

From The Fairy Chronicles

Volume Three

Sparrow and Edelweiss's Ghost

Chapter Six

Salt and Vinegar

In the morning, the girls were scheduled to take a trip with Winter's grandfather to see the salt mines, so after breakfast, they all crowded into Grandfather Weber's small orange car. The trip to the mines took nearly two hours, but there was a lot to see on the way. They stopped several times so that Sparrow could take pictures and for the travelers to stretch their legs.

When they reached the mines, the excursion turned out to be even more fun than the girls had anticipated because visitors to the mines got to dress in miners' clothing to make the tour. They wore gray, white, and black, loose-fitting outfits with black caps that resembled headscarves.

The girls and Grandfather Weber also got to ride a slide down into the mines. Some people in the tour preferred to take the stairs, and those who couldn't manage the stairs rode in an elevator, but the fairies definitely wanted to ride the slide. And Grandfather Weber didn't get to play on slides very often, so he wanted to too.

These particular salt mines were no longer used to mine salt; they were mainly just a tourist attraction to show the process of how salt was mined. Since the girls were pretty much only familiar with table and cooking salt, they marveled at the many different-colored crystals and minerals in the chunky walls of rock salt.

The tour group also got to ride on a small ferryboat across an underground lake to reach another part of the mines. There was even a wall of rocksalt crystals that people could lick if they wanted to. Of the group, only Winter was brave enough to lick the wall that probably hundreds of thousands of other people had also licked over the years. In response to Sparrow's, "Yuck!" and the face Emerald was making, Winter simply replied, "Salty!"

When the tour ended, the girls each picked up a small souvenir box of various salt rocks and some postcards from the gift shop. At one point while they were shopping, another girl, around the same age as the fairies, approached Sparrow and began speaking to her in German.

Sparrow was somewhat shy and felt uncomfortable because she didn't understand the words. She didn't want to seem impolite, but she didn't quite know what to do or say. When the girl paused and looked at Sparrow expectantly, Sparrow simply said, "Ummm...I'm sorry, I don't understand."

Fortunately, Winter saw the problem from across the shop and made her way over to her friend to translate. It turns out that the girl was interested in where Sparrow might be from, since she was wearing the t-shirt with her hometown logo that her friends had given her during their little send-off party.

The girl was very friendly, and the three spent several minutes talking while Emerald and Grandfather Weber were making their purchases. Upon leaving, their new friend, whose name was Heike, even gave Winter and Sparrow a hug and a kiss on the cheek. This made Sparrow feel better about not speaking the language, and she was reassured that she hadn't offended Heike by seeming not to want to speak to her at first.

On the way home from the mines, Grandfather Weber suggested that the girls spend some time later looking up information about salt and salt mines. "You might be surprised," he said, "as to where all that salt originally came

from—the sea.” He nodded as he added, “All salt comes from the sea, and the salt in the rocks in salt mines is ancient.”

At home in the afternoon, the girls got washed up because Grandfather Weber was cooking dinner for them in his cottage. He was an excellent cook and was preparing two very special German dishes for his granddaughter and her guests. But because of the long cooking time of one of the dishes, the whole meal took nearly three hours to prepare, so they would be eating rather late.

While the dinner was being prepared, the girls visited Edelweiss and told her about what had happened with the wax figures. The spirit fairy was very troubled and fearful for her new friends. “Oh, just stay away from that area!” she exclaimed. “What if the spriggan is around and snatches you too? Believe me, you don’t want to end up in here. And you might even end up someplace worse since you don’t have rowan wands.

“I never even got to say goodbye to my family,” she added sadly. At this point, Edelweiss choked up and started crying.

The girls were subdued and silent for some time after this. Finally, with Edelweiss’s further urging, they definitely agreed to stay away from the old library for the time being, but they were almost afraid they would eventually have to go there again to find a solution to the problem. Then they said goodbye to the troubled spirit and left for dinner.

When the girls arrived at the cottage, they crowded around the table, smelling the wonderful smells, their stomachs growling and their mouths watering.

Grandfather Weber had made both schnitzel and ruladen, two extremely yummy German recipes. They also had a kind of pickled purple cabbage and some excellent German potato salad served warm. The girls spritzed their schnitzels with lemon wedges, pulled the toothpicks out of their ruladen roll-ups, and set to work on the feast. An hour later, they were so full that they could barely manage the slices of apple pie

Grandfather Weber set before them—but they did somehow manage.

It was nearly dark by the time the girls made their way back up to the castle and to their room.

When the sun set completely, and the full moon was visible, the fairies waited apprehensively, keeping watch on the three vanity mirrors in their room. They had decided to wait for whatever might happen in fairy form.

As they sat on Emerald's pillow, they heard a lot of noises in other parts of the castle. After waiting for around thirty minutes, with nothing extraordinary happening in the mirrors of the triplets' room, the fairies were just making up their minds to investigate some of the sounds, and seek out other mirrors, when they heard noises in the room next door. The sounds were very distinctive: running horse hooves, along with a horse's neighing and some metal clanking.

They didn't have time to be frightened, or even to think about being frightened, because across the room, Winter's vanity mirror suddenly came alive with movement. Transfixed, the fairies watched a horse and rider gallop into view, as though they were watching the scene on a television screen.

Then the rider dismounted, peering into the candlelit room at the fairies. "Visitors!" he exclaimed. "Excellent!"

The girls couldn't find their voices right away because they were so surprised to be facing a tall knight in full armor standing next to his glistening black steed.

"Hello, hello!" the knight cried. Next, gesturing, he added, "Come closer so I can speak with you."

The girls flew slowly to the vanity and landed next to Winter's brush and comb, before introducing themselves to the enchanted knight.

"Sir William Richard Vinegar at your service," he replied. "However, you can call me Sir William."

"But we usually call grown-ups by their last names," said Emerald, tentatively.

"Then you can call me Sir Vinegar."

The girls smiled at the friendly knight. And they didn't even have to ask any questions about what he was doing in the mirror, or how he became enchanted, because he launched into that explanation right away. "I am under a curse," Sir Vinegar announced. When the girls' eyes all widened, the knight shook his head and waved off the event as completely unimportant, adding, "Oh, that happened hundreds of years ago. But let me tell you more about the curse," said Sir Vinegar eagerly. "I can only visit this world during the full moon and only in the mirrors of Castle Blumenthal. And no, the curse can't be broken. It is one of those *Irreversible Curses*." When he again noticed looks of concern and sympathy on the fairies' faces, the knight said, "Oh, don't feel badly for me. I don't mind living in mirrors. And I love this castle. It was only just built when I was a young knight, and I was one of the first travelers to visit Blumenthal Castle.

"By the way," said Sir Vinegar, "I noticed that the wax figures in the old library are all moved. Did you by any chance go in there?" When the girls nodded, the knight asked with concern, "Were there more than three fairies? Did you all make it out?"

"There were only three of us," answered Sparrow. "We just barely made it out."

"The wax figures are cursed," said the knight. "There are a lot of curses in this castle," he added, sighing. "The figures come to life and try to kill anything alive five minutes after the library door opens—if anything alive is still in the room at that time. Mr. Blumenthal and Mrs. Hofstedter know to only stay in that room for four minutes at a time, to be on the safe side. Just don't go in there again if you can avoid it. The bewitchment only works inside the library, so the figures can never walk out of that room. I guess if Mr. Blumenthal really wanted to, he could get rid of them, as long as they could be carried out in less than five minutes each trip.

"The curse on the wax figures was put in place by a spriggan," Sir Vinegar added, "who is *supposedly* guarding

some kind of vast hidden treasure.” The knight rolled his eyes as he said this, and from the sarcastic tone of his voice, it was apparent that he didn’t particularly believe a treasure was hidden anywhere in Blumenthal Castle.

“I think the treasure story is just an excuse by the spriggan so that he can commit curses whenever he likes,” Sir Vinegar said. “Three years ago, he cursed Mrs. Hofstedter’s hairbrush. It got stuck in her hair so badly, they had to cut it out. She’s never been able to use it since. It gives off electric shocks if anyone tries to touch it.”

At this point, the girls eyed Winter’s hairbrush beside them somewhat fretfully.

“The spriggan isn’t always here,” the knight continued. “*Supposedly*, he guards several other treasures in various castles, barrows, and crypts. He just slips in and out whenever he feels like it to cause trouble and curse things. He cursed a garden hose once about thirty-five years ago that almost strangled Mr. Weber.”

Winter was very surprised to learn that her grandfather had almost been strangled by a bewitched garden hose. She had never heard that story.

When the knight paused in his speech, Sparrow said, “Sir Vinegar, we met a mermaid and she told us that you might be able to help us.”

“There aren’t any mermaids around here,” stated Sir Vinegar flatly.

“We met her in Denmark,” responded Emerald.

“Oh,” said the knight. “Please continue,” he added politely.

“We have been trying to figure out what can be done to help Edelweiss,” said Sparrow.

The knight smiled as he said, “I’m glad you have already met her because I was going to bring that up next. I feel really terrible about what happened to her. The spriggan took her specifically because she was an edelweiss fairy. He thought she was a threat to the safety of his treasure. There are many legends concerning edelweiss and edelweiss fairies;

and the spriggan, being incredibly superstitious, saw her as a definite threat to the safety of his treasure.”

Sir Vinegar sighed as he went on. “When they were searching for her right after she disappeared, no one thought to search that trunk because there’s no way a ten-year-old girl would have been able to fit into such a small trunk. None of the searchers knew that she was a fairy and could fit into tiny places.

“Believe it or not, in the hundred and fifty years since she has been trapped, you are the first magical beings who have visited that might be able to help her. The gnomes around here wouldn’t have the ability to free her spirit. Plus, they only come into the castle on rare occasions. And Mr. Blumenthal took the mirror out of the Summer House, so I can’t even communicate with the gnomes outside anymore. The closest witches are about a hundred miles away, so I have never been able to contact any of them.

“So, finally,” the knight added, elatedly, “someone has come!” He was fairly bouncing up and down in his armor, very jubilant, as he told the girls, “Well, I have discovered a way that Edelweiss can be freed, but I have never mentioned it to her because I didn’t want to get her hopes up. Plus, there was no way to predict how long we might actually have to wait for a magical being to arrive that could take matters in hand. And now, three at once! This is splendid! Simply splendid!

“And the timing is so perfect,” Sir Vinegar said with a wide smile. “I am allowed two days in the castle mirrors with each full moon, so I will be able to meet you again tomorrow. However, you have to complete a very important project between now and then. You will need to obtain three items that once belonged to Edelweiss. If you are able to do that, there is a way that she can be freed.”

The girls nodded their understanding as Sir Vinegar added, “A fortune teller, who had set up her tent on the castle grounds for a local fair, once told me about a spell that could free trapped spirits. And she mentioned that the spell

required three of the trapped spirit's belongings to enact it. Unfortunately, before I could ask the fortune teller if she could contact someone to help Edelweiss, the woman disappeared."

As he prepared to depart, the knight said, "Meet me in the turret library tomorrow as soon as it is dark."

The girls nodded in agreement while Sir Vinegar remounted his horse and gave them his parting words. "Many more mirrors to visit tonight. *Ta-ta for now.*"

Only a few moments after he left, the girls heard Mrs. Hofstedter shouting from her bedroom down the hall. "Go to a different floor, Sir William! I am very tired tonight, and I am in no mood for your shenanigans!"

Evidently, the knight had a healthy respect for the housekeeper because the second floor was quiet after this.

Quince, Amethyst, and the Forever Journey

Chapter One Sam and Magpie

"Please, please, please, Sam! Please move! We don't have time for this today!"

Sam, a Great Pyrenees mountain dog, was stuck outside the pet supply store. It was one of those really big pet supermarkets nearly as large as a grocery store that also contained a veterinarian's office. Sam hadn't intended to get stuck. He had fully intended to accompany his human, a young woman named Jayne, into the store to get his shot and his dog treat like the big boy that he was. Then, at the very moment the automatic doors slid open, Sam spied two

gremlins just inside the door, grinning evilly at him. That was all it took. Sam froze in place—no panting, no noise, barely breathing, just rooted to the spot.

Gremlins were very dangerous, especially to animals like dogs who could see the nasty creatures. Invisible to people eyes, gremlins usually contented themselves with merely causing human beings grief by breaking all of their appliances. The evil creatures rarely attacked humans directly because they would not have wanted to give themselves away. If people discovered that gremlins were living in their houses, they would be forced to take action. But even one gremlin, let alone two, could really hurt a dog with its nasty claws and sharp teeth. There was no way Sam wanted to risk getting bit or scratched, or having his ears or tail pulled by the mean gremlins.

Sam was actually supposed to be Samantha, but he never told any other dogs this. Jayne had wanted to get a girl Great Pyrenees. However, by the time she arrived at the farm, only two boy puppies were left. She was about to leave when Sam looked at her mournfully with his large, soulful brown eyes; and it was love at first sight. Ten minutes later, Sam was in the back seat of Jayne's car, riding down the country lane towards his new home. And he and Jayne really were best friends. But today, he was just going to have to give his best friend a very difficult time.

"See, the poodle went in," said Jayne, tugging on Sam's leash.

Sam whined a little and grumbled as he thought, *Well, a poodle can't do anything about a gremlin. Oh, please, please, please let a dachshund come by.*

Just standing still would do it, because if Sam wasn't willing, Jayne could never budge him. Jayne tried lifting Sam, but of course that didn't work because Sam actually weighed slightly more than his tiny mistress. Jayne did manage to get his back end off the ground for a few seconds, but that didn't help with the moving forward problem.

“He’s planted there pretty good,” said a man just coming out of the store. “It must be shot day. Dogs are pretty smart about things like that; he can probably sense that you aren’t here for treats or toys this time.”

“He’ll get both a treat and a toy after the shot,” said Jayne, “if he’ll just follow me in. He knows that. We always do treats and toys after both shots and dips. Something else must be wrong. And this sidewalk is even getting kind of hot, so I don’t understand why I can’t get him to move.”

“Do you want some help lifting him?” the man asked.

“No,” answered Jayne, “you better not get too close, since I don’t know why he’s acting like this.”

Even getting Sam into the bath at home was nearly more than Jayne could manage. She usually had to lift his front paws into the tub first, then pick up his rear end like a wheelbarrow and rotate the back of Sam in next. That usually worked if Sam was slightly cooperating.

“Why, Sam? Why today? We have ten other errands to run.”

Sam was stoic and steadfast in his immovability.

“Oh, what’s wrong, Sam?” cried Jayne exasperatedly, once again tugging. “You’ve been in this store at least twenty times.”

Sam just kept a straight face and didn’t respond, not even with a whimper. He just held his ground.

Praying again for a dachshund, Sam closed his eyes. *Oh good grief*, he thought, opening his eyes and staring into the face of a Dalmatian. *Useless, utterly useless! Only dachshunds know what to do with gremlins!*

The next closing and opening of the eyes resulted in a bloodhound who wasn’t much help either due to his goofy and sheepish expression.

Three mutts, a border collie, and an Irish setter later...*Oh thank goodness, a dachshund!* Lucky had just arrived with his human, Mr. Forrester.

Sam, very relieved, whined a loud warning to Lucky. “Gremlins inside!” Of course, to Jayne and Mr. Forrester,

Sam's voice sounded something like the moans and howls dogs sometimes emit when they hear sirens, almost like high-pitched wolf howling.

Upon receiving an acknowledging nod from Lucky, Sam proceeded cautiously into the store directly after the fast-stepping waddle of the dachshund.

Once inside the store, Lucky didn't even need to cause a ruckus. The two gremlins took one look at him and fled, though they made a pretty big mess in their departure, knocking over stacks of dog food bowls, tearing open several bags of rabbit pellets, and crashing into two cages of birds.

Sam was always confused as to why human beings couldn't figure things like this out. They were usually so smart about other things, but they couldn't figure out something as simple as gremlins. *It's probably because they can't see them*, thought Sam. *Humans need to see things to understand them and to believe in them.*

After the departure of the gremlins, something else curious happened in the store. Several of the customers were crowded around a shelf in the corner. Something small was standing on the shelf next to a row of goldfish bowls.

Sam recognized the creature at once. *It's a fairy!* This was very unusual because fairies didn't often hang out in pet stores, at least, not in fairy form.

"Is it a crow?" asked one of the customers.

"No, it looks like a raven," said another.

"I think it's a magpie," said a shrewd woman with spectacles.

She was right.

Sam felt it was his duty to help the magpie fairy who was sort of trapped on the shelf with the regular humans closing in around her.

However, even from a distance, Sam was getting a bad vibe from this fairy, like maybe she wasn't too friendly. Animals usually had good instincts about these sorts of things. But he still needed to help her.

The first thing Sam did was raise an enormous, bellowing howl.

“What now, Sam?” cried Jayne in frustration.

Then, the Great Pyrenees gave a monstrous tug on his leash, causing Jayne to lurch, and upsetting a display of plastic gallon containers full of dog treats.

In the confusion, with people turning toward the noise, and store employees rushing to help clean up the mess, the magpie fairy was able to take off from the shelf and fly across the store to exit the sliding glass doors at the same time a woman with a Siamese cat entered.

When Sam’s human finally caught her breath, she stated, *“The next time I get a dog, I am getting a Chihuahua!”*

Dandelion and the Box of Illusion

Chapter Four Hop-On Doody Two-Shoes

Cherry had plans with her family the next day, so she couldn’t make another visit to the Machine Graveyard with Dande. However, Fern, responding to a leaf message from Dande, was available to go with her.

After changing into fairy form behind some bushes about a block from Dande’s house, the two flew to the junkyard and entered over the wall near the gnarled plum tree.

On their previous trip to the Machine Graveyard, Dande and Cherry hadn’t even been able to explore half of the hilly enclosure. Even though Fern was in awe over all of this and didn’t want to rush, Dande kind of hurriedly passed over the parts she had already seen with Cherry, anxious to discover

what the rest of the junkyard held. However, it was hard to hurry Fern who just loved stuff like this.

The two paused to say hello to a box turtle who was barely peeking out of his shell at them near a bunch of old tires stacked two deep, in a neat figure-eight shape, and planted with squashes and gourds. As the fairies flew away, the turtle took a slow walk through the gourd vines to have a drink of water from a cracked birdbath sitting directly on the ground, without a pedestal, a few yards from the tire stacks.

Two foxes peeked out at the fairies from inside of an old front-loading washer that they were obviously using for a den. The washing-machine den was filled with grasses, leaves, and old rags for the foxes to curl up in.

Today, in addition to all of the things Dande had seen with Cherry, the girls discovered an old paddleboat planted with an enormous privet bush. Fern especially loved these kinds of discoveries because they were somewhat similar to a few things she had at home. Her parents had planted their old toilets full of wildflowers in their far back yard, and her dad had somehow converted an old television into a fish tank.

As Dande tried to drag Fern along, the two noticed a small streak of smoke in the far corner of the Machine Graveyard. A metal barrel was placed outside a teeny shack just behind an old ice-cream pushcart overflowing with periwinkle vines. A warm fire blazed in the barrel. Growing beside the shack, a huge pomegranate bush leaned over the top of the roof, its branches draped entirely over the structure as though it were resting there and protecting the home.

Just as Fern and Dande landed in front of the tiny shack, a very small man came out of the door. He was barely two feet tall and was wearing overalls and a baseball cap. He had bushy red hair and eyebrows, and a long red beard that came all the way down to his ankles and curled partway around his legs.

“Hello!” said the man. “Welcome to my home.”

As the fairies returned his hello, the tiny man added, “I am a magician, and my name is Hop-On Doody Two-Shoes. But you can call me either Hop-On or Mr. Two-Shoes.”

The girls didn’t think the name quite fit because the tiny magician wasn’t wearing any shoes. At present, he was barefoot. However, they weren’t too worried about his feet being cold because the fire in the barrel was so warm. Plus, since he was a magician, he could probably manage to keep his feet warm somehow by magic, if he wanted to.

After the girls had introduced themselves to the magician, Dande asked, “Did you plant all of these beautiful bushes, trees, and vines in this junkyard?”

“Well,” responded Mr. Two-Shoes, “I planted some of the things. But a lot of the vegetation just grew here on its own. The peach trees were already here,” he added, indicating a small grove of trees on the far side of a half-buried school bus that had fig bushes sprouting out of its windows.

“It’s so beautiful here,” said Fern, smiling at Mr. Two-Shoes.

He nodded and told them, “I did have some of this machinery especially moved in here to add to the place. I wanted to have a special type of garden for plants, animals, and magical creatures to live in. No one is allowed to dump things in here anymore. It’s private property. But a few people still do it anyway.” The magician was pointing to a spot a little ways down from his shack where a computer monitor and printer had been tossed over the concrete fence.

“These don’t even look that old,” said Fern, as she and Dande flew to the spot where the monitor and printer lay to get a better look.

“No, they’re pretty new,” said Mr. Two-Shoes. “I guess someone just wanted new ones and didn’t want to bother with either donating the old ones, or taking them to a recycle center, or fixing them if they were broken.

“I can fix things sometimes, if I have the right tools,” said the magician, snapping his fingers and pulling a screwdriver

out of thin air. “Without even using magic,” he added with another snap, which stowed the screwdriver back into the invisible toolbox in the air.

Dande and Fern laughed and clapped their hands.

Just then, the Machine Graveyard had two more visitors who arrived climbing over the wall near the pomegranate bush. At first, the fairies were wary of the newcomers because one of them was a gremlin, and gremlins and fairies did not get along at all in most circumstances.

However, this was a gremlin who did get along with fairies. His name was Ripper; and he was a friend to several fairies in the area, though Fern and Dande hadn’t met him before. His traveling companion was a gargoyle named Burchard. While Ripper was very friendly and greeted the fairies and magician warmly, Burchard was more stern and serious. He merely nodded in response to the girls’ greetings without speaking to them.

The gargoyle and gremlin may have seemed like an odd traveling pair, but Burchard and Ripper had been friends for four years now. They normally lived on a farm in Missouri but were traveling South for the holidays to take a little vacation and see some sights. This was something the two liked to do nearly every year, and they also liked to stop by the Machine Graveyard to visit Hop-On Doody Two-Shoes.

The tiny magician had started converting the old junkyard to this special type of garden nearly seven years ago; and Ripper, especially, being extremely fond of mechanical devices, loved to see the progress Hop-On was making.

Ripper himself was an oddity among gremlins because he liked to fix things, instead of breaking them; and he often helped the magician with small repairs to the appliances in his shack, and a few other things in need of fixing around the Machine Graveyard. The previous year, Ripper had fixed a lawnmower and a camping stove for his friend while passing through.

This year, the magician had another special project for the industrious gremlin. Excusing himself for a moment, and

leaving the fairies to visit with the gargoyle and gremlin, the magician went to retrieve the broken object. Mr. Two-Shoes returned from his little hut in short time carrying something wrapped in a soft rag. Ripper's eyes gleamed with anticipation as the magician uncovered the treasure.

"Toys are easy to fix!" exclaimed Ripper. "This will be no problem."

Mr. Two-Shoes was holding an old automaton of a circus acrobat that would do a handstand when activated. The mechanical toy had only recently ceased to work when it had, unfortunately, been in a house that was occupied by gremlins. By the time a neighborhood dachshund was able to visit the gremlin-infested house to clear out the nasty creatures, the acrobat automaton was broken. This was very sad for a little boy living in the house who was sick. His uncle, a Mr. Kotta, had bought him the toy especially to cheer him up; but thanks to the gremlins, the acrobat hadn't performed his handstands for very long.

Soon after the toy was discovered to be broken, Mr. Kotta had brought the item to Mr. Two-Shoes, who was well known in the area as a person who could fix things. So far, the magician hadn't been able to figure out what was wrong with the toy; but he had been expecting Ripper for his yearly visit, so he had told Mr. Kotta that he would like to keep the automaton for a bit to let a friend have a look at it.

Ripper very gingerly took the automaton apart and laid the pieces out on the soft rag in which the toy had been wrapped. Being the expert in mechanics that he was, the gremlin very quickly discovered that there was a part bent inside, along with two small pieces of the inner workings missing—a pin and a small gear. The bent part was easy to straighten, and Ripper had a pin from a watch in his small belt pouch that would fit the toy, so that was an easy piece to replace. However, the gear was more troublesome.

As Burchard, Mr. Two-Shoes, and the fairies looked on, Ripper explained the problem. "You see, these old toys were all handmade, no assembly lines in those days, so

replacement parts aren't available. Our best bet will be to find another broken automaton and try to harvest parts from it. With luck, we might be able to find a gear the same size."

"Wait a minute!" cried Dande. "What does the gear look like?"

She was already fishing in the pocket of her dress, as Ripper told her, "Round and flat, with little teeth on the edge, about the size of a—that!"

Dande was smiling as she held out the nickel-sized gear she had found the day before. Ripper smiled too, along with everyone else. What good luck for Dande to have found just the part needed to fix the broken toy! This was turning out to be a wonderful day.

After expertly popping in the gear and very quickly putting all of the pieces of the automaton back together, Ripper carefully pushed the button on the back to activate it; and the group silently watched the acrobat slowly bend over, do a handstand, then return to his original standing position.

"Anything else I can do for you this year?" Ripper asked Mr. Two-Shoes.

"No, I believe that'll do it," the magician answered. "Thank you both for stopping in."

"No problem," stated the stoic Burchard. "We'll be off now," he added gruffly. The mobile gargoyle was evidently getting a little tired of standing still.

"See you next year!" called Ripper, just as the two were disappearing over the high concrete wall above the pomegranate bush.

"Would you like to come with me to deliver this to Mr. Kotta?" Mr. Two-Shoes asked Fern and Dande. "It's just down the block."

"Oh, we'd love to," said Dande.

Fern nodded in agreement.

"One moment," said the magician. "I'll just get my shoes."

When he came out of his shack less than a minute later, pulling on a very large pair of blue tennis shoes, he said, "I can hardly ever find shoes to fit me these days."

Based on his height, Mr. Two-Shoes' feet were nearly twice the size another two-foot high person's feet would have been, so the girls could understand why he might have had problems finding footwear to fit.

After carefully wrapping the toy in its soft rag, Mr. Two-Shoes was ready to go.

They had to pause once in their departure because the magician had gotten his beard caught in one of his shoelaces, so he had to stop for a moment to loosen the whiskers and retie the shoe.

As they snuck through a small hole in the concrete wall behind the magician's shack, which was cleverly concealed from the outside by a clump of oleander bushes and a tangle of wisteria, Mr. Two-Shoes told them, "Mr. Kotta just thinks I am a regular person. He doesn't know I'm a magician."

The fairies flew alongside him, while the magician, carefully carrying the swaddled automaton, walked along the outside of the back wall to the junkyard. When they neared the end of the wall and were coming upon a street with houses, Mr. Two-Shoes said, "You might want to transform to regular girls now, since we are still somewhat secluded." Dande and Fern quickly did so and were soon walking beside the tiny man.

The three made their way to a large, two-story house not too far down the block. Mr. Kotta was home and was overjoyed that the toy had been fixed.

With Mr. Two-Shoes, Fern, and Dande following, Mr. Kotta carried the acrobat up to his nephew, Nicolas, who was seven. Nicolas was staying with his uncle for a while because it was close to the hospital where he was currently having medical treatments.

The automaton was placed on the bedside table along with Nicolas's books and a few other toys and games. He

was very happy to have the toy back and working, and they all stayed to watch the acrobat do six handstands in a row.

Then the group followed Mr. Kotta downstairs so that Nicolas could rest. Mr. Two-Shoes refused to take any money for arranging to have the toy fixed. However, Mr. Kotta insisted on feeding them all cinnamon toast and hot chocolate with lots of mini marshmallows, which was a very nice treat on a cool day.

“By the way,” said Mr. Kotta to Dande as they were having their toast and cocoa, “I’ve seen you visiting Mrs. Roberts at the nursing home.”

Dande nodded but looked confused. She never remembered seeing Mr. Kotta before.

“I play the piano there on Sundays,” he explained.

“Oh, okay,” said Dande. “You do look familiar.”

“Anyway,” said Mr. Kotta, “my aunt lives there. She’s two doors down from Mrs. Roberts. Her name is Alma Winters. You might stop in and say hello to her some time. Young people sure help to cheer her up.”

“Okay,” said Dande. “I’ll look her up next time I am there.”

Since it was getting rather late, the three bid Mr. Kotta farewell and left.

The magician said goodbye to the fairies and made his way home to the junkyard, while the girls jogged and skipped back to Dande’s house.

Hollyhock and the Christmas of the Swans

Chapter Four Igen Anyo and Blither Pond

Since Hollyhock lived in a suburb on the outskirts of town, she often spent a lot of time exploring the countryside. When Larkspur and Ginger arrived the next morning, the three decided to do just that, mainly because Hollyhock's grandparents were visiting for the holidays, and the girls really couldn't talk freely about fairy things around them.

Larkspur's real name was Rebecca Wright, and she had short blond hair. Her dress was made of shimmering, purplish-blue flower petals; and her tall blue wings were very large and billowy. Larkspur's wand was made from a matchstick; and for her special fairy gift, she had a lightness and fickleness about her that allowed her to pass through life without taking things too seriously. She was always good-natured, lighthearted, and flexible.

Charlotte Newberry was Ginger's real name. She wore a leafy green dress and had dark orange wings that were tall and pointy. Her soft slippers matched her wings, and she wore a burnt orange headband to hold back her dark brown hair. Ginger's wand was an antique skeleton key, and her special fairy gift involved healing abilities. She was often able to nurse sick plants and animals back to health quickly; and her healing talents were strongest in the areas of curing nausea, dizziness, and upset stomachs. Ginger also often smelled a little like ginger root.

After bundling up in their jackets, the girls set off on their bicycles toward a stretch of farmland that started about half-a-mile from Hollyhock's house.

As they rode, Hollyhock told her friends what had happened in the park and about the visit to the witch. Since Ginger and Larkspur really couldn't use sign language while

riding their bikes, because they needed their hands for balance and steering, they sped up and slowed down a few times to ride in positions where Hollyhock could see their mouths clearly to be able to ask questions and give input.

Larkspur and Ginger thought the plan to do the tasks on Wednesday was an excellent one, and they started brainstorming ideas right away. In short time, the girls had come up with a pretty good plan; and they agreed that they should meet up early the next morning to follow through.

Hollyhock was leading the way on their ride and was heading for a particular spot. There was a lonely old farm that wasn't used anymore to raise crops or livestock, and she often liked to visit a particular part of it. The farm belonged to a widow named Mrs. Blither who wasn't around much because she frequently traveled to visit family in Arizona.

On a hilly piece of land at the back of Blither Farm, two ponds sat side by side, very close together. They were so close together in fact that they were both simply referred to as Blither Pond. A thick tree fringe surrounded both ponds. Hollyhock often liked to come here to think, and she especially wanted to today because she remembered seeing swans on the ponds before.

Though this area of the country was filled with natural rivers and lakes, most ponds were manmade and were mainly used to water livestock and raise fish. They were also often called tanks instead of ponds. These two particular tanks were something of an oddity in the area because they were never both filled with water at the same time. One always seemed to be empty, and the other full. And which was empty or full seemed to shift back and forth. Very few people ever happened upon these isolated water tanks, and the handful of local people who knew of the ponds associated the water phenomenon of empty versus full to the unpredictability of the underground springs in the area.

After parking their bicycles among the dense cedar trees surrounding Blither Pond, the girls *popped* into fairy form to begin exploring. The slightly larger pond was full of water

this morning, and since the air was a bit cooler than the water, the pond was somewhat steamy looking, giving off wisps of misty vapor.

Hovering just above the edge of the water, the fairies could see their reflections between the strings of mist. From this position, they could also see the other pond clearly through a short path cut between the trees. Hollyhock often puzzled over this path. Since no one seemed to frequent the ponds, she wondered why the scrubby mesquite and prolific cedar hadn't filled in this gap between the trees. *Maybe fishermen come here to fish for bass and catfish*, she thought. Those were the most common fish in this area, and many people stocked their tanks with them. However, Hollyhock had never seen fishermen, or anyone else for that matter, at Blither Pond.

The fairies were just about to fly down the path to explore the empty pond, when a movement in the trees at the far end of the path startled them. It was another person. Very quickly, the girls flew to a clump of juniper near the entrance to the path and alighted amongst the thick foliage of the branches. Tucking into the bush, they were well concealed by the time the person passed them on the path.

The visitor to the pond was a tall man with very short, curly dark hair. He was carrying an enormous bucket on his back, which quite surprised the fairies because the bucket was bigger than any they had ever seen, and seemed nearly as large as a refrigerator. The man was dressed simply in jeans, work boots, and a white t-shirt; but he was still very startling in appearance carrying such a large bucket.

However, other than being surprised by his sudden presence, the fairies soon got over being startled because after a few moments, the huge bucket he was carrying didn't seem so odd due to the fact that the man had quite a lot of muscles. He basically looked like some of those bodybuilders the girls had seen on television, but maybe even larger. And in seeing this man up close and in person, Hollyhock thought he looked even bigger and more muscular

than the people competing in strongman competitions—the ones who pulled trains and lifted giant concrete wheels just for fun.

The surprise returned once again when the fairies observed the man bend down to slide the bucket off of his back. He then dipped the enormous vessel into the water of the larger pond to fill it. As soon as the bucket was full, he hoisted it once again onto his back and proceeded to carry it laboriously down the path to the empty pond, where he then dumped the water. Although his task was obviously very great, the man didn't seem at all troubled by it. In fact, at one point as he passed the juniper, he smiled.

The girls watched, speechless, as the man repeated his actions, once more retrieving a giant bucket of water to take to the nearly empty pond. Ginger, Hollyhock, and Larkspur just looked at one another in silence. They couldn't yet come up with any words to say about this, because they didn't understand at all what was going on.

On his fifth trip by, the man paused by the juniper, smiled again, and said, "Good morning, young ladies. Or should I say, young fairies?"

Having been found out, the girls crept from their hiding places and walked out on the bouncy juniper branches to face the man.

"Good morning," responded Larkspur.

Hollyhock and Ginger couldn't speak yet. They were still a bit surprised by the strongman with the bucket, his actions, and especially about getting found out.

The girls couldn't sense anything magical about this man. Of course, unless he were to tell them he was a wizard or a conjurer of some sort, they might not ever find out because those types of magical beings looked just like regular people, and their magic wasn't always obvious.

The nearest the fairies could tell from what they had seen so far was that this man was something like a superhero, which was a wonderful thought because many of the fairies were full of magical and hopeful thoughts about how the

world could be made a better place, and the presence of real superheroes in the world would certainly fit the bill.

“I smelled the ginger before I saw you,” the man said, grinning at the surprised and sheepish looks on the fairies’ faces. “After that, the purple and blue flower petals were pretty easy to spot. My name is Igen Anyo,” he added.

After introducing themselves to the strongman, Hollyhock bravely asked, “Could you tell us what you are doing?”

“We know it’s not really any of our business,” interjected Larkspur, “but we are very curious.”

At the hopeful faces of the girls, Mr. Anyo sat down in front of them and said, “Yes, I can tell you what I am doing, especially since I got an early start this morning. I will have plenty of time to finish my task, even with a break.

“I have to perform the same chore every day,” the superhero continued. “The larger pond must be emptied each day into the smaller one. Then, at night, a magical force drains the smaller pond. So I have to repeat my actions again the next morning. It usually takes me right at nine hours to transfer the water. My task is tied to the life of a magical spirit who was once a princess. She currently takes the form of a cherry bonsai tree. If I fail to perform this task each day, she will die.”

Mr. Anyo nodded at the concerned looks on the girls’ faces. “There is much more to this story,” he added. “As important as it is for any person or being to live, the princess’s life is immensely important to all of mankind because her spirit is tied to the Doorway to Christmas. She actually keeps that magical passageway alive and functioning.”

What an amazing coincidence to come across something related to the Doorway to Christmas the very day after learning about it.

The fairies listened closely as the superhero went on. “Long ago, the original Doorway to Christmas was destroyed, and the world experienced a year without the

coming of the Spirit of Christmas. That was one of the darkest, most horrible years the world has ever known. However, mankind was given one chance to have the doorway restored. But that chance involved a great sacrifice because the only way the doorway could be brought back to life was to be joined with a human life from that point on.

“Of course, the wisest thinkers of that time wanted to be able to solve the problem without any person having to act as a permanent sacrifice. However, none of those wise men and women ever came up with a solution. As the time came for another Christmas to pass without the Spirit of Christmas, a beautiful princess recognized the need for someone to finally act, and act quickly. Without even saying goodbye to her family, because she was afraid they would try to stop her, she wandered off into the coldness of the wilderness in search of the doorway.”

Mr. Anyo smiled at the girls’ wide eyes as he continued. “When she finally found the Doorway to Christmas, the princess discovered that another person had had the same idea as she. A young peasant girl made it to the doorway at almost exactly the same time. Though the princess would have preferred to return to her family, as anyone would have wanted to in that situation, she had such a beautiful and giving nature that she couldn’t allow the peasant girl to make the sacrifice. Without hesitation, the princess immediately ordered the girl away to home and stepped through the doorway to the other side.

“This action brought life once again to the doorway, and when Christmastime came, the Spirit of Christmas made his yearly visit as scheduled, restoring hope to the chaotic world and helping to right things that had been so wrong for an entire year. During his visit that year, the Spirit of Christmas planted a magical bonsai beside the doorway to forever hold the spirit of the princess who had shared her life with the doorway.

“However,” added Mr. Anyo, becoming more serious at this point in his story, “there are still evil forces at work in

the world, as I'm sure you know. Five years ago, a wicked warlock poisoned an underground spring from which the cherry bonsai draws water and life. At that time, the spirit contained in the bonsai nearly died. In order to counteract that terrible action, a powerful witch used a spell to draw the water from the smaller tank of Blither Pond to dilute the poison. In an instant, all of the water at once was drawn to the roots of the bonsai to try to save the life of the tree. Though the dilution worked to save the princess's spirit, she was so weak that she needed a similar amount of water each night to sustain her and to keep the poison diluted. The continuing spell of the witch drains the water of the smaller pond at exactly midnight each night.

"I volunteered for my current job," added the superhero. "While several of the world's greatest magicians, witches, and wizards work on a permanent cure for this problem, I refill the smaller pond each day. After I remove the water from the larger tank, another witch spell causes an underground spring to refill it, so there will be water for me to use for my task the next day. Unfortunately, the smaller tank has no underground spring to feed it so I must manually transfer the water. And because this involves magic, I cannot employ technology to fill the pond by pumps or pipelines, or any other means.

"I don't mind doing this," Mr. Anyo said sincerely. "In fact, I am happy to put my powers to good use. However, five years nonstop is a long time without a break," he added, with a sigh. "I don't need a rest or anything, because I don't tire; but I do owe a favor to a friend, and I would love to take one day off to be able to help him with something. He basically just needs someone to move a few heavy things for a special project he is working on, and I feel badly that I haven't been able to help him with this because he has helped me so many times over the years."

Although the girls would have liked to have talked to Igen Anyo more, they really couldn't because he had to get back to work with his giant bucket.

The superhero said goodbye to his new friends and got on with his work fairly quickly while the fairies *popped* into girl form to retrieve their bicycles and head back to Hollyhock's house. As they were preparing to leave, a white swan landed in the larger pond, which started Hollyhock thinking about some of the things Drucilla had said about swans and their magical abilities. And this thinking caused a small, good idea to begin brewing in her brain.

While they were riding along the farm-to-market road toward Hollyhock's house, Ginger remarked, "Boy, Mr. Anyo is just like Atlas. His work is so important and never-ending."

Larkspur and Hollyhock nodded in agreement.

Eglantine and the Laughing Owl

Chapter Three A Strange Lamp and An Answer to the Mystery

Eglantine's treehouse, being three stories high and completely wonderful in other ways too, had somewhat turned into "fairy central" during the times when school was out. Since this headquarters of sorts was perfectly situated next to the woods, and was close to where many of the fairies lived, Eglantine pretty much had daily visitors on weekends and especially during times such as spring break when the girls had more free time.

The next morning, Thyme and Raven joined Eglantine, Clover, and Heather for a day of fun in the treehouse.

However, the two hadn't a clue that exploring an ancient, crumbling manor house was also on slate for the day.

Packing up a big bag of peanut butter and marshmallow crême sandwiches and apples, Eglantine told her father that they would be exploring the woods and hanging out in the treehouse for most of the day. Mr. Davis gave consent, as long as the girls checked in just after lunchtime.

Thyme's real name was Sarah Richmond; and she had short, dark red hair. Her leafy, bright green dress had accents of purple flowers; and her sparkling wings were very tiny. Thyme carried a dried pine needle for her wand that came from her family's Christmas tree on the day she was born. For her fairy gift, she had the ability to communicate well with bees and other insects. She also had endless energy and enhanced efficiency.

Harper Borden was Raven's real name, and she had short red hair too. So it was as though two redheaded twins had arrived to spend the day, except that Raven and Thyme were not at all related to one another. Raven's dress was made of glossy black feathers; and she had tall, feather-fringed wings. Her pointy slippers matched her dress; and she carried a fancy, antique hatpin for her wand. Since ravens were known as prophetic birds and keepers of all truths, Raven's fairy gifts involved being able to sometimes see the future with visions, and the ability to see truth even when it was hidden deeply within.

The group flew quickly to the manor, and upon entering via the crack over the door, Eglantine deposited the bag of sandwiches and apples on a dusty settee in the foyer. Then the girls made their way to the room with the mysterious fireplace, hoping to find some way to discover the source of the strange noises.

Clover and Thyme hovered in front of the brick wall façade above the fireplace mantle, while their friends stood along the stone ledge below them.

Thyme was the first one to touch one of the strangely-colored bricks. The one she was positioned close to was a

mossy green color. The brick also had a kind of pale green glow to it. However, when she tentatively reached out her hand to lightly touch the surface, her fingers met no resistance and seemed to disappear partway into the brick. Evidently, this brick was not a brick at all. With her friends all watching intently, Thyme again placed her hand on the brick that wasn't really there and pushed it in farther. Her hand and arm disappeared all the way up to her elbow this time. She couldn't feel anything but air inside the brick.

Heather, Eglantine, and Raven, watching from below, were silent. However, Clover, now hovering shoulder to shoulder with Thyme, whispered, "Don't try to push in any more just yet, since we don't know what might be on the other side."

Thyme nodded and withdrew her arm quickly. Then she and Clover landed next to their friends.

Just as they were about to start forming a plan as to what they might do next, the five fairies suddenly became very sleepy, and they all heard a strange voice that was both deep and soft say very quietly, "Try the red brick next."

The red brick was situated at the farthest point of the fireplace from the fairies' current location, and was only about three inches higher than the mantle ledge upon which they stood.

"Yes, the red brick is the best choice," the soft voice creamily added.

The girls weren't sure if these smooth and silky words were just in their heads, or if the voice was coming from somewhere in the parlor. And at this point, they were getting too sleepy to really care because the sluggishness they had all caught seemed to be growing. Also, for some reason, the suggestion the voice had offered sounded really good. To the fairies' heavy-lidded eyes, the dark red, shimmering brick appeared very warm and alive, like an extremely pleasant object awaiting their touch. Plus, with the girls' currently foggy brains keeping them from thinking clearly, there was no reason to suspect any danger from whatever persuasive

force was drawing them toward the brick at the far end of the mantle.

“The red brick,” murmured Heather, nodding, as she followed her friends down the mantle path in a trusting manner.

As the group drowsily made their way along the ledge, with slow, staggering steps towards the red brick, Clover suddenly caught herself, and shook her head to try to relieve some of the sleepiness. She stopped walking, and out of instinct, peered closely into the darkened room. When her eyes met an unusual sight in one corner, she grabbed the arms of Raven and Eglantine who were nearest to her. This shook some of the drowsiness out of them too, and they also looked toward the corner of the room where Clover was staring.

An old ceramic oil lamp, shaped something like a fat teapot, complete with a spout and handle, sat upon a small round table. The sight of the antique lamp was not what was unusual, since an old lamp would be perfectly placed in the parlor of an ancient manor house. What was strange was the grayish-green wisp of smoke curling up out of the spout.

With all of the fairies now staring at the lamp, the wisp became about twice as thick, and the girls felt even sleepier than they had before. Their heads became thicker, their eyelids heavier, and they were all ready to curl up and take a nap, right there on the stone mantle if necessary.

“Yes, the red brick would be very good,” the soft voice smoothly suggested. “Just step right through it.”

The lure of the red brick and the lulling voice was truly too much to resist this time. It was as though some kind of powerful sleep magic was drawing them toward the end of the mantle, along with the sound of the silkily-pleasant voice.

Suddenly, a very loud shriek pulled the fairies out of their trance, waking them completely. A shrill chatter followed the shriek and seemed to be coming from a dark gray brick directly above their position in the center of the mantle. The

gray brick was glowing like a softly-lit, plugged-in nightlight.

As the girls glanced at the lamp once again, they noticed that the spout was no longer giving off the wispy vapors. And since they were now clear-headed, the fairies were anxious to investigate the noises behind the gray brick. As they flew up about a foot to hover in front of it, they glanced down at the red brick. It was no longer shimmering and seemed oddly cold in comparison to just a few moments before when the lure to get closer to the warmly-lit stone had seemed nearly irresistible.

The girls decided that for safety, they would hold hands, like a chain, while Eglantine entered the gray brick slowly to see what might be inside, and to determine if there was any danger. Forming a line, the fairies held tightly to one another, with Raven grasping Eglantine's hand in an almost painful grip so as not to lose hold of her friend in case anything unexpected were to happen. As they were getting ready, the fairies heard the odd, trilling chatter once more; but this time the noise wasn't quite as loud as the blast that had drawn them out of their sleepy trance.

Eglantine took a deep breath, and with a last look at her friends, flew slowly forward, disappearing into the gray brick. Her foot caught slightly on the sand-colored brick immediately below the gray one, confirming the girls' suspicions that the strangely-colored bricks were passages, or doorways, of some sort. *But doorways to where?*

Eglantine's friends barely had a chance to worry about her entire body, along with Raven's hand, disappearing into the gray stone because they heard her voice a mere moment later. "There's a woods in here! It looks safe." The rose fairy's head and shoulders suddenly popped back through the gray brick as she added, "The trees are really beautiful and peaceful, and I think it's fall, instead of spring." As her friends smiled at this wonderful discovery, Eglantine said, "Let me go all the way in without anyone holding onto me.

I'll come right back to make sure we can get home okay, then we'll all go through the brick."

Her friends nodded. However, Thyme, who was feeling the need to be extremely cautious, said, "Good thinking, but if you don't make it right back, we will go for help, rather than follow you in."

Eglantine nodded her agreement. "Good idea." But she was fairly sure that the area behind the gray brick was safe. She just had a good feeling about it.

Raven, who could also sense these sorts of things with accuracy, wasn't getting any inkling of danger either.

With her friends all holding their breath, Eglantine flew quickly into the gray brick, this time managing not to bang her foot, or any other part of her, on the surrounding chimney bricks. She popped back through not quite two seconds later to face her smiling friends. "Here I am, all safe and sound!"

Since all of the girls wanted to explore the strange and peaceful woods, and because there didn't seem to be any danger, they decided to risk all going in together. However, Heather had a good idea. She frequently carried string in her pockets to play string games. (A bit of string was often handy to have for other reasons too.) Raven and Clover also had lengths of string with them. By tying the pieces together, the girls fashioned a rope, of sorts, which they tied to a candlestick retrieved from a bookcase and placed on the mantle under the brick. Then, one at a time, the fairies flew slowly through the gray stone passageway to the woods on the other side, with Heather coming through last, holding the end of the string. She left the dangling string-end hanging out of the opposite side of the gray brick.

A fireplace identical to the one in Glorford Manor stood on its own in the middle of the trees, with no house or any other manmade structure in sight.

Many of the trees in the forest were gently dropping their colorful leaves as Eglantine had noticed. And the woods were situated next to a gigantic, glistening lake of still water.

Many of the trees fringing the lake were draped with tendrils of thick moss, as though they were wearing gauzy blankets.

The treed area surrounding the fairies was shadowy, but not at all scary; and the air seemed warmer and muggier than the cool March weather they had been having at home. But fall was often warm in their region of the country, so even though the time of year was different, there was no reason to assume they had traveled far from home. However, the girls were slightly disoriented by their surroundings because the trees at home were budding leaves instead of dropping them.

In the still and quiet woods, a rustling behind one of the larger spruce trees quickly drew their attention. The scuffling noise was followed by a short shriek, exactly like the ones the fairies had heard previously. Deciding to approach cautiously, the girls walked around the base of the tree, instead of flying. They didn't want to startle whatever creature was making the sounds. They walked slowly, but steadily. After all, there was safety in numbers; and they certainly didn't pose a threat to any other beings, so there was really no reason to expect trouble.

As they rounded the tree, stepping almost soundlessly upon a blanket of pine needles strewn with damp maple leaves, the girls could see through the forest to a small meadow in the distance that was full of golden grasses, gently waving at them.

Upon circling the tree nearly three quarters of the way round, the fairies came to a complete stop when they found themselves face to face with the answer to their mystery; and they all smiled.