was more surprised than Evelyn, when Rose disappeared.”

“This is not making sense,” I said. “Why should her trick only work on Mom?”

“There were three conditions Evelyn needed to do real magic. First, she had to be able to call the subject by her true name. That part was easy. Second, she had to be someone who could use magic and apparently Evelyn was.” I nodded, but kept my hands crossed over my chest.

“Last and most importantly, the person she did the spell on had to meet the same condition of being someone who could use magic, which Rose did.”

“So what happened?” I asked. My hands fell to my knees and I leaned forward to hear the answer.

“That’s it. She was over for a visit, showing off some silly hocus-pocus. Uncle Mickey was just a baby, but Rose was all of eight years old and thought it was wonderful. She begged Evelyn to let her be a helper. We thought it was sweet of Evelyn to include her.

“‘First, I must render you invisible,’ Evelyn had said, with as much drama as she could muster, ‘so that you can be my unseen helper.’ She waved her arms around and repeated some nonsense that none of us including Evelyn understood and Rose disappeared.

“There was no flash of lightning. No thunderbolt from beyond. Rose was just quietly and completely gone.

“What a great trick it was, I thought at first. No mirrors. No equipment. Right there in front of our noses. I started to applaud. Then I saw the look of shock on Evelyn’s face and I went nauseous with fear.

“‘It never did that before,’ she whispered.

“Everything, including my heart, froze and stayed that way for the next six years. Rose wasn’t invisible. She was gone, completely and utterly gone.

“So was Evelyn, by the way. She didn’t have the courage to stay and try to figure out how to fix what had happened. She left town the next day. We never saw her again.

“For six years, after Evelyn’s accidental Sender Spell dumped Rose in the ocean with a tail where her legs should have been, your mother lived with adopted mer-parents in a city on the bottom of the sea.

“For six terrible years until the spell simply wore off of its own accord, we didn’t know if our child was dead or alive.”

CHAPTER 29

A GAME WITH A SISTER IN IT

“There’s a meteorite shower predicted for tonight,” Grandpa said to me that night at supper.

“I’ve never seen real meteors,” I said, trying to sound at least a little enthusiastic.

“What? Never seen a shooting star?” Grandpa said.

“There are hardly any stars where we live,” I answered. “We’re too close to the city.”

“Well, we get plenty here,” Grandma said. “The shower won’t start till late, ten thirty, eleven. But it’s a warm night. Why don’t you three,” she nodded at the stool where Tefnut was sitting with Poppy curled up between her feet, “take a blanket out to one of the chaise longues in the yard.

“You can sleep out there if you want, or use the futon on the back porch if you’d rather. You’ll still be able to see most of it through the porch screen.”

“Aren’t you coming to watch, too?” I asked.

“We’re real tired,” Grandma said. “It’s an early night for us tonight.”

Tefnut `excused` herself right after dinner.

“I gotta go,” she said. “Say goodbye to the oldies for me.” CHAPTER 29

“What’s up, Tiffy?” Poppy asked.

“Nothing. It’s over. We found Miriam. Now I want to go home. Not for me the open road. Bye.”

“Don’t you want to see the meteor shower?” I said to her vanishing tail. But she had already pushed open the unlatched screen door and disappeared into the backyard.

“How will she get home?” I asked.

“Shortcut,” Poppy answered. “We found a Gate, a couple of blocks away and from there it’s not far to the beech tree in your yard.”

“Oh.” I replied. “I don’t suppose I can get home the same way?”

“Nope. Maybe when you’re older.”

I shook my head, understanding, but, not really. Isn’t it amazing how many things you have to wait for when you’re a kid, I thought. Then I’m supposed to grow up and wish I could be a kid again.

“Oh, well,” I said out loud. “Maybe it will make sense someday.”

“What will?” said Poppy.

“Nothing, really,” I answered, resignedly. “Let’s get some pillows and stuff for the porch.”

We got the futon ready for later, then set ourselves up with pillows and blankets on one of the lounge chairs in the yard. With the back lowered almost flat, it was a perfect setup. All I had to do to watch the sky was open my eyes.

“I can’t believe it, Poppy,” I said after we were settled. “Somebody poofed my mother, just like you did to that flea.”

“I’ve never heard of anyone using the Sender Spell with people before,” Poppy said. “Although now that I think about it, it should be easier, because you need a name for it to work, and with people, you usually already know what their name is.”

“Fleas have names?”

“Yup.”

“What do you do, ask them? Excuse me, Flea, would you kindly tell me your name so that I can kick you out of your nice furry home and send you to some cold damp nasty place?”

“Nope. Fleas aren’t smart enough to tell you, even if they know, which they don’t.”

“They don’t know their own names?”

“Like I said, they’re not real bright.”

“Come on, Poppy. Gimme a break.”

“No, really. It’s not that hard. There are only about a dozen different Flea names.” She started to count off on her fingers. “Brandycone, Flopbane, Legwort, Eggpaddy, Dustdragger, Prince Edward...”

“Prince Edward?” I said, trying not to crack up.

“Sure. Prince Edward is one of the more common ones. There must be a zillion fleas called Prince Edward. So I look at the flea, and usually I just know which name it is. Don’t ask me how...It’s magic,” she said, wiggling her fingers and making a silly face at me.

“You must have a really strange reputation back in Ardu,” I said.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Poppy said, throwing her arms over her head. “And, please, no flea jokes.”

The only way I was going to avoid coming out with all the flea jokes that were already swarming into my brain was biting my tongue – too painful – or with a quick change of subject.

“How did you find me, anyway?” I asked.

“Tefnut figured it out. It had something to do with a game.”

“A game?”

“Yes. A game with a sister in it.”

“Oh,” I said, mortified, realizing that my most private moments weren’t so private.



Duty done and glad to be home. I jumped out of the tree house and headed for my cat-door. Padding leisurely through the tame grass, I raised my nose to catch all my special smells. Ahhh, the smell of home. Delicious. My mice, my chipmunks, my shrews and voles, my...predator?

I was not alone! Someone was stalking-in on my territory. I swiveled my ears to tune in on the rotten interloper. Nothing moved. It must be another cat. I tuned in to its heartbeat. Ka-thumpa, ka-thumpa, ka-thumpa. A cat all right, a big one, very big. I sniffed again. Male. Big fat male cat in *my* yard. Unacceptable.

“You touch my mice, you die, scum.” I spoke in a whisper, knowing full well that he would hear every word. A low chuckle came back from beyond the rhododendron.

“Fear not, fair pussy. I’ve already eaten.”

That voice dripping with sarcasm. I knew it well. My nemesis. My evil shadow. Pisu was back for his annual gloat.

This is getting old.

I sat. Let him come to me, the old hairball.

Pisu waited vainly for me to try to chase him away. I could hear his tail swishing with impatience. I held to my position in the middle of the open lawn where a sneak attack

was not possible, keeping my tail still and controlling my breathing to a steady ‘I couldn’t care less’ beat.

Eventually, Pisu gave in and stood up. He tried to compensate for this loss of face and lack of cat-like patience with a menacing approach. The effect was spoiled when he stopped abruptly midway to chew on his right hind leg.

“Hello, Tefnut,” he said through a mouthful of fur. “I’m here to see if you need anything. I’ve come to help.”

“From you?” I was too incredulous to keep the surprise out of my voice.

“Well, now that your grace period is up you’ll be coming home, won’t you, Tiffypoo?” My skin crawled. “I’ve come to help you get ready.”

“Help? The only thing I need, Pisu, is to never see you again.”

“But, Tefnut. Everyone is so looking forward to having you back. We really need you.” He used the most irritating possible pretend whine. This, he was good at.

“Give it up, Pisu. I’m not coming back. You set me up. You used magic. You made me think a mouse was a bear. I had to leave or be chased out of office and laughed out of Ailuria. You got what you wanted. Leave me alone.”

“But, Tiffypoo...”

“I have everything I need, Pisu. This is a very Comfortable place. Go away.”

“Aw...please come back, Tefnut. Please...please?” Chomp.

“Go away, you old fleabag. This place is mine. I want you off my territory.”

“I do not have fleas,” Pisu said petulantly. “You know my skin is sensitive.” He had hardly gotten the words out before he was seized by another itch. Chomp. This time it was the base of his tail.

“Pisu. I had a hard day. I am not in the mood for an extended visit. Get lost,” I hissed.

“Oo, oo, I’m so frightened,” Pisu didn’t bother to hiss back, instead, he just leaned over me in case I hadn’t noticed that he was twice my size.

“You have to come back, Tefnut,” he snarled. “Your time is up. And when you do,” Chomp, “I will be released from my tooth-and-claw-bond. My silence is only promised as long as you stay out of Ailuria.”

“I concede you a significant size advantage, Pisu. You’re the biggest cat I’ve ever known. Some of it may even be muscle, although I doubt it... maybe your head...?”

“I don’t need muscle. I could squish you like a flea.”

But I was a female in her own territory. I feared nothing. Pisu knew this. He knew I wouldn’t hesitate to hurt him if he tried anything. He might win a fight with me, but he wouldn’t walk away from it. He would crawl. Damaged cats have short lives.

“There are still cats in Ailuria who will kill for me,” I snarled at him in full bristle, letting out a long, low growl. “If I wanted to come back, you would have been dead long ago.”

“Try listening with both ears this time, Pisu,” I screeched, in classic catfight mode. “I like it here and I don’t want to go back and if you keep annoying me, I’ll have you killed anyway.” I gave him a good, close-up view of my rear end, and walked away.

“Oh, and don’t take the trouble of following me, Pisu,” I said without bothering to turn around. “You’re too fat to fit through the cat-door.”

CHAPTER 30

GROWING WINGS

We sat quietly for a while looking at the sky. It was still too early for shooting stars, but with full darkness, the Milky Way – the galaxy, not the candy bar – glowed, lighting up a big piece of the sky.

“I wonder what it would be like to watch the sky like this but from a planet right in the center of the Milky Way?” I said. “I bet the whole sky would be so filled with starlight, it would be like daytime.”

“Would you like me to take you there some day?” Poppy said shyly.

Without sitting up, I turned my head to the wide padded arm of my chair where under a washcloth blanket, Poppy lay on her back looking up at the stars with me.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what it would be like if the Milky Way filled the whole sky. But I didn’t seem to be in charge of my imagination tonight. It was like being on the edge of a dream when things push in without permission.

Because, as soon as I closed my eyes, I was overwhelmed by the feeling that I had just lost my best friend. I couldn’t stop thinking about my sister. It didn’t feel like she never existed. It felt like she did, and that now she was dead.

I closed my eyes tighter to squeeze out the tears then opened them to see four, no five shooting stars in a row.

“Poppy. Look.” I pointed. “Over there.”

I wanted to join them, leave my sadness behind, and race through the sky with them. I could feel myself pulled towards the stars. Almost as if I was floating.

“Sit up a minute, Miriam, will you?” Poppy was staring at me.

It was too dark to see her expression, but her voice sounded, like I shouldn’t ask questions. I sat. She pushed back her covers and flew around behind me.

“Miriam,” she said from behind my chair, “I think it’s time to go home.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “I thought I’d leave tomorrow. That way I’ll only miss one day of school.”

“No, not tomorrow, tonight. Now.” Her voice had a funny sound, like she was scared or excited or something.

“I can’t leave tonight. How would I get there?”

“Fly.”

“Poppy,” I said. This conversation was going nowhere fast. “There isn’t a plane until one o’clock tomorrow.”

“Look at your back,” she hissed.

I twisted my head around. I could see Poppy behind me, and just out of the corner of my eye, I could see that my T-shirt was all pushed out.

My heart stopped. I ripped off my shirt so fast, that it really did rip. I wiggled my shoulder blades where the wing bumps were. They weren’t bumps anymore.

CHAPTER 31

WINGING IT

“But it’s been less than three weeks,” I said. “How can they grow so fast.”

“I guess we got you at a good time. When your body is ready, it just happens. Sort of a ‘now-you-see-them, now-you-don’t’ deal.”

“Was it like that for you, too?” I asked.

“Worse. I was born with wing buds. I spent my entire childhood watching those stupid stubs in the mirror. Until they grew in, I had to walk or be carried everywhere. Then one morning, I woke up and there they were, just like with you. It was total freedom.”

“I don’t feel so free,” I said.

“That’s because you haven’t tried them out yet. Come on.”

Poppy flew up, urging me to follow. She was so excited, she was bouncing in the air.

“Wait,” I said nervously. “What do I do? Aren’t there any rules or anything?”

“Yea. Don’t get tangled in the electric wire. Let’s go.” She flew higher.

“Wait,” I shrilled. “What do they look like? They’re not angel’s wings, are they? I would hate it if they were angel’s wings.”

I turned around like a cat chasing its tail trying to see behind me.

“They’re not angel’s wings, Miriam. They’re more like floppy butterfly wings. Not feathered, but sort of moth soft.”

“Thank God. What color are they?”

“Maybe lavender. I don’t know. It’s dark. What’s with you, anyway?”

“Don’t I have to do something? Say a magic word or something?”

“Yes. Say abracadabra. Jump up in the air and flap your wings.

“What?”

“Just do it. Come on. Come on.”

“Abracadabra,” I said, feeling stupid. I jumped up and wiggled my shoulder blades.

“What if it doesn’t work?” I said to Poppy.

“Don’t look down,” Poppy said.

I looked down.

“Oh, my god. Oh, my god. Oh, my god,” I blathered. I closed my eyes and kept flapping for dear life.

“Isn’t this great?” Poppy’s voice was next to my ear. “You can open your eyes now. We’re high enough.”

I closed my eyes tighter.

“Come on, Miriam. Open your eyes and swoop.”

“How?” I risked squinting one eye open just a little. One glimpse and my eyes popped open the rest of the way by themselves. The whole neighborhood was laid out below me. I must have been five or six stories high.

“Don’t look down,” Poppy said. “Look up.”

Cautiously, careful to keep flapping, I looked up.

“Ahhhh.” I relaxed. I must have still been flying, but I hardly noticed.

“Hey, nice swoop,” Poppy said.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I’ll see you back on earth. Just don’t lose track of where your grandparents’ house is.”

“Huh? ...Okay,” I finally said. “...Bye.” Poppy was gone. We were alone. Me and the universe.

The stars weren't really any closer. But they were bigger. The whole sky was bigger – and fuller. I never knew there could be so many stars. They were blinking and twinkling and ...shooting. The meteor shower was in full swing.

I flew higher.

CHAPTER 32

HER NAME IS ROSE

It was easy. I felt beautiful and graceful and powerful all at the same time. It was a lot like swimming underwater. And I didn't have to hold my breath.

I raced the stars across the sky.

It was the best thing that ever happened to me. It was probably the best thing that ever happened to anyone.

I had no trouble finding Grandma and Grandpa's house when I was ready. I let myself down onto the chaise longue and stretched out, every muscle tired and relaxed.

"Hi, Poppy," I said dreamily.

"So, how do you feel?" Poppy asked.

"Like I'm sixteen years old and somebody just handed me the keys to the car. I can't believe it. It's like I'm a different person."

"Yea, it was like that for me, too."

"What was different?" I asked.

Poppy thought for a moment, then said,

"I guess if I had to describe it in a word, I felt bigger."

"Me, too. I definitely feel taller." I jumped up, squared my shoulders and stretched my neck up. "Do I look taller to you?"

Poppy stood also, stretching out to her full six inches. She started at my feet and slowly moved her gaze upward till it reached my head.

"You look humongous. You're asking me if now you look more humongous?" She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe you should ask someone else."

"Let's go to bed," she said. "You looked wiped."

"I guess I am pretty tired," I answered. "But I don't think I can fall asleep."

"Trust me," said Poppy. "Just get into bed. I give you about twenty seconds, tops."

"You know, Poppy," I said as I climbed into the futon. "I was upset because all this time, I thought everyone in the family was keeping secrets from me."

"Oh, Miriam, we all understand how you must have felt. We just want you to be okay now."

"When Grandpa told me that I never had a sister, I didn't feel like she never existed. It felt like she did and now she was dead.

"But you mustn't feel that way." Poppy was upset. "You must make yourself understand that she was someone you made up."

"Just listen for a minute," I said.

"I was thinking up there that maybe she does exist. Maybe I've just been looking for her in the wrong place." Poppy lost it.

"Get real, Miriam. I exist. Your sister doesn't."

"But, all this love I feel. It can't be make believe. It's not that kind of love. It belongs to someone. Someone outside of me.

"Besides," I said slowly. "I can prove that I have a sister. I know her name. Her true name. She was hidden from me, but now that I know her name, I know who she is."

I looked Poppy straight in the eye and told her what I had learned from the stars.



Miriam and her mother Rose were sitting side by side on the old swing set in their back yard. Their inside hands, loosely clasped together, kept the gently rocking swings in sync while they talked.

Miriam was home, her newborn wings folded up. Out of sight even in the halter-top she was wearing.

I stayed hidden behind some chairs on the deck. It's a lot harder to listen in on conversations once people know you're listening. Fortunately, Miriam doesn't realize just how good my hearing is.

So life is a little more complicated now that Miriam and I are on speaking terms, but it's a lot more interesting.

"It's very sweet, Miriam," her mother was saying, "but I'm still your mother. I'm not really your sister, you know."

"I know that, Mom. But you're the person who was actually missing, even if it was before I was born. I missed you and Daddy so much when I thought I couldn't talk to you. I thought that losing my sister made you crazy and if I could find her, our family would be okay. But you weren't crazy and you weren't keeping secrets. I thought I needed someone else. You were there all the time. I just didn't know it.

"Next time, ask. Okay?"

"I did ask."

"Well...next time I'll listen. You ask. I'll listen. Deal?"

"Deal."

EPILOGUE

All I heard for the next minute or two was the squeaking of the swings. I had already begun the delicious deliberation of which pillow to select for my next nap, when they started in again.

“Grandpa didn’t seem to know exactly how you were able to break the spell and come home,” Miriam said to her mother.

“We never did,” Rose answered. “It wore off.”

“That must have been awful,” said Miriam, horrified. “You could have drowned.”

“Not really. The spell wore off almost a year before Mom and Dad my adopted mom and dad realized what had happened. Melvin and Flora are two of the best magic users in their community, but they never figured out how to reverse the spell and then when it finally wore off, even they didn’t notice. It was precisely because my fishtail didn’t go away when the spell did, that it took them so long to see the change.”

“You mean you could still be there? I could have never been born?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. I’m convinced that if I had been adopted by anyone but Melvin and Flora, I would probably still be a happy little fish girl.

“Did you have any sisters and brothers?”

“No, I was their only child. And you, my dear, are their only grandchild. Speaking of which...”

Miriam’s mother stopped the swing and took something out of her pocket. It was too far away for me to see what it was. I would have to get closer. I switched into my best sneaky stalking mode and headed for the Japanese maple next to the swing set.

“Miriam,” Rose said. “How do you feel about Tefnut’s suggestion that you visit Ailuria this summer?”

I twitched my ears. My muscles tensed up and set themselves onto maximum attention. This is it.

“Are you kidding?” Miriam said. “It’s a dream vacation. No parents and all the cats I can cuddle...”

Yes! I could feel my fur frizzling with excitement all along my spine. My own dreams were about to come true.

“...but I don’t know about this queen stuff. It makes me nervous just thinking about it.” Miriam turned, twisting the swing, so she was facing her mother. She was also looking down at her.

“It’s my life, you know. I want to decide what I want and when I want it.” Miriam was so intent on her words that she didn’t realize that her wings were talking, too.

“Great,” Rose said. “But settle down. It makes me nervous when your tush doesn’t touch the seat.”

“Oops, sorry Mom,” Miriam floated down and tucked her wings back in.

“Anyway,” she said. “I decided that I’m not going to Ailuria when school is out.”

THUMP.

“What was that?” Rose said, turning to look at the Japanese maple. “It sounded like something fell out of the tree.”

“Hey, look, there’s Tefnut,” said Miriam who spotted me quietly slipping away. “Hey, Tif. Did you just fall out of that tree?”

“Certainly not,” I said. “Cats never fall out of trees.”

Nor, I muttered under my breath, are they obliged to tell the truth, if it compromises their dignity.

"I just happened to be passing by." I said casually, turning and walking over to the swing set. "Did I just hear you say something about not visiting Ailuria?"

"No, you did not," she said to me. "I only said that I wouldn't be going right away. There are some other people I want to see first.

"Mom," Miriam said. "What I really want to do is visit my other grandparents. I'm ten years old. I have wings. As soon as school is out, I'm going.

"That is," she said sheepishly, "right after you tell me how to get there."

Rose smiled and held out the box in her hand.

Miriam opened it. Inside was a silver chain with a dull green-gray bit of something attached to it.

"It looks like a fish scale. What is it?"

"It *is* a fish scale. Melvin and Flora gave it to me when I returned to my birth family, so that I could come back and visit them whenever I wanted."

"You mean, if I wear this, I can breathe underwater?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Can I go tomorrow?"

"No. You can go when school is out."

"Aww, Mo-om."

"You know, Miriam," Rose said. "Normally, I wouldn't consider a trip like this until you were at least 13 or 14.

"But, hey ...you've got wings.

"Besides ...I trust you."

#####

END OF BOOK 1

This version was brought to you by Free Kids Books – <http://www.freekidsbooks.org>
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Dear Reader,

If you enjoyed this book, please tell your friends.

Out of Place is the second book of The Fairy Gifts. In Out of Place, Miriam visits her adopted grandparents and finds a sister. She is kidnapped by a rogue Sky and will need to be really creative about how she uses her sampo if she is going to escape.

The third book is called Zazkal. Miriam is still with her adopted grandparents, but now she is studying magic. She and her teacher travel to find the shape shifting pirates that she meets in Out of Place. I am working hard to finish Zazkal. It won't be long before it is ready.

I am sorry that there are no cats in books two and three. This is because both stories are set under the water. You may not have known that cats can swim if they have to, but you probably do know how they feel about it. Tefnut would never consider traveling with Miriam to visit her adopted grandparents. However, Tefnut will be in the fourth book when Miriam finally visits Ailuria. There is also a prequel that will tell the story of how Tefnut came to live with Miriam and her family. All the characters are cats.

So that's where The Fairy Gifts are now. I am writing as fast as I can. I don't have a website, but you can write to me at susha.g@bellsouth.net.

Sincerely,
Susha G.

THE FAIRY GIFTS

Book 2

OUT OF PLACE



It is a little known fact that fairies have pockets in their wings for the occasional small but important things they must carry with them. Miriam Mermelstein was not a fairy. However, her cat Tefnut was half magic and able to claim a certain advantage in this area. Tefnut was also an expert at plotting, conniving and long term planning. As a result, Miriam was currently in possession of a regulation pair of wings, complete with pockets.

PROLOGUE

I found Rose sitting cross-legged on the garden swing reading a book, leaning back and forth just enough to keep the swing going. Using my best stalking technique, I crept over so quietly, that even the grass didn't know I was there. Then, with the perfect timing of which I am undoubtedly the master, I jumped and landed next to Rose, without the slightest interference in the rhythm of the swing.

It's what I do.

It's not my way to start a conversation, so I tucked in my paws, curled up my tail, and made myself comfortable, enjoying my moment of total invisibility. While the early spring sun warmed my fur, slowly, lovingly, penetrating all the way down to my bones, I waited.

Eventually, Rose got the subliminal message, put down her book and looked to see whose eyes had been boring into the back of her head.

"Oh, Tefnut, it's you. Don't watch me like that, it makes me nervous."

"We have to talk."

"Okay, now I'm really nervous. This had better not be about Miriam."

"It is."

"Oy! Wait, I'm getting Ben."



"Now we're both here," she said after Rose and Ben were both settled. "Talk."



"...Its not the being there that worries me, Tefnut," Rose was saying. "Its the getting there."

"She has her gifts," I answered. "There won't be any problems."

"Miriam lacks the experience to make good decisions," Ben said. "Her little bag of tricks and a pair of grafted on wings will only get her into trouble. She won't be able to manage them properly. She can't go alone."

"Oh yes she can," I said

CHAPTER 1

WING POCKETS

The minute I unfolded my left wing, the ocean wind, obviously confusing me with a kite, grabbed it and pushed. I was reduced to hopping all over the road just to keep my balance while Mom and Dad zigzagged along behind trying to catch up.

“She’s headed your way, Ben,” Mom, called. “Quick, grab her.”

“Hang on, Miriam,” he hollered. He grabbed. The wind changed. Dad missed and landed on his tush, while I was blown, spinning and bouncing, like a badly launched kite, in the opposite direction.

“Open your other wing, honey,” Mom, already huffing and puffing, wheezed out, “so we can catch you.”

True, two wings would be better. At least I would be pushed in a straight line. But, this wing thing was still new to me. For sure, with both wings open, I would be blown up and away like a lost umbrella.

“Miriam. Sit.” Dad’s insight came from the fact that his recent effort had left him in a similar position.

I sat. Mom grabbed me and helped me tuck my wing back in. Then we all walked over to the car, propped me against it facing into the wind and started over.

This time I spread the wing out against the side of the car and let the wind blow all it wanted while I took Mom’s necklace out of the left wing pocket. Wing pockets don’t have zippers. They keep things in by being very tight. It’s never good to be in a hurry to get something out of a wing pocket.

I had two fingers in and could just feel the chain with the tip of one finger. A little further in and I had it hooked. Using my free hand I stretched the pocket a little wider – not too much, or it hurt – so that the delicate charm wouldn’t be damaged as I pulled it out.

“You know,” I said when I finally got it out all in one piece. “There’s a reason that whoever invented wing pockets isn’t famous.”

Hanging from a silver chain was my ticket to the Twilight Zone, disguised as an ordinary fish scale. Out of the water, it looked thick and dull. It was a part of the ocean. A place where I didn’t belong. But I was going there anyway.

My first big trip away from home. Am I going to Grandma’s on a plane? Off to summer camp on the other side of the country? Nooo, nothing so ordinary for me. I’m going to go and play with the fishies. All by myself.

“Let me, dear,” Mom said. I handed over the necklace and pulled my wing back under my shoulder blade where it stayed nicely hidden. Mom got behind me and straightened the back of my t-shirt while I pulled my hair out of the way. She put the necklace around my neck and closed the catch, finishing with a reverse hug, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and nuzzling my hair. I could feel wet tears soaking through to my scalp.

“Now, you remember how to use the necklace?” she sniffed. “Do you need me to show you again?” I wiggled free of her damp embrace.

“Mo-om! I remember.”

Dad went right into high-speed lecture-mode. A sure sign of parental distress.

“Don’t forget,” he said. “You’ll be perfectly safe as long as you stay under the water. Fairies, including mermaids, are not on the food chain and that’s exactly what everyone

will think you are. Oh, and don't say 'mermaid' when you get there. It's not considered polite. The preferred term for double breathers is Sky'. Don't forget. And don't forget to give your grandparents the photos we gave you. And call," he added. "Whatever happens...Don't...Forget...To Call."

"Okay. Okay. Why are you so worried? You're the ones who spent the last four days convincing me how safe I'll be underwater."

I was not about to admit to them that my heart was pounding so hard I could feel the ka-thumps bouncing off my eardrums. They would both jump at any excuse to cancel this trip.

My parents are normally pretty intense anyway, but we just spent three days cooped up together in the car. We were now as far south as you can get without a passport and Mom and Dad are a wreck.

I spent three days sitting by myself, in the back seat, listening to music and rereading my old Harry Potter books. Boring, but not crazy-making. Mom and Dad spent the same three days together in the front seat, getting on each others nerves and worrying themselves into a frenzy.

"Come on, let's do it," Dad said with his cute crooked smile. "I want to see the Great Transformation." He turned to lock up the car. Mom wiped her eyes on her sleeve and took my arm. Dad put the keys in his pocket and took my other arm. With me squeezed tight in the middle, we stepped off the pavement onto the deserted beach and started walking across the sand to the sea.

It was only the middle of June. But even with the umbrella-grabbing wind off the water, the weather was a lot warmer than anyone expected. Only the wind kept it from being sweaty-hot. I opened the drawstring pouch that hung like a mutant fanny pack at my waist.

"I'm starving," I lied. I wasn't hungry, I was nervous. "How about a snack from the sampo." One at a time, I pulled three ice cream cones out of the bag: Rocky Road in a sugar cone for Mom, the family chocoholic; pistachio in a fancy waffle cone for Dad, the gourmet chef; and vanilla with rainbow sprinkles in a plain cone for me. It's what I always get. Dad held his ice cream at arm's length and looked at it like he was pondering a great work of art.

"Rum raisin, right?" I said, already taking out a new cone. Rum raisin is Dad's other favorite flavor.

"Mmmmm. I think so," he said thoughtfully. I handed him the replacement and shoved the unacceptable pistachio cone, ice cream first, back into my bag.

"Ahh. Instant gratification," Dad said, slurping happily.

"Ewww, Miriam," Mom squealed. "How are you going to clean that out?"

"No problemo. Here. Hold this." I handed her my vanilla cone so I could use both hands to turn the bag inside out. It was empty...and clean. "See. My sampo is self-cleaning."

"What happened to the photos for your grandparents?" Dad asked severely.

"Easy. Magic, presto, change-o." I turned the bag right side in and pulled out a small plastic photo album.

"I'll never get used to you having that thing," said Dad.

“It’s okay, Ben,” Mom said, happily licking away at her Rocky Road. “After all, all the best dragonfly fairies have one. Mmmmm,” she added, totally focused on her ice cream.

“Our daughter is not a fairy,” Dad said testily. He had never completely forgiven the dragonfly fairies for grafting wings onto his precious daughter, a.k.a., me, without asking him first.

“She may be human,” Rose replied, “but she has all the right equipment.”

“That’s an understatement if I ever heard one,” he said tartly. Look at her. She has legs, so she’s human but she’s about to acquire a tail, so she’s a fish, wings... that makes her a bird and a couple of built-in pockets which I believe--correct me if I’m wrong--means our only child is a marsupial.”

“Hey, come-oon,” I said. “Why are you so touchy? I’m on my way to visit Grandma and Grandpa Mermaid. Everyone’s happy, happy, happy. Remember?”

At least we were supposed to be happy, happy, happy. But Dad was right, I was like some mythical creature. The kind that’s made up of lots of different animals. What would my adopted Grandparents think of me when they met me for the first time? What if I was too weird even for them?

“It will be all right, Ben,” Mom said, getting right to the heart of what was really bugging Dad. She put her arm around his shoulder. “Relax. You know as well as I do that Miriam will be perfectly safe as long as she’s under the water,” she reminded him. “Even in bad weather, as long as she stays in deep water, she’ll be fine. The worst thing that could happen is that someone might be rude to her. But no one will hurt her. Not while she’s in fairy form.”

“Mmph.” Dad had succumbed to the lure of Rum Raisin, grunting his agreement between licks.

We reached the water’s edge and the beginning of an old fishing pier. The wind was even stronger now that we were over the water. I had to hold my hair back with one hand to keep it from whipping around into my ice cream. The stiff breeze kept pushing me back the way I had come. It was like the ocean didn’t want me to be there.

The clacking of our shoes as we walked on the weathered planks echoed back from the empty sky, attracting out of nowhere a flock of scruffy-looking seagulls looking for the avian equivalent of spare change.

Ignoring the gulls and each other, we concentrated on our ice cream cones until we got to the end of the deserted pier. I stared down at the deep water under the pier, then out to the whitecaps on the horizon. This was the moment I had been waiting for.

CHAPTER 2

GIRL WITH GILLS

With a shake of my long fluffy hair, I would dive gracefully into the sea, giving an artful flip with my tail fin as I disappeared into the depths. My parents would gasp with admiration at my power and beauty.

That was the vision...

...then there was the reality.

My parents gasped all right. It was either that or laugh out loud and risk one of their hormonally challenged daughter's tantrums.

Sucking in my breath for courage, I gave the necklace a quick twist. Almost before I finished, my pale skinny legs disappeared, replaced by a large muscular fishtail, the kind worn by mermaids in all the best storybooks.

I was left standing on my tail. But not for long. No knees. No feet either. Without feet to support me and with a lower half that felt more like Tefnut's tail than stuck-together legs. Try to imagine a cat, standing on its tail. Same deal. I slithered gracelessly to the ground, then flopped myself into the water.

"Sheesh. For someone whose mother spent a big chunk of her childhood as a mermaid, you should be better at it than this," Dad choked out, in between belly laughs.

"Next time, Miriam," Mom said through quivering lips, "twist the scale after you jump."

"Thanks a lot Mom. You could have told me before I bruised my butt...or whatever it is."

"Sorry, Doll," she sniggered.

"Oh, look." Mom pointed to a place just behind me. "Miriam, you still have your wings." I wiggled my shoulder blades and could feel the pull of the current tugging on the wings poking out from under my t-shirt.

"My daughter," she sighed with mock pride, "the flying mermaid. Speaking of which, is Poppy's cape all right?"

Flying mermaid? I pressed my lips together and didn't say the words that wanted to come out. It's all right for them to make fun of me, but look out if I try to defend myself with a funny comeback.

So, I kept my mouth shut and checked the right wing pocket. I could feel the little lump that was the fern-coat that Poppy, had given me, the day I received my wing buds and sampo from the rest of the dragonfly fairies. The wing pocket was still nice and tight.

"Snug as a bug," I answered.

"What about the sampo? Is it still there?" Dad said anxiously and perfectly reasonably, since my pants were not. I checked.

"Yes. It's here."

I was still wearing my T-shirt, but except for the drawstring bag around my waist, the rest of my clothes seemed to have disappeared. My new blue-green tail was covered with shiny scales almost, but not quite identical to the charm around my neck which had taken on a translucent glow. Giving the necklace another twist I felt the weight of wet sneakers and jeans on my skinny legs and quickly twisted myself right back to tail again.

"I wondered about that," I said. "But this T-shirt, ugh. I must look awful, and it feels worse. Wait a minute," I said to my parents. "And don't look."

Swimming under the pier for privacy, I switched to legs and climbed onto a sheared-off, out of use pylon. First I took off my squishy sneakers.

“Here. Catch.” I called up to Mom and Dad.” Reaching out and leaning as far as I could towards the edge of the decking above me, I tossed them up one at a time onto the dock, sneaker, sock, sneaker, sock. Thump, plop, thump, plop. Four perfect landings.

Next, I opened my bag. Out came a tiny bra top made of seashells.

“I hope you’re not looking,” I hollered out.

I held the thing at arm’s length to examine it. Two big shells, mother-of-pearl smooth on the inside, each one decorated with a border of tiny golden-yellow conch shells. Dozens of small, oval shells were strung together to make the straps.

I put the whole thing gingerly across my chest over the wet T-shirt. Six years old, I thought. When I was six, I would have eaten mashed peas to have one of these. I think I blushed.

“I can not do this,” I muttered to myself. Making a face, I quickly shoved the Little Mermaid Bra Top back into my bag.

Impulsively, I pulled off my T-shirt and stuffed it in on top of the seashells. Now this is what a real mermaid would wear, I thought, opening my arms wide to get the full effect.

This worked for about two seconds. Then I crossed my arms over my bare chest, looking around and up through the cracks in the planking to make sure that Mom and Dad weren’t peeking and that the deserted stretch of beach was still deserted.

Finally, out of my bag, came a modest two-piece bathing suit. Since I’m not a real mermaid, I guess this will be okay, I thought. My jeans and underpants were the next thing to hit the deck.

“Keep not looking,” I shouted. Crouching naked on the pylon, I put on the bathing suit and lowered myself back into the water. Another twist on the necklace and the bathing suit bottom was gone. I was back in my new fishy form. There is no way I’m going to wear a bunch of seashells on my chest, I thought, swimming out from under the pier.

“Like my new outfit?” I said to Mom and Dad as soon as I got to where they could see me. The bathing suit top felt a little silly with my tail, but it was comfortable.

“Looks great,” Mom said. “Have you tested the gills yet?”

“No.”

“So, do it. You’ll love it.”

The truth was, that I wasn’t in a hurry to figure out the breathing part. You think everybody wants to be able to breathe underwater, right? But faced with actually doing it is scary. Just the thought of sucking in water made me feel panicky.

I put a hand to the back of one ear. The skin was rough and scabby. I felt behind the other ear. Same thing.

“That’s them. Those are the gills,” Mom said.

“Can you see them?” I said nervously. “Do they show a lot? Do they look right?”

“We can’t see them from here,” she said, “but they’ll work just fine. Go ahead and try it out.”

“I guess I have to do this sometime, don’t I,” I sighed.

“Yes, and now is a good time,” Dad said. “If you mess up we can pull you out.” Mom elbowed him in the ribs.

“Ben, she can’t mess up. It’s impossible.

“Miriam,” Mom called down to me. “Don’t worry. You can’t make a mistake with this. Just relax and breathe comfortably...you don’t even have to relax. Go ahead. Be tense. The gills work all by themselves.”

“Well... goodbye,” I said as I ducked reluctantly under the water.

I started out by opening my eyes just a little. Then, I opened them a lot. It was like wearing goggles on your eyeballs. Everything was crystal clear and the salt water didn’t sting.

So I tried a little sniff through my nose. Just the barest smallest sniff I could manage. Water went in. Nothing bad happened. I sniffed in a teensy bit more. It was still okay. I sniffed in a lot.

It was great. I was breathing under water. The water went in my nose and out my gills. It never went near my lungs.

I opened my mouth and let a little water in. It went out the gills just like the nose water. I tried swallowing some. I gagged.

It tasted terrible. But I was all right. I was still breathing...breathing water.

I powered up my tail and dolphined out of the water and took a deep breath. It still worked. I was officially a double breather.

“I love it,” I shouted. “This is great.” I did a couple more leaps, accidentally on purpose too close to the pier. Mom and Dad were soaked. Then I dove deep and came back up further away.

“I love you,” I called out to them, swimming backwards and waving with both hands. “I’ll call you tonight. Bye.”

“Don’t mess around with any rogue sky and stay away from humans,” Mom shouted into the wind. “Stay far away from boats and don’t even think about teasing any scuba divers.”

READ THE REST OF OUT OF PLACE SOON!

(In case you are wondering about what happens next, Miriam doesn’t tease any scuba divers. She also doesn’t stay away from boats.)



