

THE TOWER PRINCESS



SHONNA SLAYTON



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ALSO BY SHONNA SLAYTON

FAIRY TALES

Cinderella's Dress

Cinderella's Shoes

Spindle

Snow White's Mirror (coming soon)

HISTORICAL

Liz and Nellie

PROLOGUE



In a land, far, far away where the winters are bitter and the springs are wet, there is a kingdom called Morlaix. Once a famous land where merchants traveled to trade for salve and balsams made from the fabled rowan trees, the land is almost forgotten today.

Morlaix Kingdom was once strong and united. In that lush, green land, two boys grew up together as best friends. Did I say grew up? I meant, competed. After all, one was Anglo-Saxon. The other, Viking.

"Bet I can climb the castle wall without getting caught by the constable."

"Bet I can shoot my arrow through the cook's hat and pin it to that post."

Problem was, they both wanted the same thing when they grew up: the crown.

"When I'm king, I'll expand my territory in all directions—as far as I can ride. I'll let you till my fields."

"When I'm king, I'll build the grandest castle around and let you serve my bread."

"You'll never be king; your head is too fat."

"You'll never be king; you can't shoot straight."

Boys grow into pages. Pages into squires. Squires into knights. One knight was tall with chiseled chin and quick reflexes. One knight was short with cunning mind and piercing eyes.

Finally, all their betting and arguing came down to one final war. The knights fought valiantly, side by side, to defend the ailing Morlaix king—their king who was desperately ill and dying without an heir.

The battle was won but the strongest two knights, well, they were not done.

"Who's got the fat head, now?"

"Look how straight my shot was, eh?"

All through town the knights did battle, ignoring the townspeople they did seek to govern, smashing the very town they did wish to own. About to destroy the life-giving center of the Isle of Morlaix.

"You will relinquish to me."

"You will hand over your sword and muck out my stables."

They knocked each other off their horses and continued fighting fist to fist for both the upper hand and for the kingdom.

"You will lose in hand combat. My reflexes are quicker."

"My mind is fast. Hand combat is my best skill."

Finally, the fight came to a standstill underneath the Tree of Morlaix. My tree. And that is how I got involved. The tree must not be hurt no matter the ego of the knight.

"STOP YOUR BICKERING.

YOUR BITING.

YOUR BELLY WAGGING."

Swinging nimbly out of the tree, I planted my two small feet between the growling, frothing knights.

They stopped and stared. Likely surprised to see me. I am the stuff of legends and tales and bedtime stories in this land.

"Who are you?"

"What are you?"

Maintaining a menacing stare to make up for my small stature, I proclaimed, “King of the Woodlings.” I expected them to bow. Most do.

Blank looks.

Bawk! In their ignorance, they were the same. I uttered a deep growl that began as distant thunder and quickly multiplied to an earthquake. The shaking earth caught their attention and brought them to their knees.

*“WOODLINGS ARE THE MAGICAL CREATURES WHO PLAY
UNDERNEATH THE FORESTS ON THE ISLANDS OF
MORLAIX.”*

With eyebrows raised, the two knights, still on their knees, awkwardly bowed.

I have a little bit of magic, not a lot. Enough to make people wonder about me. And take a rest from fighting to listen to my poems.

*“I SEE YOU TWO MEN, FULL OF SASS,
HAVE FOUND YOURSELVES AT QUITE AN IMPASSE.
BOTH OF YOU WANT TO BE KING,
RISING WHEN KING RORICK SINGS HIS FINAL SING.
YET, YOUR SKILLS ARE EQUAL IN EVERY WAY.
YOUR FIGHT WILL GO ON AND ON, FOREVER BEYOND
A DAY.
PERCHANCE WHEN ONLY ONE OF YOU REMAIN,
T’WON’T MATTER ANYWAY—THERE’LL BE NOTHING LEFT
TO GAIN.”*

At the end of this speech I made the two knights turn around and witness their selfish battle through the village.

They had dueled through the very heart of the marketplace. And, being autumn, and the harvest fully in, the marketplace was rather packed. They had smashed through piles of pumpkins,

leaving trails of stringy orange innards strewn about the stalls. Exploded hay bales littered the ground. Columns of dark smoke smudged the sunset in the distance and marked the knights' path of destruction through the metalworking corridor. As they stood observing, a decorative gourd that had been flung onto a rooftop rolled down and shattered, breaking the silence.

The sound seemed to release an angry craftsman—a plump fellow with a pumpkin smashed on his head. He took a step forward, shouting impolite things while jabbing his finger at the knights. After speaking his mind, he flung pumpkin guts on each one, dulling the shine on their shining armor.

*"ALL THIS DISASTER CREATED WITHOUT AN ENEMY
IN SIGHT.*

*WOULDN'T YOU SAY—FOR THESE VILLAGERS—IT WAS AN
UNFAIR FIGHT?"*

The two knights managed to hang their heads and look ashamed, even though they were not. Their brains were already whirling, trying to come up with new ways to gain the crown.

Thus, I negotiated a peace treaty between Jorvik the Large and Simon of the House of Waterton. They each took half the kingdom. Exactly half.

"Half? But that is not whole."

"Half? That is only part of what I want."

*"THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO SOLVE THIS FINE RIDDLE.
THE TOWN MUST BE FIRMLY SPLIT DOWN THE MIDDLE.
HALF TO EACH OTHER, AND WITH A DIVIDING WALL
THAT IS MY DECISION. THIS IS MY CALL."*

We built a wall right then, splitting the town into North Morlaix and South Morlaix (for the reigning king did, after all, sing his last sing.) The wall traveled from where the water laps the base of the sea rocks, to where the thick forests choke the

shore, through the fields and villages, across the moat, until it split the very center of the castle. Half for Jorvik and half for Simon. The stables, the drawbridge, the moat. Dividing everything into North and South Morlaix. Eighteen feet high, six feet across, the Dividing Wall separated the land for two new rulers, friends no longer.

North Morlaix was mainly Viking and South Morlaix mostly Anglo Saxon.

As for the peace treaty, it was to last as long as each knight held the throne. They could never again attack each other, or outside forces would take over and neither would win. But if they would allow, love could conquer all.

THE KINGS' CONTESTS

After the wall went up, King Jorvik and King Simon set about to build their families and their armies. They decided if they could not attack one another, surely, their children could. They each took a bride. Jorvik from among the strongest damsels. Simon from the wise.

**BY PROCLAMATION OF THE KING OF NORTH MORLAIX: A CONTEST.
TO FIND THE DAMSEL OF GREATEST STRENGTH. IN FIVE DAYS' TIME.
A TOURNAMENT.**

The winning damsel was built like a fighting horse. She could carry the knight's charger five paces. She could throw a boulder from the top of the castle keep and hit the ocean. Her name was Ingrid, which means "hero's daughter." She was exactly what Jorvik was looking for in a wife.

Not to be outdone, Simon also held a contest.

**BY PROCLAMATION OF THE KING OF SOUTH MORLAIX: A CONTEST.
TO FIND THE DAMSEL OF GREATEST INTELLIGENCE. IN FIVE DAYS'
TIME. A TEST.**

Simon's bride would come from amongst the most scholarly. He devised a series of puzzles and riddles to be solved. The damsel who could solve them all would become his wife. The winning damsel not only solved all the riddles, but also made up her own that Simon himself could not solve. Her name was Margaret, which means "pearl." She was truly precious to Simon.

Jorvik wanted to produce a strong heir, Simon, a cunning one.

Jorvik's wife was fertile and bore him seven sons shoulder to shoulder. Delighted in his growing army, he directed their training exercises next to the Dividing Wall in the castle courtyard. He had them growl and grunt and throw heavy objects to make sure their strength could be heard.

Simon's wife was barren. She used all her cunning to study herbs and balsams to help her bear a son. As the ivy climbed its way up the wall, time slipped by and Simon had no heir. He suffered through years of hearing the army train next door. With no children of his own, Simon poured all his energies into training his own knights from the populace of South Morlaix. He knew as soon as his old friend Jorvik stepped down from the throne, the sons of North Morlaix would scale the wall to attack. He must be ready.

King Jorvik watched his sons train each morning. He was proud of their strength and skills. The only fly in his mead was that to win the entire kingdom, he would have to abdicate his throne to one of his seven sons. He was not ready to do so. The eldest was eager to step forward as the new king. Daily he stalked back and forth before the Dividing Wall like the caged panther he had once brought home from a trip to Africa.

The second, third, and remaining sons trained only because they enjoyed the exercise. They knew their older brother would take over the throne.

"You did not make the bulls-eye. Try again," commanded the eldest son, Herrick, cracking the small whip he carried with him.

"I was close enough. If t'were a man he'd be dead already." The second son threw down his bow. "I'm going fishing." He

stalked off, taking youngest sons numbers six and seven with him. The boys were not yet teens and were much more interested in catching supper than in practicing under Herrick the Panther's critical eye.

A BOY AND GIRL ARE BORN

Then one day there was the unmistakable cry of an infant from the South. The Panther stopped in his tracks, cocking his head. This cry was coming from the castle, not from a village brat.

Royal trumpets sounded.

The Panther's lip curled in a smile that looked more like a grimace. "Finally, my competition has arrived." He reached back into his quiver, pulled out an arrow, and shot into the Dividing Wall. "Until we meet."



IT WAS TRUE. A son was finally born to Simon and Maggie. There was great celebration. With an heir at last, Simon pinned his every hope on the healthy eight-pound creature. He named the baby boy Manny, meaning "powerful warrior."

"How long I have waited for you," whispered King Simon.

Unfortunately, Queen Maggie, exhausted from the difficult nine months of carrying the child and after a strenuous labor, lived only hours after her bright boy was born. On that final day, her skin turned pallid and the bed sheets became soaked with perspiration. Her fever would not come down and no one knew what to do, least of all King Simon. He paced at her footboard while she held the sprawling infant.

"Manny, dear," she said to the baby. "My time with you is short. I must give you a lifetime of love while I can." She kissed his little baby nose. "You will never remember me. But my prayer for you is to unite the kingdoms the way they once were and bring peace to the land." She kissed his little baby fingers. With

trembling hand, she removed her jeweled cross necklace and laid it on the boy. She looked at Simon with pleading eyes. "Don't let him forget me," she whispered. "I want him to know how much I wanted him." She kissed his little baby toes.

Then Maggie died holding Manny in her arms, the king holding them both.

A ruddy nursemaid removed the squawking infant from his mother's arms and gave him to the king. Choking back his tears, he brought the infant to the window to show the waiting citizens their prince.

While holding the babe in view of the citizenry, he unfurled the child's banner. The people whooped and hollered. They knew the stakes of the divided kingdom. Did they not hear the next-door army practicing every day? The prince was their hope as well.

Then, with a cry of despair, the king unfurled the black banner of death. The cheering and dancing stopped. The people stood and stared. No! Their beloved queen? It could not be. Yet there were the two banners side by side. One signifying life, the other death.

The king knew he should speak. The people needed his strength and his wisdom. But he had nothing to say. He backed away from the window until the people couldn't even see his shadow.

Not knowing what to do, the people sat on the ground and waited. King Simon didn't know what to do either. For the moment, he did not care that he was king over only half a kingdom. For just a moment he thought only of his family and what he had lost. But then, something inside him shifted. Realigned his thinking. He had to preserve what he had left.

He knew the Panther stalked at the wall. He felt his enemy's restlessness grow every day. He knew his son would be in grave danger. The Panther would have no heart for a baby. Could he make a double funeral? Would it be convincing? Then he could

send his son into hiding—away from his family to be raised as a commoner.

Wishing he had his wife's wise counsel, he collapsed into a chair. He knew now, more than ever, what a pearl he had in Maggie.

While he was mulling over these thoughts, the nursemaid approached him, wringing her hands.

"I 'ave a sister, newly widowed. She bore a babe yestreen and 'as no way to care for 'em. Bring 'er into the castle to raise her son like he was the prince. A decoy, as it may."

The king stared unblinking at the nursemaid. Could he put someone else's babe at risk? He was shamed for even thinking it.

"'T'would be her 'onor to serve the king in this way," said the nursemaid, sensing the king's concerns. "'Tis for the safety of the prince."

What the king didn't know was that the nursemaid and her sister were conniving, greedy women. The nursemaid herself did not wish to leave the luxury of the castle, and she had been looking for an opportunity to bring her sister in to share the wealth. It was not the kingdom's best interests she was concerned with, rather, her own. And what she was sensing was not the king's feelings, but opportunity. Once the king went along with her plan, he would be hard pressed to restore the real prince. The entire kingdom would recognize the nursemaid's nephew, Nigel, as the prince of South Morlaix.

"And where would my boy go?" asked the stricken king, studying the baby, marveling at his tiny ears. Grief flooded his mind and he had a hard time putting thoughts together.

Smiling wide, the nurse revealed her crooked teeth. "Thar be a fine tailor and his wife in town. They 'ave not been able to 'ave children, much like yerself. He wonts an apprentice. They would be most agreeable. And 'is wife would be sure to hide the true nature of the wee babe." She stroked the prince's cheek.

The king nodded, relieved that he wouldn't have to send his son away. He could watch him grow up. But what kind of rela-

tionship would they have? Could he risk not letting his son know he was the prince until he had grown into a man? Simon pressed his hand to his temple to stop the throbbing. Then the babe awoke, screwed up his face, and let loose a piercing wail. The king wished he could scream too. Instead, he handed the child to the nursemaid with all the ideas.



NOT LONG AFTER, in North Morlaix, the cry of the eighth child born to Jorvik's wife rang out. This time, a girl.

The king stared at the babe. He was so used to having sons that he felt a bit awkward. His wife, too was a little shocked.

"It's...a girl?" The king set down the sword he had brought with him. He had given each of his seven sons a sword at their birth. *What did one give a girl? A shield mayhap?*

"We can't call her Thorwald like we planned," he said.

Ingrid laughed.

Jorvik had never heard his wife laugh before. Once she started, she couldn't stop. Her mirth was catchy and soon Jorvik also broke out in joyful noise. The child's birth was the beginning of other changes in North Morlaix.

After much debate and suggestions from every member of the family and the court, the babe was named Gressa, meaning "pearl." This made the old nursemaid raise an eyebrow, but she kept her tongue silent.

No one stepped into the castle without a quick look in on Gressa. Presents piled up. Fancy linens and imported silks. Gold jewelry and precious gems. Not to mention grain and chickens from the townsfolk.

Ingrid kept company with plaiters to learn how to entwine Gressa's hair when she grew a lock or two. The princes of North Morlaix came to coo and make funny faces at the baby. In all, Gressa brought out a softer side of her family. In everyone except the Panther.

THE CRY THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

At first, the king and queen rejoiced over their daughter. It was like they had never had a child before, the way they doted on her. One day, when they were strolling in the garden, they heard a baby cry on the other side of the wall.

In King Simon's private garden.

In response, their baby girl cried and reached for the wall, as if to comfort the child on the other side.

The hearts of the king and queen grew cold. The young prince of their enemy. A boy on one side, a girl on the other. Too many kingdoms had been lost over forbidden love. They decided then, that the two must never meet. King Jorvik had a lock installed on the princess's room in the tallest tower.

The Panther observed what happened in the garden of North Morlaix.

"My father's response is weak," he seethed. "He allows a coal to burn." Then, planting stories filled with fear and uncertainty, he convinced his father that the princess must be protected from all harm.

What he really meant was that his own future was to be protected at the cost of his sister's freedom.

King Simon, realizing the implications of destined love, also took measures. He handed back his true son to the tailor's wife and told her never to bring him secretly to the castle again. His son would not be killed by his rival's son, nor beguiled by their daughter.

From my home in the ancient rowan tree I watch it all. Those knights—turned kings—think they have outsmarted me. They don't know everything.

I left a hole in the wall.

CHAPTER 1



Manny Taylor struggled up the ramps from the unloading docks in South Morlaix with arms laden down by leathers and furs. A shipload for his father, the tailor, had come in from Copello early that morning and Manny had insisted on carrying double his share. His hands had already been made strong from tailoring, but he needed arms fit for the glory of arm wrestling at the castle gate.

"These look like furs from our forests," Hoxham said, grunting in disgust. The older apprentice resembled a dandelion puff—skinny and tall with a shock of blond hair sticking out in all directions.

"Likely they are," Manny replied. "Sold on the mainland, and then resold back to us for a price."

"Tis not fair they have more forest than we."

Manny grunted. Poor Hoxham kept a long list of complaints about the injustices of living on the south side of the Dividing Wall. The North had better water, better trees, better houses, better craftsmen. All this knowledge, yet Hoxham had never stepped foot in North Morlaix.

"But we have more fields. More food," Manny countered. He, too, had lived in South Morlaix all his life. The coastline provided

an abundance of fish, the fields were plentiful with wheat, and the villagers were a friendly lot who looked out for each other.

"I'd rather have more meat, meself."

Manny shrugged. "At least you don't have to suffer through a North Morlaixan winter."

Hoxham rolled his eyes. "Whoever made up that joke isn't the least bit funny. There ain't no difference between their winter and ours."

"I think that's the joke, my friend." Manny chuckled.

"It's still not fun—" Hoxham collided with someone rushing in the opposite direction. They knocked each other to the ground with leathers landing in clumps all around. In a flash, Hoxham was up, fists at the ready. He'd lived in the streets as a castle rat before Manny's father had taken him in as an apprentice and was always quick to fight.

Amidst the leathers lay a portly fellow, struggling to rise while spouting insults back at Hoxham.

Prince Nigel. Manny groaned. *Not again.*

Face red with rage and exertion, the downed prince pushed his stout figure off the ground and took a swipe at Hoxham's head. "Oaf! Look where you're going."

Hoxham easily ducked and was about to take the prince from behind in a headlock when Manny leaped between them and received an elbow to the eye.

Manny grabbed onto Hoxham's arm and deftly flipped him to the ground, pressing his boot to his friend's collarbone. He nodded politely at Nigel.

"Fine spring day, Prince Nigel. What brings you to the docks?" Manny grimaced as he pressed his foot harder into his friend to keep him down.

Nigel glanced up at the tallest tower on other side of the wall dividing North and South Morlaix. The rooms where the Tower Princess was rumored to be confined.

"She's not lookin' at you," Hoxham said before Manny could mash his face into the dirt.

Nigel scowled but looked away from the tower. "Sir Fletcher arrives today for the land granting ceremony. I'm here to welcome him," Nigel said in his attempt at sounding superior. He replaced his hat, the one with an overly large purple plume, onto his princely head.

Knowingly or not, Nigel emphasized *land granting ceremony*. The one thing Manny desired but could never have if he remained a simple tailor. His own estate. Had the prince known Manny's ambitions, he would have gone out of his way to rub it in.

The prince scowled at Hoxham, still struggling under Manny's grip. "One word from me and the dungeon floor will be the only land you see." He spat in the dirt by Hoxham's nose before speaking to Manny. "Try to keep your dog under control." As he walked by, Nigel cuffed Manny on the side of the head.

Manny's head snapped back, but he showed no sign of reacting to the pain. Ever since they were kids, Manny had been the castle target until Hoxham came along. And once Nigel had targeted someone, it was like giving royal permission for every other bully to take a shot. Maybe that was why he felt so beholden to the scruffy boy.

Biting his lip, Manny pressed down with all his might as Hoxham strained against his grip. "Not now," Manny insisted. "I'll get him in archery practice."

Once the prince was safely out of view, Manny let his friend go.

Hoxham sprung up, hands balled into tight fists. "I don't need your protection. Our prince is worthless. North Morlaix has the better prince, too." He kicked at the leathers Manny was piling up.

"I wouldn't call the Panther the better prince. Maybe the more dangerous."

"I wish the pestilence on him." Hoxham cursed but accepted the pile of leathers Manny shoved at him.

"You do not. No one wishes to see that evil return to the kingdom."

Hoxham shrugged and fell silent. But Manny could tell by the way his friend was clenching his hands that his fight with the prince was not over.

Manny had planned to even the score with a well-placed arrow accidentally-on-purpose shot through Prince Nigel's outrageous hat, but didn't have the opportunity. Archery practice was called off to allow the squires and knights to attend the ceremony. Since Manny was neither squire, nor knight, simply a volunteer to help protect the land he loved, no one told him.

However, finding himself alone at the field and with his bow at the ready, he fired off a quiver full of arrows. With each pull back, the bow stretched taught, straining his muscles. The twang and thump of the arrows hitting their mark was soul-satisfying, so much more so than sewing a leather for an ungrateful merchant.

He really should be back at the shop instead of practicing on his own. The shop that was crammed from floor to ceiling with linen and wool, leathers, and the odd piece of silk in readiness for tournament season. He shot another arrow. *Zing.*

The shop that battered his ears with the noisy chatter of the apprentices rising ever more loudly over the constant hum of his mother's spinning wheel at the back or the clackety-clack of his father's loom. Another arrow zoomed into the target.

The shop that stifled his senses as if he were wrapped in wool and sewing near a blazing fireplace in the heat of summer. *Zip. Zip. Zip.* He was out of arrows.

A quick glance at the sun told him he had indulged too long in practice. With his guilt caught up to him, he retrieved all his arrows and headed back to the shop. But not via the most direct route. Instead, he circled past the castle keep, ears open to catch the land announcements.

Most knights wanted flat land for raising crops. The land on the island was limited and the choicest plots were already gone. But there was some land, he had heard, beyond the forest and bordering the sea, that was too rocky for planting grain. This was

the land he dreamed of. Though a modest dream, it was out of reach to someone of his station.

The doors to the castle were closed, as were the windows. All except the one around the corner, in the back. If he were quiet, and the king spoke loud enough...

"You there!"

Manny squinted up unto the parapet. A guard was aiming an arrow at him.

"Step away from the keep and be gone with you."

"Right." Manny held up both hands while backing away, keeping them far away from his own weaponry. He lowered them once he rounded the corner into the open space before the market.

One day, he would be inside that ceremony. He would gladly take the land that no one else wanted. And once he had been given his plot of land, he would find a way to plant rowan trees. He would bring South Morlaix back to its former riches, when people from around the world traded for the famous rowan balsams. He nodded to the guard, who was still watching, before double-timing it to the shop.

CHAPTER 2



On the other side of the wall, the only daughter of the king and queen of North Morlaix fussed with her embroidery. With an angry tug, Gressa pulled a tangled thread through the fabric, ripping a hole in the center of a tree in her picture.

“Argh!” She threw the fabric—hoop, needle, and all—across the tower room. Her long gold-red braid fell forward, brushing her arm. She flung her hair back and huffed.

Teacher and nursemaid, Old Anne, set aside her own handiwork. A spinster, she was thin, gray-haired, and with deep blue eyes. Her stiff joints meant she couldn’t move very fast, but she more than made up for her physical limitations with her quick mind.

“Tsk,” Old Anne said quietly as she shuffled over to the handiwork and examined it. “I will show you how to fix the hole, but we best try it when you are of a better humor.”

“My legs cramp sitting here in this small room. Why must I be a prisoner when I am a princess?” Gressa sprang from the window seat and marched around the room, which wasn’t as small as she let on. The Dividing Wall that split the castle in two did not touch her room, though it did render a back staircase all but useless. “My brothers are free to roam where they want. Axell

is in Copello. Varin tends a farm outside the gate. Jutland goes hunting every day, and the rest tag along with whoever they want. 'Tis not fair."

Old Anne glanced out the window, setting her lips firm. "One day, you will be free. Do not lose heart." Her eyes brightened. "Shall I ask if you can take a daily turn about the grounds?"

"Daily? I can't imagine anyone agreeing to that."

"Leave it to me."

Taking a turn was not much better than being confined to the tower. The rare time she was allowed outside, she had to walk with a chaperon and follow a prescribed path that kept her as far from the Dividing Wall and as many people as possible. And, more often than not, Herrick's black gaze followed her every move.

What she craved was the sun on her face and fresh air in her lungs.

"Ask about the garden again. Just a small patch for my herbs. I would rather tend that in the morning and take a turn in the afternoon. That doesn't seem like too much to ask." Noting Old Anne's expression, she added, "Please, if I may."

The sorry plants lined up against the window needed to be planted in the ground where they stood a better chance at survival. She hadn't found the right balance of sun and water for them in the clay pots, and expected them to start dying off one by one if she didn't release them into the wild soon. Healthy specimens were needed if she were to experiment with the healing recipes in the newest book her brother Axell had sent from Copello.

Axell was her conspirator. He didn't like that she spent so much time in the tower either. Whenever possible he sent her things that would draw her outside. Just when she'd run out of ideas, he'd send her something new to ask Old Anne about.

As a young girl, she had the run of the castle. When she walked among the stalls on market days with her mother, the townspeople sprinkled her with gifts, so glad they were for a

princess. But ever since she had grown tall and added curves to her silhouette, she'd been tucked away in the tower.

Old Anne was hidden away with her, and the nursemaid didn't seem to mind, no matter how surly Gressa got. Yes, Gressa was grateful for the company, but she sensed that other girls didn't live like she did. She overheard the servants talk about going out into the countryside, or down to the sea at the base of the castle to swim. Gressa had never swam in her entire life. Or maybe she did when she was little and had forgotten.

"Do I know how to swim?" she asked Old Anne.

"We took you when you were a wee thing, but the waves scared you. Your mother thought they should keep you in the water until you got over your fear, but your father scooped you up and brought you home to eat sweets. You never went farther than knee-deep after that."

"Hmm." Gressa suspected she knew which parent Old Anne agreed with.

She leaned out through the open window as far as she dared. Her chambers in the tallest tower gave her a tiny, tiny view of where the knights of South Morlaix conducted their exercises. If her brother ever found out she spent hours watching the knights from the rival kingdom, surely, he would move her to a room closer to the dungeon.

Daily, she positioned herself at the corner of the window, pretending to need the light for her embroidery. Every time Old Anne's back was turned Gressa would give up any pretense of handiwork and sit and watch the young men exercise.

The cursed prince was usually in the practice field. Laziest thing she ever saw. Last in all the races, could barely hit a target, and cared more about his doublet than wrestling. For someone destined to meet her brother in battle, he wasn't trying very hard. So much for looking to South Morlaix for her rescue.

Gressa had already asked Axell about the princes in Copello, but he said they were all spoken for. His tone implied not to press

him further. Who would want to rescue a princess they'd never seen or spoken to?

But there was one young man who showed promise. He was tall and with hair the color of beach sand. Quick with the bow and arrow, he always out-performed the others. But more than that, he was kind. They were too far away for her to read facial expressions or hear what they talked about, but from her tower she'd become a student in body language. You could tell a lot by the tilt of a head or a shift in a torso.

The prince stood the way she expected him to, based on the descriptions she'd overheard about the haughty boy. Feet shoulder-width apart, arms crossed, chin high, looking down on the others.

Old Anne had told her that King Simon of the South was a kind man. She couldn't understand why the prince was not more like his father, unless he was so scared of the Panther that he'd already given up.

The kind boy, on the other hand, was always in motion. He was the first to start a task, often the winner of a race, and frequently joked with those around him. Would that he be a noble and maybe, just maybe, they could have a future together. She imagined sending him a letter tied to a starling and having him storm the castle, taking her far away from Herrick the Horrid.

The boy from South Morlaix was, of course, the root of the problems she had with her embroidery. Today he was the only squire at practice and it was like a gift to her to watch him and only him. But when she lost sight of him, it was like her dream had also disappeared and her confinement closed back in on her. She didn't think she could take one more day, let alone years of living under Herrick's restrictions. And there was no use talking to her mother or father. The entire kingdom was bent on preparing Herrick for the Great War.

She snorted. Based on what she had seen of the prince of South Morlaix, it would be a short war. By the time war came, she

needed to be ready with her healing balsams, if not for her own people, then for those over the wall.

“Did you say something, my pearl?” Old Anne stood expectantly.

Gressa shook her head, still staring out the window. No, she was just dying inside, that’s all. There was nothing Old Anne could do.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Tower Princess is the first in a new series I'm calling *The Lost Fairy Tales*. These tales are original stories, not retellings. Though, like all good fairy tales, they will draw from familiar tropes that make fairy tales fun to read.

