

Chapter 4

Avril Warrior Princess

Maagy's heart pounded faster as she descended the stairs. She stayed in shadows and crept along the wall to the back staircase, which led down the north side of the palace where McTavish was waiting. Her excitement grew as she hurried along the dark corridors. She began to sweat under the layers of wool and fur. Finally, she reached the bottom and stopped to make sure the way was clear. One last dash across the hallway and she was at the service entrance, which opened to a road mostly used for delivery. She put on the coat, hat and gloves, and quietly unbolted the door, giving it a gentle push. A blast of frigid air hit her face. The wind whipped wildly and the door almost swung out of her hand. She was able to hold on... preventing it from crashing against the wall... and wrestled it closed without a sound. She breathed a sigh of relief, but almost lost her breath when she looked toward the road and saw no sleigh or diminutive driver. Her mind raced. Had she dreamt it all? Was she standing in the frigid night air for nothing?

“Psst... Psst, Princess Maagy. Here we are... down the hill.”

Her heart quickened again, as she realized it had not been a dream. She was embarking upon a secret mission to save Krispen.

“Coming,” she said. “I’m coming!”

She crunched through the snow and slipped and slid on ice all the way to the sleigh. She could hardly believe her eyes when she saw it gleaming in the moonlight. It was solid black with gold trim and comfy red velvet seats that were more like elegant couches than carriage benches. She recognized the two horses harnessed to the sleigh. One was dear old Parker whom she had worked so hard to rehabilitate after the barn fire that past summer. The other was Primrose, a big strawberry roan mare, who often pulled the small carriage to Berryville when Grandma Polly and she went on their shopping trips. Both horses were wrapped in the warmest fur blankets and their feet were protected from the bitter cold by fur-lined suede boots that came to their knees. They looked like huge woolly mammoths in the moonlight.

“Parker, Primrose!” She exclaimed, as she went to them with hugs and pats. “It’s so good to see you. If I’d known you two were here I’d have brought you an apple.”

“Princess Maagy, we must be off. The hour is gettin’ late, and we have a long journey ahead of us.”

“Of course, Sir... right away.”

She climbed onto the seat next to him, and he threw a large fur cover over her knees.

“Bundle up, dear lass. It promises to get even colder where we are goin’. Gee! Get up there team! Take it home!”

He turned the horses and sleigh round and started down the mountain. The narrow, slippery road leading from the back of the palace wound down along the top of steep rocky cliffs, which dropped off... hundreds of feet... on either side. Somehow, huge trees managed to grow out of them, giving cover to those who might try to attack. It was an arduous and dangerous path usually only traveled on horseback in daylight, rather than by carriage... or sleigh... and *never* at night... *in winter*. She had heard her father say it was the only vulnerable access point to Avington, but had not understood what that meant until that moment. Then something very disturbing occurred to her.

“McTavish... how did you get through the back gate?”

“Pardon me, Yer Highness?” He whispered, just as they approached the wide-open portal.

“These gates are always... I mean *always*... closed... *locked*... and heavily guarded. How did you get in?”

“I... drove through...” he said, not committing to too much detail.

“But... *how*?”

“They... were... open... when I got here...” again, intentionally vague.

“That cannot be,” she whispered, almost to herself.

She began to panic. Her body tightened. Her mouth went dry. Chills and sweat broke out... *at the same time*. She looked from side to side, as her breathing got more rapid and shallower.

“It is *all* good, Yer Highness.”

“But... the guards... how did you get past them? Where are they? I don’t see them!”

“I believe... they might be... takin’ a short nap...”

“Oh good heavens! A nap! If Father... finds out... they were... sleeping on their watch... he’ll have them... beheaded!”

“Then... Princess Maagy... perhaps... ya should not tell him. I can assure ya... I swear upon me own life... which I am rather fond of... there is no cause for alarm. No nefarious* persons have entered the castle walls. The gates will close as soon as we are through them, and the guards will be wide awake and at their posts... *none the wiser*.”

“How do you know this?”

“Ya must not ask questions I cannot answer... Yer Highness.”

They passed through the gates unhindered and began the treacherous descent. She was trembling and her heart was pounding with trepidation*. Had she made a terrible decision to go with this odd fellow she had met only briefly months before? The gates creaked and groaned as they slowly swung shut and she heard the clash of metal. The iron bars came together and the lock bar dropped into place. She sat up and looked behind to see the guards walking their post and chatting quietly, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. She looked at McTavish and saw a slight smile on his face.

“Ya see, Yer Grace? All buttoned up... safe and sound.”

Maagy realized there must be much more to this diminutive soul than she could fathom. She snuggled into the blanket... still a little dubious *... but nonetheless, excited for the adventure. She was amazed at the skill with which the team and McTavish navigated the icy trek. He gave them the lead and Parker and Primrose chose each step, working together as if they were one mind, picking their route to the flat plane at its foot. Finally at the bottom, the horses bolted forward and away they went.

The frosty wind bit at her face, and she soon found herself buried beneath the warm cover with nothing but an occasional eye peeking out. She couldn't help but notice how quiet and still the night with no sound except the horses' hooves beating rhythmic harmony in the soft snow. It was reminiscent of her last carriage ride, and her heart pounded with unexpected panic. She took a few deep breaths and calmed her fears by considering the two scenarios and finding no other comparisons. The moonlight reflecting off the trees and meadows was breathtaking. She wondered how many people had ever appreciated such a magnificent sight.

Maagy must have fallen asleep because the next thing she knew the sleigh had come to a stop. She was so warm and cozy she almost stayed put, but there was something eerie about the circumstance. She listened from underneath the fur cloak. There was absolutely no sound whatsoever... only silence... *deafening silence*... and for a moment, she thought she might be dreaming. She cautiously ventured out from under the warmth to find Parker and Primrose standing statue-still in the winter night. She sat upright and pulled the fur down from her face. She was alone.

“McTavish? McTavish?” She whispered. “McTavish, where are you? This isn't funny. You're scaring me. Come out this minute! I command you as Crown Princess of the Commonwealth of Realms!”

She was paralyzed with fear... the same fear she felt the night of her attempted kidnapping. She stood and looked hard into the moonlit landscape for any movement. There was nothing but endless white expanse... on all sides.

“*Mc-TAAA-VIII-SH!*” She screamed, as loudly as she could.

No answer came back. The horses, startled at the sound, whinnied and tossed their heads. The sleigh lurched slightly forward causing her to lose balance and grab the handrail. The stark realization flooded over her. McTavish was nowhere to be found. She was *alone*... in the middle of nowhere with no idea what to do next. The circumstance was eerily similar to her Huggermugger burrow incident. She began to whimper and shiver in the cold. Suddenly, Parker threw back his head and let out a loud whinny and a snort. He stamped the ground, over and over, while bobbing his head up and down. It was then she remembered what Prince Rudolpho had told her on one of their rides during a summer visit; *‘Trust the horse. The horse always knows the way home.’*

“Trust the horse,” she said, to herself. “Trust the horse.”

She picked up the reins and spoke to Parker.

“All right, Old Man, I’m going to trust you. Take us home. Gee... get up there team,” she called to the woolly mammoths, as she popped the reins. “Gee, get up there team.”

Parker seemed to know exactly what she said. In fact, it seemed as if she had known what Parker had said as well. He stepped forward and Primrose followed. The pair moved through the night like skaters on ice, their synchronized gait carrying the sleigh swiftly across the frozen landscape. She held the reins tightly, but knew it was actually Parker and Primrose who were in charge. As they glided over the snow toward Whitmore, she began to think about poor McTavish and wondered what could have happened to him. She reasoned he would never have left her there alone... *by choice*... especially with a mission of such great importance hanging in the balance. She wondered what she could possibly do to fix the Kringle’s situation without him. He was the only one who knew about the trickery and the only one who knew she had been enlisted to help. She concluded he had surely been taken... *against* his will... *kidnapped!* The realization led her to the next logical decision. *She* would have to rescue him. So... in contradiction of all her better instincts... her heart pounding in fear of the unknown... she pulled up on the reins.

“Whoa, Parker! Whoa, Primrose! Whoa, whoa... there’s the good team,” she said, with authority as they came to a halt.

She got out of the sleigh and walked in front of the panting horses where they could see her.

“Parker, my wise old friend, we have a big problem to solve,” she whispered, as she cupped her hands round his muzzle. “We must find McTavish. He is missing and you and Primrose are the only ones who saw what happened. Please Parker, help me find him.”

He stamped at the ground and whinnied as he tossed his head up and down as if to say, “*Yes I will help you.*”

“Where is he? Take us to McTavish, Parker. Find McTavish!”

Again, he bobbed his head and puffed a great cloud of steam out his nostrils as his warm breath hit the frigid air. Primrose followed suit as if she too understood the mission and stamped and snorted with her partner. The shivering princess ran to the sleigh and climbed onto the seat. She covered herself with the fur cloak and took the reins in her hands.

“Gee-up! Find McTavish, Parker! Find McTavish!”

He turned sharply and Primrose had no choice but to follow. They turned the sleigh round and bolted back in the same direction from which they had come. The two horses galloped at a break-neck pace toward their assignment. Maagy saw the hoof prints and sleigh tracks they had laid down going in the opposite direction and recognized they had returned to the exact point where she had awakened and found McTavish missing. The horses pulled up and Parker raised his head to sniff the air. She threw off the fur cover and climbed down. She walked round the sleigh looking at the

ground for any clue to McTavish's whereabouts. Parker whinnied and pounded his hoofs on the packed snow. He nudged Primrose and seemed to whisper something to her.

"Easy, Boy, be still. We don't want them to know we've come back."

It's a good thing the moon was full because it illuminated the pristine landscape and made it sparkle like diamonds. It also illuminated any disturbances in the snow. As she came round the back of the sleigh, Maagy spotted exactly what she'd hoped to find... *footprints!* There they were... as clear as could be... leading east into the dense forest of the Sagamathian foothills. Surely this was the evidence she was seeking. Surely this was the proof positive that McTavish had been kidnapped by a band of hooligans.

"Ah-ha! There it is, Parker! There's the trail. They came on foot from out the woods. It looks like four or five of them. Over here is where the sleigh stopped the first time. They must have jumped in front of you and made you stop. Then they overpowered him. No, wait... these tracks look as if they were made by... *children.*"

She bent down to get a closer look and continued to inspect the evidence.

"These are his boot prints. I recognize the odd pattern from outside the palace. But these... they are much smaller. No adult has feet that tiny. What would children be doing out here... on their own? That's it. They were obviously lost. McTavish must have stopped... and got down to help them... but then what?"

She climbed onto the driver's seat and took hold of the reins.

"This way, team. Come round."

Maagy took charge of the situation as if she were a seasoned Knight in Her Majesty's Royal Guard.

"Get up there, team! Gee!"

Both horses jerked forward in unison and she had to grab onto the rail in front of her to keep from tipping over backward. They galloped toward the woods along a path following the boot prints. She stood in the sleigh, reins in hands like a gladiator, racing toward the finish line. As they entered the dark forest the path narrowed and the brush between the trees became thicker. The horses slowed until they could go no further. Parker stamped the ground and snorted angrily as he tried to force the sleigh forward.

"Whoa. Whoa, Old Man. It's as far as we can go with the sleigh," she said, as she jumped out and walked in front of the horses. "Is this where they took him, Parker? Is he in there?"

She hadn't expected a response, but he stamped again and bobbed his head. It was as if he knew precisely what was being asked... and he *answered*. She knew she couldn't go it alone, but the sleigh and both horses were out of the question. Besides, she had no idea what she would do if she

found McTavish among a passel* of thieves. She was but one young... rather small girl... albeit a plucky princess. Parker reached out and nuzzled her and made soft noises of encouragement.

“I know. I have to go on foot.”

Again, Parker nuzzled her and pawed at the ground.

“You want to go with me? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

He nodded his head up and down wildly as if to say, ‘*Yes!*’

“I could use someone big! That’s for sure. All right then... let’s get you unhitched.”

She had never actually hitched or unhitched a team... or even one horse... from a carriage, but she had watched the process many times. She didn’t know a trace chain* from a hame tug*, a collar* from a blinker*. She did know what a halter, saddle, bridle, and reins were, but that was as much knowledge of tack* as she possessed. Nevertheless, she began to inspect the many straps and chains and hooks and knots holding the powerful animal captive to the sleigh. Time was slipping away. Each minute she spent pondering the situation was one minute less in the race to save Krispen. She was not oblivious to *that fact*. She took a deep breath and began unhooking chains, unbuckling straps, and untying knots.

Her furry gloves were too bulky to be efficient in the task, so she took them off and worked her freezing fingers like a magician. In a matter of seconds the cumbersome tack fell to the ground and there stood Parker in only his large collar, bridle, fur coat, and boots. He resembled a mythical creature she had seen in a book she had read as a child. It inspired a brilliant idea... at least... she *thought* it *might* be brilliant. She picked up the set of hames* she had removed from his collar. They were made of wood, gold, and leather and were large and ornate. The two prongs looked much like steer or bison horns. Rather than place them round the collar at his withers, she hung them just behind his ears and tied them to his bridle so they wouldn’t slide down his neck or over his ears and off his nose.

“Ha! A horse with horns! You look just like that Equisyroptus* in *The Adventures of Avril: Warrior Princess*. I read it as a child, over and over again. It was my favorite adventure book. You’re even bigger and more imposing than her pet. Oh Parker, you are magnificent!”

She ran to the sleigh and grabbed the fur cloak that had concealed her from the hooligans.

“You are *Cheval Courageux*... that’s what Princess Avril named him. It’s Francinèse for *Brave Horse*. You are Cheval Courageux and I shall be *Avril, Warrior Princess*.”

She encircled herself with the cloak pulling the hood over her head and then wrapped one of the trace chains round her waist.

“There... I look like a warrior... don’t you think?” She asked her equine* cohorts*. “Wait... I need a weapon. All good warriors have a favorite weapon. Mary Lu has a sword. I need a sword. Oh dear. I don’t think McTavish uses a sword... a hammer, perhaps... but not a sword.”

She went to the sleigh and climbed into the back behind the seat. She began to rummage round under spare blankets and packages of dried meat and crackers packed for emergencies.

“Oh, good idea. I am rather peckish *,” she mumbled, as she began nibbling crackers.

She continued to search and came upon a single snowshoe, a shovel, some extra harness straps, and a box full of nuts and bolts. Then in a stroke of amazing good luck, she came upon a lone ski pole. It was broken at the bottom and had only a sharp point on the end.

“Ha-ha!” She exclaimed, as she hoisted the broken pole in the air. “My sword! Well... maybe I can make the kidnappers *think* it’s a sword. Come, Cheval. We shall save our friend!”

Maagy jumped out of the sleigh and strode confidently to the horses as she secured her weapon in her sword belt... rather, the ski pole in the chain round her waist. She was no longer the timid, frightened little girl she had been when she went to bed that night. Her fertile imagination had transported her to a mystical time and magical place and she *was* a *warrior princess!*

“Prinrose, my gentle mare, you must stay here and guard the sleigh. Your job is important. I know you shall do it well. Off we go then, Parker... I mean, *Cheval Courageux!*”

Princess Avril and her trusted horse with horns set off through the brush continuing to follow the footprints in the snow. As they pushed deeper and deeper into the forest and the undergrowth got thicker, the moonlight became more obscure. Parker... Cheval... had to use his considerable strength to forge a path by reaching over her and clearing the bramble with his head. She could no longer see the prints on the ground. However, since it had stopped snowing hours before, there was no new accumulation. She could see where the branches had been disturbed and snow had been knocked off as the kidnappers moved through. She knew she was on the right path. Just when it seemed they could go no deeper into the brush, she heard voices. She froze... dead in her tracks.

“S-s-h-h-h Parker, I hear something... just over there,” she whispered, as she put her hand on his nose to stop him.

She looked through the trees and saw a clearing and a campfire. Behind it there appeared to be a cave in the mountainside. There were several individuals huddled round the fire and still more milling about and talking. She counted twenty in all.

“Oh horse feathers... this might *not* be my best idea. In fact... it might be the *worst* idea... *ever.*”

Just then she saw more captors push McTavish out of the cave and into the clearing. She gasped, almost making noise. She clapped her furry hand over her mouth, took a deep breath, and whispered to Cheval.

“There he is. I was right. He was kidnapped.”

Maagy... Avril... heard a loud voice demanding his prisoner's purpose for being in the region in the dead of night. McTavish stood stone still and spoke not a word. Again the captor asked and again got no answer. One of the henchmen punched McTavish in the abdomen and he doubled over. She gasped and tears welled in her eyes. The captor spoke in a heavy Isle of Reland accent similar to that of McTavish.

"All right then! We shall send the king a message and tell him that we have captured ye. Should he want ya back, he shall have to *pay... dearly!*"

Her mind was spinning. It brought back all the horrible memories of her experience. She was *paralyzed* in fear. Then she remembered the heroic actions of a girl just her age. Her dear friend, Mary Louise Gray, hadn't thought twice about engaging in battle with kidnappers. However, there was one *huge* difference. Mary Louise had a sword... *a real sword...* and knew how to use it. Maagy had only a broken ski pole and an aging horse... albeit a horse with horns... that looked rather imposing. She mustered her courage and steeled her resolve.

"Come, Cheval Courageux. Let us do this!"

Princess Avril and her ample sidekick stepped out of the shadows and crept upon the scene. The horned horse raised his head majestically over his companion and walked as close to her as he could without stepping on her. Her face was completely obscured by the fur hood, and she looked twice her size. The trace chain round her waist dragged the ground, and the heavy links made an eerie clanking sound. The whole lot of kidnappers became aware of the approaching menace. They all stopped to look toward the intruders, their faces reflecting fear... and amazement. She drew her makeshift sword and dropped the end ominously to the ground, hiding the broken point in the snow. McTavish recognized who was in their midst... *by the broken ski pole...* and almost gave it away by laughing out loud. He stifled his chuckle in the nick of time and stared in amusement at what was before him. Avril and Cheval moved menacingly toward the fire without saying a word. They stopped in front of McTavish. He diverted his eyes... else, he would have surely laughed. She slowly looked round as Cheval snorted and growled like a dog.

It was only then that she actually looked at the enemy and was dumbfounded. It occurred to her they might be the legendary Snow Trolls* she had heard stories about since she was a small child. No wonder she had thought McTavish had gone off with a group of children. She had thought him to be slight of stature, but these fellows made him look normal size. In fact, she and Parker must have appeared to be giants in comparison. The Snow Trolls' facial features were similar to Polacians*. However, the trolls were considerably shorter and much more rotund. They were dressed in pure white fur to blend into the snowy scenery. Their skin was positively alabaster* and their great shocks of untamed white hair made them look like huge white Lion Mice. Lion Mice were a species of mouse, which had developed long hair round the head and neck... *it is thought...* as a

protection mechanism to scare away predators. They were somewhat larger than Field Mice, but much more timid, which was ironic, since they were called *Lion Mice*. She did not remember ever hearing of *white* Lion Mice, but that was neither here nor there, since these creatures were not four-legged. Everyone stood... speechless... for several moments. Finally, the troll who had threatened McTavish spoke to the woolly mammoth and the cloaked one.

“Wh... wh... who *are* ye... and wh... what do... do... do ya want?” He said, with much less bravado than before.

She remembered from the stories that these little scoundrels were huge on bluster, but small on bravery. Still, she thought it a good idea to keep her own voice quiet, since they would know immediately she was a young girl and it might have inspired them to unusual courage. Instead, Avril raised her furry arm straight toward McTavish and pointed at him. Cheval snorted and growled and bobbed his horned head up and down. He stamped the ground and shook his big fur-coated body. Everyone stood in awkward silence for several moments.

“I... I... think... they... want... me,” McTavish said. “They seem... serious... about it.”

The brave warrior princess spoke not a word, but nodded her cloaked head so as to appear more intimidating. She raised her arm and made another emphatic motion toward the prisoner as she stabbed her sword into the snow to drive home the ‘*danger*’, but really to mask the broken tip. Cheval puffed and stamped the ground. McTavish played along with the ruse and cowered, as if he were terrified.

“Oh no! Please, please... do *not* let them take me! Heaven knows what they are capable of doin’ to me!”

Just as hoped, the Snow Trolls cowered and scrambled behind the campfire and moved closer to the cave opening, which left their prisoner unguarded. Maagy found this whole scene hilariously funny and could hardly keep herself in check. She felt ever so brave.

“Wh... who... who are ya?” Timidly rose from the crowd behind the campfire.

Cheval again snorted and growled and reared up on his hind legs, his hooves battling the air. He must have looked enormous to the band of tiny thieves. She raised her weapon and frantically sliced at imaginary opponents in a supposed display of superior swordsmanship... *hoping* no one would notice it was a *ski pole*! Maagy... *Avril*... jammed it back into the snow while raising her other cloaked arm and pointing at McTavish.

“Take him! Take him! We do not want him! He is yers!”

“No, please! No! Do not let them have me,” McTavish begged. “They are goin’ to cook me... *for breakfast*!”

With that, pandemonium broke out. All the trolls began to scream and scramble in every direction, bumping into one another and falling on the ground in a panicked attempt to run for cover inside the cave. In less

than ten seconds not one of the little beggars was left in sight. Not a sound was heard coming from the cave. Avril, McTavish, and Cheval stood for a moment in bemused silence. Then she walked toward him... slowly... ominously. She pointed her furry arm and makeshift weapon at him and told him to march forward with a gesture of her head. He did so... *'reluctantly'*.

"Help me... do not let them have me... please... come back and save me!" He wailed in the direction of the cave opening.

Maagy was red-faced and almost weeping in silent laughter as they pulled off the subterfuge*. McTavish kept wailing and calling to his captors for salvation as the motley three disappeared into the thick darkness of the forest. Parker brought up the rear to form a giant barrier against the misfits as they escaped. Once out of the dense underbrush, they ran as fast as they could back to where she had set out on foot. They found Primrose and the sleigh just as she had left them, proving they had not been discovered. They frantically rehitched Parker and McTavish took the reigns.

"Back it up, Parker," he whispered. "Primrose back... back, me girl. Come on, ya two. Get us out of here."

Most horses have a difficult time backing the vehicle to which they are hitched. It's not a common practice. Fortunately, Parker and Primrose were not common horses and they backed the sleigh until there was enough room in a small clearing to turn round. Once accomplished, he slapped the reigns and they took off toward the open expanse of gleaming snow that would lead them home to Whitmore Castle. For a long while, neither Maagy nor McTavish said a word. Neither wanted to risk having their voices carry in the still night air to listening ears. The only sound was that of horses' hooves racing toward their goal. Finally, when he was certain they were out of earshot of the enemy, McTavish let out a tremendous round of uproarious laughter. Maagy joined him, as she lay down on the seat, once again, covered in fur.

"Princess Maagy, Yer Royal Highness, most brave and clever lass! Ya have surely proven beyond a shadow of doubt ye are worthy of the Crown! Ye and yer equine sidekick were a sight to behold, indeed! Where in the world did ya get such an idea?"

"From a story I read as a child... called 'The Adventures of Avril, Warrior Princess'! She had a pet called an Equisyroptus, which she named Cheval Courageux. He was a huge horned horse!"

"Brilliant! Positively brilliant! And exceptionally brave!"

"I don't know about that! McTavish, I was petrified with fear! I had no idea what I was doing!"

"Most brave warriors act as ye did, Child... *on instinct*. Ya read the enemy and acted accordingly. Bravery does not mean fearlessness. Bravery is the ability to act and accomplish great things in the face of bone-chillin' fear. Yer father would be so proud of his daughter. Too bad ya cannot tell him about it."

“I can’t wait to see the look on Mary Lu’s face when she hears this! She’ll be so impressed... wait... *What?* What do you mean... *I can’t tell him?*”

“If ya tell him the story of yer heroism, he will want to know why ya were out here in the first place. He will ask why I put ya in such a dangerous position and then ya will have to either tell him a *fib*... or tell him the *truth*. From where I sit, neither is an option. No, Princess, there are some things we must keep inside... forever. This is one of them.”

The gravity of his words fell heavily upon her heart. The full meaning of her pledge of secrecy smacked her in the face. She had never had to keep *anything* from her father and loved to tell him *everything*. Now to have this amazing story of her own courage and quick, clever thinking and not be able to share it was a weighty burden to bear. The lump in her throat grew and tears welled. She sat for several minutes in deep thought, but her natural curiosity finally got the best of her.

“McTavish, were those odd-looking people... Snow Trolls?”

“They were... and still are... Snow Trolls of whom legends are spoken. I am sorry to say, Polacians and they are descended from the same group of Leprechauns cast out of the Isle of Reland centuries ago. Some of us made good. Some of us did not.”

“Snow Trolls... I didn’t think they really existed. They look like giant Lion Mice... which also don’t exist... or do they? It’s all rather confusing.”

“They most certainly do exist... the Snow Trolls that is. I am not so sure about the Lion Mice.”

“You say they’re descended from the same ancestors as your people. So why do they look so very different?”

“Do ya remember that last summer I told ya how the Leprechauns were exiled to Polacia*?”

“Oh, yes... you did tell me.”

“Leprechauns were accustomed to livin’ outside in cold weather on the Isle of Reland. However, the winters on Polacia were nothin’ any of them had ever experienced and many of them perished. So a group of explorers set out across the frozen sea to the mainland and then migrated south across the mountains. One group... me ancestors... were taken in by the residents of Whitmore Estate.”

“Yes. You said they became toymakers,” she interrupted, with a sly grin.

“That is correct. The others continued farther south and sought shelter in the Sagamathian caves. They earned the name Snow Trolls by spendin’ so much time underground. As a result of little exposure to sunlight, their skin turned the color of sweet cream. Their hair turned pure white for reasons unknown. These physical adaptations made for excellent camouflage in the winter snow.”

“I see...”

“While seekin’ refuge in the caves they decided to put their natural skills to work and try their luck at minin’.”

“Yes... I seem to remember... you said they became miners. So *they* are the Snow Trolls?”

“Aye.”

“What did they find in the mines?”

“Low and behold, they discovered unfathomable* riches.”

“Really? What sort?”

“Some uncovered veins of gold... others diamonds, rubies, and sapphires... although the reports of sapphires may be mythical, as they are the rarest of gems.”

“What in the world did they want with you then?”

“They wanted a king’s ransom. They planned to trade me for food.”

“Gold and precious gems? Then why would they need to kidnap and ransom you... *or anyone...* for that matter?”

“The original group of exiles-turned-entrepreneurs* made fortunes beyond their wildest dreams and became quite skilled at not only minin’ the precious treasures, but also makin’ fine jewelry and sellin’ it. With the enormous wealth came lavish indulgences. Legend has it, the insides of the caves are dug out and gilded like palaces. Although I did not see anything of the sort when they had me in there. Over time, the youth of the population became lazy and developed attitudes of entitlement. They refused to go into the mines as their fathers and grandfathers had done. They refused to learn the art of jewelry makin’ or to help with the family businesses. Instead, they depended on their inheritances... until there was nothin’ left. By that time none of the elder folk were round to teach merchandizin’ or minin’ or jewelry craftin’. So the entire population has resorted to thievery and ransom of kidnapped victims. They are not even skilled enough to get anythin’ more than the bare necessities. They have no leadership and not a wit of the Leprechaun cunning’ left in them. They are a sorry lot of ne’er-do-wells*, to be sure.”

“How do they get away with it? Why has no one put a stop to it? Does my father know about them?”

“Well, for the most part, they are harmless. They only ask for the bare necessities in return for their victims. They have never really harmed anyone to me knowledge.”

“But I *saw* one of them strike you.” I wanted to flatten the little beast!”

“True... that one was rather aggressive. In fact, they all seemed more desperate than usual.”

“Than usual? Have you been kidnapped before?”

“Not I, but other members of me community. In the past a few baskets of Grandma Polly’s delicacies have satisfied them. They seemed a

bit more... fraught... this time. And as far as the king havin' the information... that I do not know."

"Perhaps I should mention it to him and ask what he's doing about them."

"I... wouldn't do that... if I were ye, Yer Highness."

"Why not? Oh... I'd have to tell him... I know about them... and he'd ask questions..."

"Questions ya cannot answer."

"Oh dear. Perhaps they're hungry. Why don't they just go back to work and earn money for what they need?"

"A good question indeed, Princess Maagy. Now there are two real ironies to this part of the story. First, had they been more clever in their clandestine plan, they would have searched the sleigh more thoroughly and discovered the Crown Princess of the Commonwealth was nestled in the fur on the seat."

"I'm pleased they missed that one!"

"Aye! Indeed! Even individuals of less sophisticated thought processes would have surely realized ye would have netted them a far greater reward for their efforts than a lowly toymaker. Second, the mountainsides are still brimmin' over with wealth for the takin'... if any of them had the gumption* to get it. They could again be as *well heeled** as their ancestors."

"Do they own the mines?"

"Own is probably not the right word. Their ancestors laid claim, but there has never been any official ownership. It would be like sayin' they own the mountains. The mountains belong to the entire Commonwealth. The other side... I suppose... belongs to Terrasicus."

"If they don't want to do the work themselves they could hire miners and jewelry makers. Perhaps I could assist them."

"They're such a reclusive little clan... no one really knows they're there... so..."

"So... to bring attention to them might make them vulnerable to being attacked by bigger... meaner... people. Also... by trying to help... I would have to admit I know they exist and... oh dear... such a dilemma... a shame really. Such a waste of resources."

"Aye... that it is, lass... that it is."

