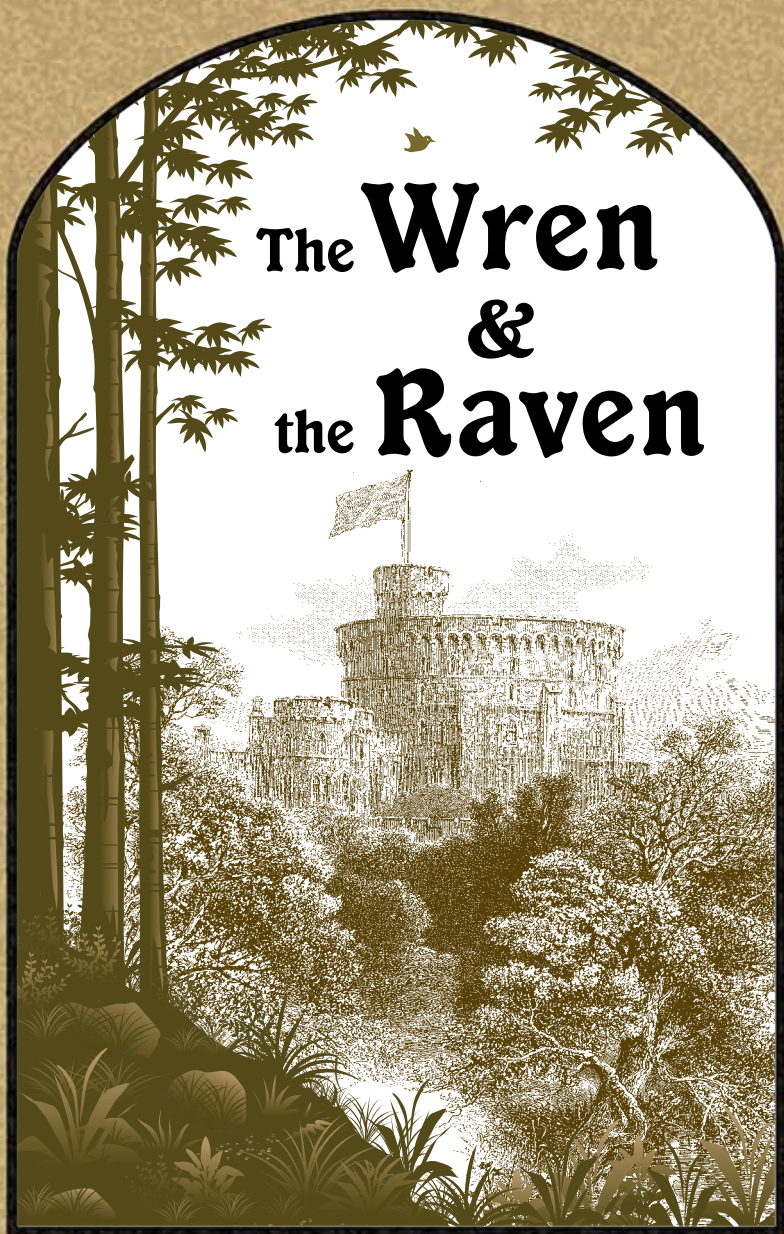


Once Upon a Journey ♦ I



SMSMITH

Sometimes the journey we want,
isn't the journey we get.

~ adapted from various "want, get, need" quotes ~

Once Upon a Journey ♦ I

**The Wren
&
the Raven**

SMSMITH



ZANTHYM HOUSE
Mountain View♦AB♦CA

Published by ZANTHYM HOUSE
PO Box 115, Mountain View, AB
Canada T0K 1N0

Once Upon a Journey ♦ I

The Wren & the Raven

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Cover design & book layout by SM Smith

Cover illustrations:

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Inside Illustrations:

Wren, woodpecker, lark, hawks, penguin © Dover Publications, Inc.

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First distributed in PDF ebook format through Scribd.com

(2013/03/01)

Distributed with minor revisions/corrections through <https://www>.

zanthymhouse.ca (2018/01/16)

ISBN: 978-0-9918690-1-5 (2013 ebook)

ISBN: 978-1-928083-02-3 (2018 ebook)

Dedicated to my sisters, Bicki & Marcheta, for their enduring encouragement.

Some day [perhaps today] you will be old enough
to start reading fairy tales again.

~ C.S. Lewis ~

When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret
and would have been ashamed if I had been found
doing so. Now that I am fifty, I read them openly.
When I became a man, I put away childish things,
including the fear of childishness and
the desire to be very grown up.

~ C.S. Lewis ~

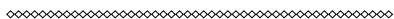


The old-fashioned stories of *Once Upon a Journey* take place in a mystical suzerain known, from ancient days, as Noo. Noo was founded by wandering survivors after a great cataclysm. Over time, various independent kingdoms—Zuukyn-Pristal, Gebble, Ohahdi, Tribbles, Hatuu, and so forth—were established; yet, through a centennial Grand Council, the various kingdoms continued to nourish a common heritage, language, and memory. Noo has endured for many millennia. Its *Chronicles* contain more journeys than can ever be told.

SMS ~ 2013

Journey ♦ I ~ *The Wren & the Raven*

A *wren*, bewitched and exiled by a rejected suitor, returns against impossible odds to attempt the rescue of her imprisoned love—bewitched as a *raven*.



Once Upon a Journey series:

I *The Wren & the Raven*

II *A Prince to Crown*

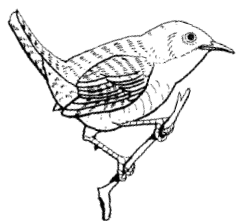
III *The Day the Rains Came*

IV *Journey to Welkindorn*

V *Belle of the Ballroom*

VI *The Pelican's Gift*

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The Wren & the Raven

QUINDA could scarcely believe her ears. Had the woodpecker really said it was only twelve furlongs to Zuukyn-Pristal?

"Yes sir, missee," the woodpecker said again. "Twelve furlongs, truly 'tis. And I should know. Yes sir, missee, I should know."

Quinda ached to ask a thousand questions, but she dared not ask even one. Indeed, she could scarce keep from fainting, but to faint would prove disastrous. As sure as she did, this nosey, noise-maker would peck all through the forest how a scruffy wren had just fainted in the strangest way for no cause at all. Then of course, FooSOR would hear of it. And that would bring the disaster.

It was bad enough to have been spied as she sought a hidden place of rest. Even worse—to be trapped now in exposed conversation so near the place where that awful FooSOR had begun his wickedness.

Suddenly Quinda knew why she had not seen any of her own kind in many furlongs. It could only mean that FooSOR had banned her likeness from every place he could. Thus, whatever the dizziness in her head, she must not succumb to it. She must not give excuse for this woodpecker to even notice she was a wren.

The friendly woodpecker chattered on, but Quinda could not keep focused on his headaches or his itches. Again her thoughts took wing—pestering, perturbing thoughts she had carried through seven years of wind and rain and dreadful terrors to the impossibility of being but twelve furlongs from where it had all started.

Would Hydr be alive? After all his sufferings, would he want anything to do with her? I wasn't to blame, was I? Quinda asked herself for the

umpteenth time. I didn't encourage FooSOR. I was only polite. I thought reason would prevail. I thought FooSOR would see how much I loved Hydr. I thought he would honor my wish. I thought—

"Hey," the woodpecker suddenly exclaimed, "wrens are outlawed twice ten furlongs from Zuukyn-Pristal! Why, I can't believe, sitting here chatting and you, an outlaw, and you didn't even say."

"O-outlaw," Quinda squeaked, fearing that all she had endured would now come to naught because this silly woodpecker had blundered into her.

"Yes, outlaw," the woodpecker said, "since seven years, till we now scarce know a wren from a raven."

With that the woodpecker clutched his downy belly in a fit of chuckles such that he nearly fell from his perch. But he chuckled alone because Quinda was just too angry.

This knocker's heard some garbled story,

Quinda fumed, or he wouldn't have said wren and raven in that way, for it was not funny what had been done those seven years ago. No, not funny at all.

At last the chortling woodpecker calmed himself enough to notice Quinda's somber stare.

"Sure are a sober one," the woodpecker said, "though sober is quite proper perhaps—yes, sir, missee, being an outlaw and all. Why, I'd wager you've not even heard our story."

Quinda was sorely tempted to set him right, but as she desperately wanted news of Hydr, she schooled her tone to innocence and said, "Wh-what story?" though how she expected this silly creature to know anything of use she did not know. Hydr was probably still locked away just as FooSOR had threatened, where he could see rolling hills and blue sky but be double barred against their freedoms.

Quinda had often wondered if Hydr preferred death to his prison, but in spite of everything, she knew she preferred his prison because hope

of some miraculous escape had been her driving force in returning against all odds.

When the woodpecker finally broke his brief, staring silence, Quinda felt a tremor pass to the end of her weary wing tips.

"My, oh, my!" the woodpecker began, only to fall into a second, squinting silence. At last he seemed to decide.

"'Tis impossible!" the woodpecker exclaimed, and then in a rush of words, "Oh, missee, please, I beg forgiveness. I didn't mean, laughing and all, but my sweet, I must laugh or I should cry, for you see, I guard your Hydr's caged sorrow ten days of every twenty, and I—"

But Quinda heard no more, for in such incredible news she could not help it. She fainted dead away through cushioning branches to the forest floor. The next she knew, this woodpecker, who knew far too much, was fanning her vigorously with his wings.

"Just as I just suspected!" the woodpecker said when Quinda finally fluttered to her feet. "You

have to be Quinda," he whispered.

"Q-Q-Quinda?" Quinda said, trying to sound confused.

"Well, never you mind," the woodpecker said, "save you are dreadfully unlawful, as much as impossible! And might I further say, terribly, horribly at risk."

Quinda did not dare admit to anything—not even to her great fear at sitting so exposed in a forest clearing.

"You must be m-mistaken," Quinda stammered. "I am j-just an ordinary w-wren."

"Of course, could be," the woodpecker said, "but come, I know a hidden spot straight above." So saying, he took off and Quinda gratefully followed to find herself in the perfect seclusion she'd been seeking when the woodpecker had spied her.

When they were cosily settled in the tree's snug cavity, the woodpecker began, "Well, my sweet, if you are just an ordinary wren, as you say—" He paused, quirked a brow as though

awaiting some confession, so Quinda spread her cramped wing tips in a gesture of confusion.

After a deep sigh, the woodpecker continued. "Well then, I shall tell you of the incredible wren and raven of Zuukyn-Pristal." The woodpecker's eyes brimmed with tears as he swallowed a sob to say, "Which dear, incredible wren is lost these seven years."

The woodpecker's downy cheeks quivered as the tears coursed down to splash about his feet. It seemed but another ploy to invoke her tearful confession, so Quinda kept an expressionless silence. As she had suspected, the woodpecker's unsuccessful tears dried within the space of another sigh as he scratched upon his throat with a wing tip, and said, "Well then, I shall tell the story, but if I should mistake in any part, I could happily be corrected?"

Not by me—not here, Quinda thought as she sought to control her thudding, anxious heart.

The woodpecker began his tale in a low, sad tone. "Seven years ago," he said, "there lived

near the grand castle of Zuukyn-Pristal, a most dazzling maiden.”

“Not dazzling!” Quinda cried, forgetting her vow to let the story proceed unhindered. “I mean—I’m sure she was merely pleasant. She would not think—” Quinda paused not knowing how to cover her blunder, but the woodpecker proceeded unconcerned.

“Oh, all right,” he said, “this maiden then was most, *most* pleasant to gaze upon.” But from his emphatic tone, the maiden remained dazzling.

Quinda sighed for dazzling made her feel even more guilt for all that had passed. But she knew she had been merely pleasant, and if FooSOR had thought her dazzling—well, he didn’t see much as it really was. That seemed to be his whole problem and that was why in his jealousy, he had changed her into a small, brown wren, the most undazzling of all, in his mind.

The woodpecker’s tap on her shoulder called Quinda back to his narrative. “Now, pay atten-

tion," he said. "You might hear something important. You see, there also lived near the grand castle—on quite opposite sides—two magnificent sons of the kingdom. They were much alike in aspect and intelligence; yet very, very different. And since you may wonder, I shall tell you how, for there is none can tell you why."

That is surely true, Quinda thought, and I must know it more than anyone.

The woodpecker leaned one sloping shoulder against a crinkled knot and crossed his spindly legs. When he was comfortably settled he continued. "Now, this was—still is—the sad difference," the woodpecker said, "for you see, one gave himself to labors and the other to leisure. One honored others while the other aspired to honors. One studied to control himself and the other to control all else. One provided covering for the poor and the other for his pretences ..."

Quinda listened, amazed as the woodpecker's speech became more grand and poetic in his telling of differences. The more he spoke, the

more there seemed something strangely déjà vu about this silly woodpecker. There was much in his manner that tugged at her memory—like his ratta-tap tapping on her shoulder to focus her attention.

"You get my vision?" the woodpecker said, tapping away.

"I do," Quinda said, though her own memories were vision enough—enough to make her shudder—for here she was, back in the very place where FooSOR had done his spiteful deeds; and she, now, but a poor wren.

"Well, to shorten this longish story," the woodpecker said, "these two lads both fell for that most, *most* pleasant maiden, and she, but for one of them; and guess which one it wasn't."

"Foo—" Quinda began before catching herself. But again the woodpecker pretended not to notice her wide-eyed, confused silence.

"To say fool is to come mighty close," he said with a chuckle, "for his name is FooSOR."

He paused again, squinting at Quinda and

then, with a heavy sigh, said, "Thus, I hate to confess this, but that dreadful FooSOR is my present employer—"

Quinda's wide eyes popped wider as the woodpecker hurried on. "Which I assure, attaches not one whit of loyalty, for I tell you true, there are many in this kingdom, as me, would free that fine raven we are forced to guard."

"You—w-would do that?!" Quinda squeaked as her frantic heart thumped crazily, puffing breast feathers outward in a furious rhythm.

The pecker's brow puckered in sadness. "But wishing does no good, sweet wren," he said, "for we have pondered every possible means to his freedom these seven years, but alas, it is impossible."

Quinda closed her eyes to breathe steadiness into her heart as she quietly said, "I do not know impossible."

The woodpecker's eyes brightened as he exclaimed, "Perhaps so, for a wren come so near Zuukyn-Pristal is impossible! More so, should

this wren be our Quinda—taken to places unheard of. If my shy, timid Quinda could return, then indeed, nothing should be impossible!”

In hearing those forgotten, teasing words—“my shy, timid Quinda”—the recognition came. Why this crazy, old woodpecker could be none other than Ruudles, the horse-master and best whittler of Zuukyn-Pristal! At least that was what he had been the last Quinda knew. But then a lot could have changed besides me, Quinda decided. Still, this was someone she could trust.

“R-R-Ruudles?!” she said. “Is that really you?!”

“Well, it sure has taken you a spell,” Ruudles said. “Yes, it’s me, and sorry not to tell you straight away, but FooSOR forbids us birds to speak our past; proves nasty if he discovers it. Has his little random decoys, detentions, and queries so



we tend to keep a tight beak, so to speak. Save I've just said some rather risky things just now—being pretty sure it was you and all."

Quinda's eyes brimmed with tears.

Ruudles hurried on. "Now, now don't look so distressed. Being a bird is not so bad. I have done some right great whittling, as good as I ever did. So don't go feeling sorry for me on top of everything. Besides, some say I brought it on myself. Told Foo to his face that even the spoiled son of a High Prince was not above the law, though I sort of knew he mostly was; so you see the result. We've just had to make the best of it—as best we can."

"Has he changed everyone?" Quinda asked.

"Oh, no, no," Ruudles said. "He seems to know there might be a limit to his father's tolerance, so it's just a few dozen or so, plus us who guard Hydr. We're at our duty ten days on, ten off. And I'm just off—on my way home I was." He shrugged. "It's not my wish, but FooSOR keeps us on a tight string as it were. And for now, we

don't seem important enough for anybody to take up our case."

"Is he still so spiteful?" Quinda asked, fearing the answer.

"'Fraid so," Ruudles said, "which means your dear Hydr's lot has not improved one whit these seven years."

"Oh please, tell me about Hydr," Quinda cried. "Is he all right? Is there anyway I can see him? Is—"

"Whoa," Ruudles said, thrusting his wing tips against a rush of words. "I know you have come so far, and I know there must be purpose to it, but the simple answer is—there is no way at this time—at least none I can imagine—not without us all dying in the process."

"Does Hydr remember me?" Quinda asked trying to hold back the tears.

"Oh, he remembers," Ruudles said, "though he rarely mentions you. You see, the hawks report it and then he is caged more tightly, five days for every mention, and I can vouch, he's a

quick learner.”

“Is he really all right?” Quinda asked.

“Well, some days he’s frustrated and sad,” Ruudles said, “but many days he’s full of hope, sometimes even humor— though, I tell you, until this moment I couldn’t imagine how he ever thought to see you again.”

Ruudles shook his head vigorously as if to dislodge some lingering confusion. Then he crouched low, closed his eyes, and began to rock into deepest concentration. It seemed a long time to Quinda as he swung between bouts of rocking and head-shaking, but in the end his frenzied focus did not seem to help.

Ruudles groaned and said, “Quinda, I know what you said about not knowing impossible, yet even when I think and think on this—twelve furlongs, or even one, may not differ from ten thousand. We all know what FooSOR is like, and it’s not that I wish to dishearten you, but only to be sensible.”

“Ruudles, had I been sensible these seven

years, would I be here now?" Quinda asked.

"I hear what you say," Ruudles said, "but we have six guards on every shift and some are hawks in the unkindest sense. So you see ..."

"So, I see—it may not be easy," Quinda said, "but there has to be a way."

Ruudles looked toward the sinking sun. "Well, if there is," he said, "I'd best not be caught dawdling on my way home, so it seems the best course is to leave you here for now. I'll be back, I promise, before five days. Hopefully, by then, we shall each have thought of something."

Quinda cried out in alarm. "Five days! Alone! In this cramped place?! Ruudles, I should go crazy."

Ruudles shook a feathered finger and fixed her with a piercing eye. "If you don't stay hidden," he said, "you will go somewhere all right—caged or just plain dead. You get my vision?"

Quinda did. She had known it anyway—how lucky she was that Ruudles had found her and not some hawk, as he had said. She had tried to

be so careful, but being so close and yet so far was starting to feel impossible.

Ruudles was now in a hurry. "Here, lass," he said, "you keep this." So saying he vanished to reappear with the net sack he'd been carrying when he had first spied Quinda. "My sweet fir-gen bakes me more dainties than is descent for any bird," he said, "so eat these as you will and try not to worry. We shall just have to think of something. I'll come as soon as I possibly can."

Then with a few cautions and hurried good-byes, Ruudles sailed off to the west, his parting words still ringing in her ears, "Remember Quinda," he said, "we shall not think impossible."

With Ruudles' departure, Quinda felt the exhaustion of her day rush in. Suddenly, there seemed no better course than to accept her quiet seclusion, rapt in the sweet smell of Fir Ruudles delicious dainties. They proved scrumptious beyond description. But then, as usual, in the lonesome quiet, the plaguing memories flooded in.

It had been the most terrible evening of her life those seven years ago when she had invited FooSOR to a final meeting. For two years, despite her many refusals, FooSOR had persisted in his lover's pursuit, till in desperation, she had asked the Zuukyn-Pristal council to help in convincing him of her feelings. But the council had refused, saying it was a private matter—that she, Hydr, and FooSOR would have to settle it amongst themselves.

Hydr had said, "We do not need FooSOR's consent. We do not need his blessing. We make our plans. We live as we choose. If FooSOR has a problem, it is his. If he makes it our problem, we deal with it as best we can. But trying to appease him will solve nothing. It will only give him a sense of power he does not have. For now, he is but a nuisance."

But Quinda desired peace. She didn't want anyone, not even FooSOR, to be angry with her. At last Hydr had agreed to her plan. "Against my best judgement," he had said.

So it was that with her reluctant Hydr, she had gone to meet FooSOR to explain for the last time that she loved Hydr, that their wedding was set, and that FooSOR would surely find another to love if only he would let himself.

But somehow, in FooSOR's machinations, they had found themselves in the grand aviary, alone with FooSOR and a black-cloaked stranger.

When Quinda had opened her mouth to speak, FooSOR had laughed his dreadful laugh. "Save your pretty speech," he had cried, "for my friend here has a prettier one. But first, I shall have my say. You, Quinda, shall be plainest of the plain such that none shall ever love you as I. And you, Hydr—you shall be black as your heart is in devising this treachery against me."

Quinda had barely managed to cry out, "You are wrong!" before strange words and smoke and spitting static engulfed them. The next Quinda knew, she was being held high in a punishing grip. Looking down she saw the contorted face of FooSOR. He was shouting and gestur-

ing hysterically, almost forgetting he held her in his tightening fist. Twisting as best she could, Quinda saw the focus of FooSOR's attention. An enormous, squawking raven was crashing itself against the aviary roof. It sounded bone-crushing and terrible.

"Get it! Get it! Whack it if you must," FooSOR shrieked as his robed companion frantically waved a long-poled net high in the air. The entire aviary careened and screeched in raucous chaos. Suddenly the raven swooped down. FooSOR dove to the ground and Quinda fluttered free—but only for a moment. The wizard's short net swished down and instantly she was caged.

As Quinda watched, FooSOR flailed and cursed at the frantic raven. But FooSOR need not have been so openly villainous for there was no way out for any bird. At last, the raven perched at the aviary's highest peak and commenced a despairing, croaking cry. The wizard, now calm and composed, gazed intently upward, mumbling, till gradually the raven's cries choked

off, and keeling from its high perch, it fell dead weight into the wizard's reaching net.

"Is it dead?" FooSOR asked in a rasping tone.

"Just a trifle mused," the wizard said, laughing as he thrust the unconscious bird into a waiting cage.

"Good," FooSOR said. "It is well you did not spoil my excellent plans. Now, you will spread the news—how that deceiving, thieving Hydr has borne FooSOR's darling away against her will. I have set evidence for even the most unbelieving, and when I return—"

The wizard interrupted. "When do I get my reward?"

"When I return, my good fellow," FooSOR said. "I do not have time to see to it now. I must leave at once in search of them and when I return from my ill-fated rescue, I shall take possession of this black-hearted thing, and then you shall get your treasure and title. But I want this thing alive and well. I want it to live—long past any hope."

"But I thought you meant to—" the wizard began, but FooSOR interrupted.

"I've changed my mind," FooSOR said. "I have a far better plan."

The wizard, who craved to know all things, said with subtlety, "Such a plan can be?!"

"Such will soon be," FooSOR said in haughty tone, "when this freedom-loving blackguard is caged; when this fearful, timid wren is cast into all that freedom allows in a far off and terrible place. Oh, yes. At length, they shall both die in their respective prisons. They shall imagine how dreadful it is for the other; and they shall live in despair."

"But you don't know—" the wizard began, only to be interrupted again.

"I know what pierces deep," FooSOR scoffed. "Why, just ask this wretched wren what she would wish; *then* tell me what I know 'n *don't* know."

The wizard cocked his head toward Quinda and all Quinda's thoughts seemed to flow into his speech.

"What you have done is bad enough, FooSOR," Quinda cried through the wizard's lips, "but if you love me, as you say, keep me caged wherever you like, but please, you must let Hydr go free. He cannot endure the cage as I. Please. Even I will marry you if only you will restore my Hydr and let him go free."

"Bosh," FooSOR exploded. "You think I should live with that? I should restore him for some second-hand song? I am not a fool, you foolish bird. No, you shall come with me in my despairing search of you and when I find the perfect spot, I shall set you free as a bird—though it shall not be in a place where they love birds, I can assure you of that."

"Please, please," Quinda cried again through the wizard's lips. "Would it hurt so much to do this one thing? To let Hydr go free?"

"No, my dear," FooSOR said and laughed. "The whole problem is—it shall not hurt enough. I should far rather look upon you, even as a wren, than him, but you would always have hope of

something if Hydr were free and that I cannot have. There is no better means to eat you both through with despair than to set you free as a bird beyond any hope, and him captive beyond every hope.”

FooSOR had smiled his dreadful smile. “You see, I can trust you to never return. But Hydr, I cannot trust. He is only safe from hope, tethered in a cage.”

With a few parting words to the wizard, FooSOR had carried the grieving wren out of the aviary. Her last sight of Hydr had been of his limp, black-feathered body lying in a cramped and rusty cage.

That was the worst thing Quinda had endured—even than all else in her travels. It was worse than the monstrous snake that had slithered so close to her perch she had seen half-way to its tail before her wings had lifted her to safety in the midst of a monkey’s shrieked warning. It was worse than the endless days of floating, sodden

and near death upon a tiny bark raft across endless waters till the sun and sand of a miraculous beach had revived her. It was worse than lying helpless with a broken wing as a golden-haired boy stood to cast his second missile of destruction. But that time a tearful girl had scooped Quinda up and mended her wing and nursed her while a raven-haired boy stood guard and defended them against his angry, golden-haired brother. It was during those days of mending that Quinda had wept most. The raven-haired boy was so like her Hydr and the golden-one so like FooSOR. Was this the pattern everywhere?

That was the closest Quinda ever came to giving up. She had almost accepted the gilded cage and the safe alliance with her rescuers, but the raven-haired boy had finally convinced the girl-child to set the mended wren free—though for days Quinda had perched within the branches of an ancient oak that hugged the castle wall. It proved the most ambivalent, despairing time of her journey. Even now, she wept to remember

what she had given up to fly on toward this unknown end—this seemingly impossible pursuit.

By the third day of her hidden confinement, Quinda was fully recovered from her exhaustion and bursting to do something more than just think. But what could she possibly do? Every plan she could imagine seemed fatally flawed—with death the inevitable outcome for everyone, though if any creature died to help her, she would surely live to endure the guilt. It was a deeply despairing time.

By evening of that third day, Quinda, in her anxiety to do something, almost considered forging ahead in a one-bird convoy of surprise. Except, she knew, the surprise would wear thin over twelve furlongs, and long before Zuukyn-Pristal she would be a captured, if not fatally-wounded, wren.

She was just settling in for another long night when a soft “yoo-hoot” at the make-shift door of her refuge so startled her she sat bolt upright

into a protruding knot. Clutching her head she waited with her heart thudding in fear. When the scratching began, so did visions of things too dreadful to relate. Then she heard the gruff whisper.

"Quinda, are you in there?" the voice said. "You're supposed to be in there."

The voice was not Ruudles' by any imagination. The voice continued. "Ruudles sent me, so answer lass. I should not give another hoot—not with so many ears out here."

"W-w-who are you?" Quinda whispered.

"Name's Tüssa," the voice gruffed, "and I've got news, if you're up to listening."

"Oh, I am," Quinda cried.

The gruff voice spoke again. "We've a lark prepared to put you up, eight furlongs in. An old chum of yours, she says, so we're to move straightway, if you're up to it?"

"I g-guess so," Quinda stammered, a little afraid about trusting these bird strangers, chum or no chum.

"OK," Tüssa said, "let's get going then. No time to waste."

The creature started to say, "I'm an owl, just so you'll know" but she had scarce begun before Quinda poked her head past the bark covering of her refuge. The unexpected sight of piercing, yellow eyes in an ear-tufted face was too much. Quinda shrieked and toppled backwards in unbalanced fright, clasping her heaving breast with trembling wings.

Tüssa thrust her V-browed face close to the tree's small cavity. "Sorry, Quinda," Tüssa whispered. "I sure wasn't meaning to scare you."



Quinda scrambled to her feet and hopped to perch upon the cavity's edge. "Well, you're not quite the worst fright I've ever had," Quinda sighed, somewhat exasperated at herself.

"I'm believing that," Tüssa said, "for when Ruudles tells what you must have endured!"

"How did anyone come to know?" Quinda asked as she smoothed her ruffled feathers.

"When FooSOR is in his cups, he forgets himself, so Ruudles has learned a fair piece about a lot of things," Tüssa said. "But that's all one long story, and since we have a dangerous piece to travel, I say, we get underway."

Quinda began trembling anew, but this time it was in wonderment for this night would bring her within four furlongs of the place she had fought with her whole being to reach. Surely, surely, she had not come so far to fail.

Tüssa broke in upon her wandering thoughts. "I've never smuggled before," Tüssa said, "so I sure hope you've the stomach for this."

Quinda turned in the direction of Tüssa's nod and there upon a tree limb lay a red-smeared rabbit-skin. Quinda clutched at her downy throat in instinctual alarm, but Tüssa whispered. "It's fake—there's a pocket inside."

Pocket or not, the idea of being in an owl's claws sent shivers chasing along every tiny nerve in Quinda's small body. But with a gargantuan effort, she forced her instincts down and did what she knew had to be done. She hopped to the limp rabbit and scooped inside. She was determined to prove herself equal to anything required to reunite with her beloved Hydr.

Amazingly, the body pocket was lined with satin and smelled of roses, which was indeed blessed fortune, for it was only in such comfort that Quinda kept her sanity as Tüssa's claws gripped into the rabbit skin. With a little bounce, they were airborne.

It took just moments for Quinda to wonder if wrens knew how to fly at all. Tüssa's flight was so angelic Quinda could have fallen asleep—were it not for those dreadful claws that encircled her body and the gripping curiosity swirling about the identity of that "old chum."

Surely, surely, it couldn't be—? No. She wouldn't even think of it.

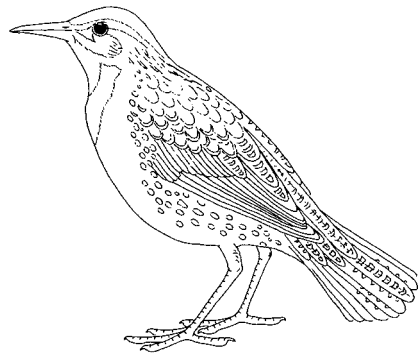
Time seemed to fly too, for with unexpected swiftness Tüssa began her smooth descent. With a muffled hoot she swooped down into a rocky cavern. At least Quinda imagined a cavern for the drafting air felt cool and damp.

Tüssa lay her strange burden upon the cavern's hard floor and immediately Quinda wriggled toward the rabbit's mouth, hoping to relieve her claustrophobic anxiety.

"No, no, just stay quiet," Tüssa whispered, and right away the sound of wings and a twittering voice filled the air.

"All's clear," the voice chirped, and in the lilt of that beloved, though strangely accented, voice, Quinda forgot her instructions.

"Vaussi?!" Quinda cried as she tumbled pell-mell from the rabbit's mouth. But instead of her dear childhood friend, she saw, hopping in



a bright patch of moonlight, an ecstatic yellow-breasted lark with twinkle-filled eyes.

"Vaussi? Is that you?" Quinda cried.

"Sure is," Vaussi twittered. "It was bound to happen, for you know me. Though never, never before today, was I ever so thrilled to be a lark. You, dear, darling Quinda. You have done the impossible!"

It was a somewhat awkward embrace, with wings and feathers all awry, but they managed it—with sobs and tears of joy, all round.

Too soon, however, glaring, stark reality intruded again.

"Vaussi, if we're all birds, how can we ever succeed against FooSOR's power? It just seems hopeless, now," Quinda cried, feeling suddenly disheartened.

"No, no—birds fly. It can be most useful," Vaussi said, ever the enthusiastic optimist.

"But Ruudles told me of the dreadful hawks," Quinda said, voicing the worry that had plagued her since she had learned of them.

"Well true," Vaussi conceded, "but with care—we shall flip FooSOR head to tail before we are done."

"Does this mean you have a plan?" Quinda asked, feeling a stir of excitement.

"Still thinking," Vaussi said twisting her wing in a so-so sign. Then winking at Quinda, Vaussi added "though if it comes to it, we might just have to wing it."

"Good grief," Tüssa exclaimed. "Am I to leave this sweet thing in your charge?"

"Right you are, and perfect it is," Vaussi chirped, still as cheerful and nonchalant about the most serious of things—just as Quinda remembered her. Though frankly, it now made Quinda a trifle nervous, for this was life and death and not the pretensions of Vaussi's amazingly gifted stage improvisations.

"Vaussi, I think you must remember—" Quinda began, only to be interrupted as usual.

"Quinda, Quinda, would the fates have brought thee so far for us to botch it? I think

not!" Vaussi exclaimed in her best theatrical manner, concluding with a flourishing bow.

"Vaussi, please, this is not some grand—" Quinda began again, but Vaussi cut her short with a startled cry.

"That's it! I have it! 'Tis come—like a flash! Why Ruudles and I muddled and stewed for three days and here it is—smack dab before our eyes! Why even, you, Tüssa, the wise, were at a loss. And here it is!—the most incredible plan!"

"Well, out with it," Tüssa said, "and I shall be the calm, reasoning head."

"Oh, this is pure theatrics," Vaussi exclaimed. "It has nothing to do with reason. And when it works—oh my! it shall prove so brilliant, FooSOR shall burst."

"This does not comfort me," Tüssa said, echoing Quinda's unspoken feeling.

"Oh, comfort, pooh-pooh," Vaussi said. "Where is the comfort these seven years? It's time for a little show!"

"Vaussi, in sound, prudent, wise conscience,

I cannot—" Tüssa began, only to find her regal, prestigious self just as brusquely interrupted.

"We don't have much choice," Vaussi exclaimed. She turned to Quinda., "I hate to dash off, but this is your bed," Vaussi said as she whisked Quinda to a grass-laden crevice. "Try to get some rest as there might not be much time after tonight." She continued, "And remember too, we'll be needing your fine stitching skills, so nimble up those wing tips, if you can."

Vaussi hopped away in unconcealed delight leaving Quinda wide-eyed in the moist darkness. Quinda felt she should insist on hearing the theatrical plan, but the astonishments of the past hour had caught up with her. All she could manage was a stuttering, "but ..., but ..., but ...," till Vaussi's final instructions cut her off.

"We'll be back in a flash," Vaussi called through the narrow fissure, "so remember, don't make a sound. Sometimes I have unexpected visitors and it would ruin everything if word of you gets out. So take care—we're off and away."

The next words came fainter as Quinda heard Vaussi say, "Come, Tüssa, we'll lay it all before Ruudles."

Quinda heard Tüssa's deep mumble and strained her ears for the least hint of what lay ahead, but all she heard was Vaussi's cheerful twitter. "Oh Tüssa, I tell you—lighten up—life is a lark." At the swish of wings, Quinda heard Tüssa's deep mumble again and then silence.

Quinda wished she knew whether fear or gratitude was the feeling for the moment. Granted, Vaussi was one remarkable bird, as it were, but—

But what? a voice said in Quinda's mind and she realized there was nothing to follow. Not one of her fears about a Vaussi idea had ever come to pass. Vaussi had always been a roaring success, adapting as freely as a bird on the wing. And here she was—a bird in fact. No wonder FooSOR's curse had fallen as it did, Quinda thought, for Vaussi's favorite saying had always been, "Oh, lighten up. Life is a lark."

But frankly, it had not seemed larkish to Quinda for a very long time; not like those days when she had sat stitching splendid costumes while Vaussi practiced her high drama from sunrise to set. Oh, those had been the days!

In the pleasure of such memories Quinda tried to lull herself to sleep, but however much she tried, her mind kept shifting to Vaussi's unknown plan and to a niggling doubt, that said, *This is real life, Quinda. This is not one of Vaussi's plays.* And the little doubt would not leave.

Quinda strained to read Vaussi's mind from afar, but there was not one plan—not one theatrical show she could conjure that would change anything in the slightest. How could anything ever return her or Hydr to their human form? And now she thought about it—being so close to Hydr and all—what good was it? How had she ever imagined that seeing Hydr would be enough? It was not going to be enough at all. If FooSOR had only known, certain death would have been to let them live within distant sight

but without power to speak or touch. For her part, Quinda was sure she would have died.

The worrisome night seemed endless, but at last, morning light began to creep along the cavern floor. Yet still, there was no sign of Vaussi or Tüssa.

It was hard to tell time in her confinement, but pangs of hunger told Quinda it was past noon when finally she heard the sound of wings. She almost called out, but then she heard a strange voice twitter, "Morning, Vaussi. My, that is some burden you have there!"

"Oh, the best," Vaussi cried. "Life is just the best."

"Well, what is all that stuff? You planning a party or something?" the voice said.

"Oh, much better," Vaussi said. "I have this great idea for a great show; and strange it is, how I was, this very moment, thinking of all the enormous work and stuff, and who should I see but your dear self, and I says to myself, why

Dritzi is just the bird to help with all the—”

Quinda heard the sound of wings and then she heard Vaussi’s voice rise as if she were calling to someone. “Dritzi, ‘twouldn’t take but a fortnight or two.” And then a long whistled call, “Driiitziiii—”

In no time, Quinda heard Vaussi winging her way in and merrily singing, “How lucky, how lucky, how lucky, we are.”

As Vaussi deposited her burden, Quinda scrambled into view. “This is such fun,” Vaussi cried, “for here I was wondering how the deuce to keep gossips like Dritzi away and in two shakes, the word is spread. I tell you, some things work out far better than one expects.”

“I pray it all does,” Quinda sighed as she eyed the huge bundle Vaussi had somehow managed to collect and transport.

“Think success—and this should help,” Vaussi said as she rummaged in her bundle to drop a slab of dark bread at Quinda’s feet. Vaussi continued, “That sweet firgen of Ruudles’ makes the

best molasses bread in the whole of Zuukyn-Pristal. Why I would fly—”

But this time, Quinda interrupted. “Vaussi, how many, exactly, know about me—being here and all?”

“Exactly three,” Vaussi said. “You see, Ruudles feared to tell anyone, even his good firgen, but when I found him that very evening of your coming—to tell of this weird dream I’d just had about you, why he thought—”

“Dream?” Quinda interrupted again. “What did you dream?”

“Actually, I’d rather not tell,” Vaussi said. “It was a little crazy. You know how dreams are, and—”

“This whole business is crazy,” Quinda cried, “so please, if it gives me some hope ...”

“Quinda, I wish you wouldn’t,” the reluctant lark began again, but Quinda insisted.

“Vaussi, I have survived more than you could ever imagine, so surely I can take hearing a little dream.”

After a disgruntled pause, Vaussi spoke. "All right, as you say, but remember, I said it was weird. And I don't remember everything, just that in the dream, I took you by the hand and then we—"

"By the hand?" Quinda cried. "Oh, Vaussi, you don't know how in all my dreams these seven years, I've always been human. So if you dreamt it too, it must somehow be possible."

Vaussi cut in. "Quinda, please. I said the dream was weird. Yes, you had a hand. And yes, you had a body. And you were dressed in flowing golden chiffon, but you—well to put it bluntly—you had a bird head. So what it means, who knows. So are you happy, now?"

Quinda didn't know what she was. This was not what she wanted to hear—to be trapped between two worlds did not seem much better than being confined in one.

"Vaussi, was Hydr in the dream? Was he—?" Quinda stopped. She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Vaussi gave an exasperated sigh and Quinda knew a rush of words was sure to follow. "Yes, Quinda, he was in the dream," Vaussi said. "And yes, he had a bird head, too. And yes, you lived in a lovely cottage. And yes, you had lovely babies, and no, they didn't have bird heads, and yes, it all seemed quite normal in my dream, and no, it doesn't seem normal when my eyes are open, and no, I wouldn't have told you except you insisted. So are you any happier knowing?" Vaussi stopped for she was all out of breath.

At last Quinda spoke. "Vaussi, if I can ever be with Hydr, I don't think it would matter what we were. As long as I could talk to him and touch him He could be an ostrich, or a—"

"Ostrich!" Vaussi cried, looking startled. "What made you say ostrich?"

"I don't know," Quinda said puzzled. "The image just flashed in my head, and the truth is—I would not wish him an ostrich at all. In fact the very thought makes my feathers prickle—in a quite scary way."

"Well, this is some strange," Vaussi said. "Until you said ostrich, I had totally forgotten, but in my dream, when you and Hydr meet—right after you touch—well FooSOR is suddenly there and in his rantings, *he* turns into an ostrich, and there is this pot of sand and, well, he dives his head into it and he turns into stone. Sort of like a potted ostrich. Oh, my!" Vaussi said, clutching her feathered head, "this is weirder than I remember."

"I wish we knew what it meant," Quinda said.

"Well, all I can say, is that if Tüssa can't figure it out—though I didn't remember about the ostrich part—but that has less sense than the rest; so if Tüssa doesn't know, there's no good in us sitting around scratching our heads. Our job is to get cracking on what we can, so eat up while I sort these materials and—"

Vaussi broke off at the sound of wings and Quinda scuttled into the dark crevice. Vaussi began to twitter merrily as she sorted her stuff

throwing heaps in front of Quinda's hiding place. But it was only Tüssa, all out of breath.

"I got us an appointment this very, very day," Tüssa gasped. "It was the most fortunate thing. So I hope your pitch is ready, Vaussi, and I sure hope—"

"Oh, fabulous!" Vaussi cried, cutting her off. "This is working. I feel it in my feathers. Come on out, Quinda. I guess you'll have to eat while you work for we have an appointment. So take a good look at me, Quinda. You must memorize every feather."

Vaussi hopped about preening and posturing. "Now, you see these materials," Vaussi said as she scampered on top of them. "You will need your best skill from all those years ago for I need a costume that looks exactly like me. Exactly, in every detail. Not a feather out of place, except a slit here in the underbelly that we can camouflage—about this wide." Vaussi held her wing tips apart, across the width of Quinda's body. Vaussi spoke on, "Oh, and also, another tiny slit, here

too, just under the right wing. And don't forget the see-through eyes. Can you do all that?"

"I think so, but Vaussi, what good is all this—?" Quinda began, but Vaussi interrupted.

"I'm sorry, Quinda," Vaussi cried, "I'll explain, I promise, the whole plan, everything when we get back."

"If we get back," Tüssa mumbled.

"Oh, Tüssa, lighten up. Of course we'll get back." Vaussi said. "What's he going to do—change us into frogs?"

"One never knows," Tüssa said. "If he doesn't like your idea—and I've said—there is much risk he will hate it, it being so close to the truth and all."

Vaussi scoffed, "Tüssa, Tüssa. FooSOR is so obtuse, he'd miss a flying fiddle."

"He would not miss a flying wren," Tüssa said.

"Well, that's not the plan, so why worry. Be happy," Vaussi said. "We have our unbelievable appointment."

Quinda had been listening, but comprehending very little, save this plan involved FooSOR quite directly.

"Vaussi, if we include FooSOR, it just seems to me that—" Quinda began, but again Vaussi cut in.

"We don't have a choice," Vaussi said. "Either FooSOR agrees to this or you can forget you ever loved Hydr. It's as simple as that, *unless* this amazing plan works."

"I wish someone would tell me what it is," Quinda complained, as she laid a wing tip upon her anxious breast.

"I will, Quinda. Honest, as soon as we get back, but we can't be late for this appointment," Vaussi said.

"If we get back," Tüssa mumbled again.

Vaussi turned to Quinda and asked, "Was Tüssa ever this bad when she taught us the alphabet all those—?" but this time Quinda interrupted.

"Fir Grooma?!" Quinda cried. "Tüssa is Fir Grooma?!"

"Oh, I forget. You weren't here when FooSOR had his other little rages," Vaussi said, laughing. "Quinda, meet Fir Tüssa Grooma. Fir Tüssa meet Quinda. Though it's not like you haven't met. So anyway, we're off, Quinda. Keep busy and listen for wandering wings, just in case. And wish us luck."

With those words they were off, leaving Quinda still gasping that dear, old Fir Grooma was Tüssa. Well, it was not like children ever knew the first names of their teachers, or were ever allowed to call them anything but Fir or Fin. But that sweet Fir Grooma had crossed FooSOR as well, made Quinda wonder if there were any humans left in the whole of Zuukyn-Pristal! But then FooSOR had never liked the alphabet, so Quinda guessed it was understandable why FooSOR's wrath had fallen upon dear Fir Grooma.

This wise owl was perhaps a blessing, Quinda decided, for Fir Grooma would prove the best wing control imaginable for Vaussi's grandiose venture—whatever it was.

With some measure of anxiety lifted from her mind, Quinda turned to her task, snipping and stitching as in the old days, save it took some adjustment to go from agile fingers to beak and feather tips. Yet it was amazing how quickly she adapted.

And for the ten-thousandth time, at the least, she murmured, "Thank You" to whomever or whatever deserved it, for the unusual spell, or maybe it was a flawed spell, or whatever it was, that had created the wing dexterity that had made her bird life so much easier. She had sometimes wondered if the wizard had done it deliberately, as a little gesture of spite against FooSOR's tyrannies and as an endowment of sympathy for the unfortunate bird-humans.

She had never seen such flexibility in the wings of natural creatures. It was one of the first things she had observed in Ruudles, Tüssa, and Vaussi. They too, had the same range of motion that was impossible for ordinary wings—almost as if they still had arms. Without it, her sewing

task would have been nigh impossible. As it was, she almost forgot she was a bird. She was just Quinda, the gifted seamstress and costume designer of all those years ago, crafting another marvelous creation.

She worked steady the whole day and even crept cautiously to the cavern's entrance as deep night descended, to continue in a patch of moonlight. There, with a yellow cloth draped about her neck, she listened carefully for wings.

Dritzi, who glanced once from a distant tree, never gave more thought to the yellow-breasted bird than to be grateful that Vaussi was not so boorish as to have chased her down to insist on a little help. But Dritzi had always been more spectator than participant, so she would just wait to hear news of the show and would be front wire and center if she had her way, as usual.

At last, just before the moonlight faded away, Quinda finished her brilliant work. By then she was so tired she could scarcely keep her eyelids open. She draped the beautiful costume upon

the back side of the piling of scraps and crept into the crevice. She fell into a sweet sleep knowing she had never made anything so perfect in all her life.

Quinda even dreamt, and though this time she and Hydr had wings, it did not matter, it was still the same wondrous dream. They were together and they were happy. It seemed so perfectly normal—until Tüssa woke her.

"Upsadaisy, girl," Tüssa whispered at the crevice opening. "Our plan's in full flight."

Quinda skittered out, rubbing her bleary eyes. "Where's Vaussi?" she asked, eager to show off her splendid creation.

"Ruudles was making a thing for her and she's gone for it," Tüssa said. "So, we've not a moment to lose. With the show set in three days, it—"

"Three days!" Quinda gasped. "What can Vaussi get together in three days? We always had eons before. We always did such splendid productions. We—"

Tüssa held up a wing against Quinda's tumble of words. "Well, you know FooSOR," Tüssa said. "Vaussi requested a fortnight, but FooSOR says it goes in three days or not at all. So of course, we had to accept three days which is rather fortunate in its own way because Ruudles will still be himself. But other than that, FooSOR swallowed it, bait and hook. I tell you—that Vaussi is something else. It was right chilling to watch, she was so good. And Ruudles, too, translating it all."

Quinda pondered a moment. "What do you mean, Ruudles will still be himself? And translating? I don't understand."

"Oh, I'm sorry, we keep forgetting you don't know all these things," Tüssa said. "See, five or six of the guards assigned to Hydr? Well, FooSOR, has it fixed so they switch back and forth between their bird selves and their human selves. Discourages conspiracies, he says. Keeps him up on all the bird talk—or so he thinks—and if ever he catches even a whiff of conspiracy, he says everyone will be birds forever and he'll change

their children into crickets and see if they like that. So you see, he's never had any trouble so far. Half-time human has proved a pretty powerful incentive. Ruudles can tell you that. But the funny thing is, out of FooSOR's suspicions, we have Ruudles who understands bird even when he's human. That's how we got the bird plays."

"The bird plays?!"

Tüssa chuckled at Quinda's outburst. "Need I speak more than the name Vaussi?" she said. "Her bird plays have become the rage, as they say. She uses script readers for the plain humans who find them so amusing, and when necessary, like today with FooSOR, Ruudles serves as her translator in helping with arrangements."

"Ohhh, Tüssa, no one has explained this plan, and if it means someone might get hurt, or that Ruudles will have to be a bird forever, or that his children will be crickets, or that—" Quinda began to cry.

"There, there, my dear," Tüssa soothed as she stroked Quinda's quivering back. "No one—not

one bird—is doing anything they don’t want in this. We know there is risk, but for us, it’s worth it. And anyway we’re old. Well, accept you and Vaussi—but we want to do this, Quinda.”

Quinda’s sobbings increased as she envisioned all the terrible things that were bound to come, all because of her.

“Quinda, listen,” Tüssa said. “Whatever happens, it’s worth the try. And as to crickets, Ruudles is sure FooSOR is bluffing because the only power his wizard seems to have is to make birds. Besides, it’s never been right to keep you and Hydr apart, especially not now. And with all you have endured—well surely we can endure just a little, too.”

“As if you haven’t already!” Quinda cried out between sobbing hiccups.

“Oh, it’s not been half bad,” Tüssa said.

“Well, before this goes any further, you have to tell me your plan, and then I shall tell you whether I can agree to it or not,” Quinda said, swallowing several sobs.

"Well, it's sort of convoluted," Tüssa said, dropping her tone to a conspiring whisper, "But it's so clever."

Quinda swallowed the huge lump in her throat. "And if FooSOR is *more* than clever?" she asked.

"He wasn't yesterday," Tüssa said loftily, "for he latched right to Vaussi's idea. See, he's not a regular theatre person, but Vaussi explained through Ruudles how she had discovered this incredible tragedy—about two love-birds—and how she wished to play the lead, but how we needed a big—really big—blackbird to play the tragic lover!"

Tüssa laughed at the memory of it, before continuing. "Well, Vaussi scarce had time to ask if one of FooSOR's big anvil workers could be turned into a monstrous blackbird for the play's run before FooSOR latched right to Hydr, just like Vaussi predicted. One of his nasty, twisted tortures. So, of course, Vaussi cried, "No. No. No. Hydr won't do at all." She pleads how he's

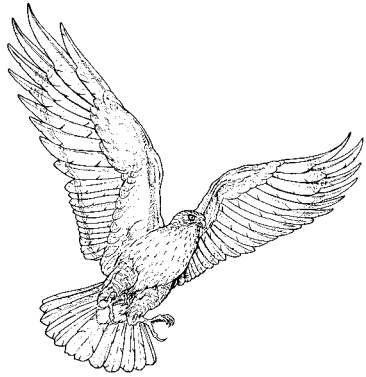
not black enough. And he's not big enough. And how he would be a lousy actor. And how it couldn't possibly be done without rehearsals. And how Hydr would never agree to it. And on and on."

Tüssa tapped her great forehead with a wing tip. "But, of course, FooSOR is immovable. He will string Hydr's chain, he says, to some millstone backstage, so Hydr can play his part, but not fly away. And FooSOR will have his best hawks sitting near, just in case, and on and on. Well, it worked just perfectly."

"Tüssa, what worked?" Quinda cried. "What good is Hydr on stage and chained, with hawks all around. I mean really, what is this supposed to accomplish?"

"Well, true," Tüssa said, "but with our success so far, the rest just has to work. There is no other solution. Ruudles will cut Hydr's leg band at just the right moment and you and Hydr will fly away together into the sunset. And our tragedy will suddenly become a FooSORian comedy."

"And Hydr and I will be torn apart in the sky by those waiting hawks," Quinda cried. "My idea was not to die together."



"Quinda, Quinda," Tüssa said. "You forget.

We have thought of everything. The water cups for the guarding hawks will be spiked by yours truly. And they will be—well, wingless for a time. They'll just perch there like fierce gargoyles and FooSOR will go mad."

"And his wrath will explode everywhere," Quinda said with a trembling voice, feeling very discouraged.

"As if it hasn't already?" Tüssa asked. "Besides, for the pleasure of FooSOR's instruction, most of us will be happy to suffer whatever comes in this."

"How will Hydr know any of this?" Quinda asked and then before Tüssa could answer she voiced her worst fear. "What if after all these

years, he's not that keen to go off with me?" Quinda said with a tremulous voice.

"If Hydr has changed then FooSOR is my sweet pupil," Tüssa scoffed. "Now, as for Hydr knowing anything? Well, we just hope he's quick on the updraft. There'll be no chance explaining anything as FooSOR insists he deliver the script himself—after it's proofed by some loyal hawk of his. So you're right, Hydr will not know of the off-script fly away scene until it's upon him, so as I said, your Hydr will just have to be quick."

"Tüssa, don't you think this is expecting a bit much—to think this can all happen just as planned?" Quinda said.

"I thought Ruudles said you did not know impossible," Tüssa said. "Why it is impossible we should fail."

Quinda could not help smiling. "Tüssa, I think you have been, too much, with Vaussi."

"Oh, when I am with Vaussi, I keep my cool," Tüssa said, "but when I think on this, I feel right weepy."

Tüssa brushed a tear aside. "Quinda," she said, "do you know what this old motherless bird feels? She feels just like some wren's mother."

"And do you know what I feel, right now?" Quinda said. "I don't feel orphan at all. I feel like the child of a wise and weepy owl."

"Well," Tüssa said, clearing her throat several times, "'tis best we get to work. What with the shortage of time, Vaussi wanted me to tell you especially how we'd have to hurry on the lark costume, and—" But Tüssa stopped short as Quinda pointed to her creation upon the pile of scraps. Tüssa could only stare, speechless with her beak hanging open.

At last Quinda broke the stunned silence. "Well, what do you think?" she said.

"Why ..., why it looks ..., it looks like Vaussi, with her innards gone," Tüssa finally gasped. "My, that gave me such a start!"

"Well, the one thing no one has explained is what this is for," Quinda said. "I mean, if Vaussi is the lead, what's with the costume that looks

just like her?"

"Well, actually, that was something Vaussi wanted to explain in person," Tüssa said. "You'll find it just a minor matter I'm sure. But in the meantime—till Vaussi comes—I have a copy of the script here. It will give you the flavor of what will be happening." Tüssa looked shy all of a sudden. "I hope you don't think it's too, ... well, melodramatic. It's my first try, though, of course, Vaussi helped with ideas and things."

Quinda began reading and knew right away that Vaussi was perhaps the only bird alive who could handle such a heart-rending lead role—not that Quinda thought the play bad, just very—she couldn't quite think of the word. But Tüssa was waiting expectantly.

"It reads rather ... tragically," Quinda finally said.

"Well, we hope so," Tüssa said. "We wrote it especially for FooSOR. Just what we thought he'd like."

Quinda read more. "Tüssa, do you really think

Hydr will do this? I mean, Vaussi was absolutely right. Hydr is not an actor, and this is so, ... well, so unlike Hydr."

"Oh, there is no question but what Hydr will do it," Tüssa assured. "FooSOR says we can trust his persuasions on that point, and I, for one, don't doubt him in the slightest; though Vaussi expects Hydr will be rather flat. But since that is not the point, and we can't have everything—maybe a few boos and hisses even—why worry? Hydr has endured more than that so I expect it won't stunt him."

"Well, at least Vaussi will carry her part," Quinda said, and in those words they heard the sound of wings. Quinda was just ready to scurry into hiding when Vaussi called out, "Just me. Just me," and flew in with a net full of sticks. Then just like Tüssa she perched for a moment, stunned and staring with open beak at the marvellous cloth bird draped upon the scraps.

"Yeeih," Vaussi squawked when she finally dropped the bulky net off the end of her open

beak. "I hope this is not some hint of the near future."

"Well, you asked me to make it exactly alike, but why is beyond me," Quinda said.

"Yes, well, I've been meaning to explain this and—oh good, I see you have been reading the script," Vaussi said, with a rather too light tone.

There followed a heavy silence. Quinda felt prickles begin along her feather-warmed skin. Her eyes began to widen in dismay.

"No, no, no, Vaussi. I make costumes. I don't wear them," Quinda cried out. "You can't think I would have the nerve. You can't think I would fool FooSOR for one moment. I would be shaking like a leaf. I would get sick right there. I would—"

Vaussi clamped Quinda's beak shut with two wing tips, effectively cutting off all protest.

"You would be marvellous, you silly thing," Vaussi said. "Do you think for an instant that Hydr would fly away with me? He'd be so confused he'd never get in the air—not unless he knows

it's you in that costume. And when he knows—this play will take off like you can't imagine. He will become an actor par excellence. And we shall have a stunning performance."

Vaussi threw her wings wide in demonstration releasing Quinda's beak.

"I can't," Quinda cried. "I'd be paralysed with fright. Beside this costume would drown me. I couldn't walk in it let alone fly. I'd wreck the whole plan."

Vaussi turned to their wise friend. "Tüssa," she said, "has it crossed you mind how this wren is too pessimistic for all she has been through to get here? And has it crossed your mind she thinks we haven't planned this well enough?"

"She's scared," Tüssa said. "It's not like this is merely a play for her, Vaussi. We have to remember that."

"Quinda, this is so well planned, FooSOR won't know what happened for a month of Zuukyns," Vaussi said. "This can't fail. You have two days to practice-fly this thing and you'll be top notch."

Ruudles has built a bird-works here, so it's just peddle your feet and rudder a bit with your tail and you'll be flying and walking like the true lark this is. So Tüssa, let's get this thing together while Quinda finishes that script. And we sure hope your mind is the sharp tack it always was, Quinda, because FooSOR just can't wait to see this little tragedy play out now he has the idea in his head. So it's work, work, work."

Of course, Quinda could not concentrate at all. It was such a shock. Finally she gave up on the script and watched as Ruudles' bird-works began to take shape, everything clicking and notching into place. Vaussi and Tüssa left her alone with her worries until the frame of the bird was complete.

"Come and try it for size," Vaussi said, and Quinda obeyed. Things seemed to be happening without her say.

It was a marvellous works—the pedals so smooth, the wings flapping in such perfect rhythm, and the feet moving just so when she

flipped the little lever that brought the wings snug to the body.

"Now comes the crucial part," Vaussi said. "We're going to take this apart piece-by-piece, and you, Quinda, will re-assemble it inside the costume, just the way it comes apart. You crawl inside and watch us through the slit and we'll hand you each piece. And you must be sure it's put together just this way."

At that moment Quinda began to feel a surge of hope. Maybe this could work! And so, with a renewed will she took to the task.

Just as the sun was setting they finished, and right away Quinda and Tüssa began having trouble knowing which was Vaussi and which was costume; especially with Vaussi's teasing, frozen silences.

Following supper, they took to the cavern floor for practice. After only a few glitches and stumbles, and spreading her wings when she meant to hop, Quinda was mimicking Vaussi with such finesse that Tüssa truly could not tell

them apart. The flying they knew would take a bit longer and entail more risk. It was very late when they took to the skies—two larks and an owl.

The only thought Dritzi had from her distant, drowsy perch was for the poor, unfortunate owl and lark who had been snared into Vaussi's service. And what with word spreading of the play coming off so soon, why the poor birds would be working night and day. So Dritzi counted her blessings and slept.

For two days the cave and night-sky rehearsals continued. Vaussi took Hydr's part so well it brought tears to Tüssa's eyes every time. It was almost more than Tüssa could bear to watch—thinking of the coming separation. In a way, this would truly be a tragedy, even if it all worked as planned. Too bad they couldn't boot FooSOR to the Zuukyn moon and see how he liked that. Oh well, some things were just not possible.

It was noon on the day of first performance when Ruudles came strolling across the meadow. Quinda was in the shadows of the cave practicing when she saw him. He was the first human she had seen since arriving in Zuukyn-Pristal. It rather startled her, but she could see how like the old Ruudles of whittling fame he was. She called to Vaussi and Tüssa who were feverishly finishing the scenery.

"Perfect, perfect," Vaussi said. "This is the last knot. So go to the entrance and greet him like you were me."

But Quinda was feeling her accomplishments. Taking to the sky, she flew out and landed on his shoulder.

"Well, it's about time, Ruudles," Quinda said in her best Vaussi voice. "We've been ready for hours."

Ruudles didn't even raise an eyebrow. "Now, Vaussi girl, I doubt that—not with the work you've been doing."

"We're just very good," Quinda bragged in

her Vaussi voice.

Ruudles ignored her self-adulation. "So how's Quinda holding up?" he asked. "Is she going to survive this without a nervous break-down like the rest of us?"

"I expect so," Quinda said in her own voice and Ruudles stumbled nearly dropping his basket.

"Good feathers," he said, "this really is going to work."

"I expect so," Quinda said, again in Vaussi's voice.

"Come, come, Vaussi, Quinda, don't rattle me so," Ruudles said. "I'm an old man with a heart and a vital part to play this very evening, so please, send me gently into this good thespian eve." He dropped to his knee in a fine theatrical gesture.

"Oh Ruudles," Quinda cried in her own voice, "I would send you a thousand, thousand days and nights of gentle bliss, if I had the power."

"Quinda. Vaussi. Whoever you are, you are

marvellous!" Ruudles said, rising. "I can't quite believe this."

"It's me," Quinda said, pushing a foot through the concealed slit and scratching upon Ruudles' twill shirt. "And your bird-works is just unreal."

"I'm seeing that," Ruudles said in awe at this thing they had created together.

"Ruudles," Quinda said, becoming serious, "I may not have another chance to thank you for all this. Even now there are just no words. I don't even know why I'm letting you all make this awful sacrifice for me. It's like I have to go ahead and that somehow things will work out. If I didn't have this strangest calm, I don't think I could leave you all to face what Hydr and I are running away from. I just want you to know, I'll love you forever."

Ruudles wiped a tear away. "Sweet lass," he said planting a kiss upon the yellow bird, "I shall love you forever, too."

When they reached the cavern entrance, a breathlessly eager Vaussi was hopping atop the pile of cloth and scenery. "We didn't have time to do everything, but at least this will look something like a play. I hope this isn't too much to carry."

"I'll manage," Ruudles assured, "but we best get cracking, as Vaussi's always saying, for the word is: We're to expect a big bird crowd. Seems a few have heard Hydr might be involved."

"Oh, dear, I hope that doesn't cause a riot!" Tüssa exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" Quinda cried. "Why should anyone riot against Hydr?"

"Not against Hydr," Tüssa said. "For him. See, despite FooSOR's outlandish story concerning you two and all, most every bird believes the caged raven is Hydr. The humans don't seem to have a clue, but the birds do and seeing Hydr uncaged, might just lend spark to who knows what. And that could throw a real loop into—"

"Hey, folks, folks!" Vaussi scolded, "Let's not scare ourselves. Don't you know—riots always

come *after* my shows, not during or before them? I promise you. Have I ever been wrong before? I ask you?"

"She's right," Ruudles said. "She's never been wrong, so there's no point in starting now, is there? So let's get crackin'."

Quinda squeezed out of the costume to make her final good-byes. As Tüssa turned, she saw Quinda with tears flowing down her downy cheeks.

"Oh, Quinda, you're going to make us all cry," Tüssa said, choking back her own tears. "And look at Vaussi, too. We shall look such a sight. Whatever shall people think?"

"They will think we are going to a tragedy," Vaussi said, wailing upon the last word.

It sounded so hilarious they burst into such hysterical laughter that Dritz nearly flew over to scold the lot of them for such raucousness. But on the off-chance they might need some last minute help, she opted for silent annoyance.

At last the foursome settled down and began their journey to the theatre circus with Quinda back in costume and carefully tucked in Ruudles' woven basket. Beneath her she could feel the hardness of the carefully wrapped tool that would make the cut for Hydr's freedom. Vaussi and Tüssa flew silently above.

As they travelled, Quinda knew she must not speak, but she could hear, so Ruudles whispered his final cautions.

"The first chance you get, Quinda, you must try to touch Hydr through the wing slit with your very own feathers. He must somehow get the message it is you inside without alarming anyone, for when I cut the clasp and shout 'fly' you must both be away in a flash. There can be no time for puzzlement. This is crucial. And if Hydr is as smart as I hope, he should give you a flying assist because this bird works is not quite up to Vaussi's usual speed. But even if there are glitches, I'm convinced this is gonna work. I feel it in my bones."

Me too, Quinda thought, despite the niggling fear that Hydr would never get the message.

"Also," Ruudles continued, "we don't intend that FooSOR should ever know you returned or that the lark was anyone other than Vaussi. We were all her dupes—we hope—and if you should hear of a famous larking in some far off place, well, it will probably be Vaussi. So don't you worry. She's not really unhappy about taking up adventures in another land. As for us, well we're happy too, whatever happens. And just so you know—if any of the hawks are able somehow to give chase—well, don't be alarmed if Vaussi shows up with a hawk or two of her own. She'll be disguised with a little face- and wing-black for her own safety, but she will keep you in her sights, and then she'll be off. So I guess that's about it. We're getting near the streets now, so it's farewell, and good-speed my dearest little friend."

Quinda could hear the hustle and bustle of the streets. She knew too, when they arrived at

the theatre circus. Through narrow cracks in the basket weaving, she discovered she could see a fair piece. She watched as Ruudles hung the scenery to the fussy directions of Vaussi. She watched in awe as Vaussi pretended to practice her heart-rending part with Tüssa playing the tragedy of the blackbird. And she watched as later the crowds began gathering, humans in the seats and birds upon the wires above.

Quinda thought it seemed a precarious place for the humans—to be right under the birds, especially considering the many careless birds she had encountered in her journeys. But it was not so precarious had Quinda known the penalty FooSOR promised for any errant or thoughtless bird. As it was, most of the birds that came to the plays had, at one time, been human, so they were most circumspect. No one had ever heard of an incident, so to speak.

Suddenly Vaussi came flying in, almost frantic. "Oh, Ruudles, I nigh forgot. I have this pot stored backstage and I need it. I need it out

front, at once. There at the side."

"Pot?" Ruudles said. "We never talked of any pot that I remember."

"It's just minor prop-eree. Extra stuff from an old play. Wishful thinking. I don't know. Call it what you will," Vaussi huffed as she shooed Ruudles backstage.

"Mercy, Vaussi," Ruudles said, "I call this heavy. What have you got in here—rocks for our stoning?"

"Sand," Vaussi said. "And don't ask silly questions, because I have nothing but a silly answer which I am not about to discuss right now. Just humor me, OK?"

"OK," Ruudles said. "OK, OK, OK."

Quinda watched as Ruudles staggered to the edge of the stage to deposit what could only be the most wishful of thinking. Poor Vaussi. She had clearly been working too hard.

The thing that finally sent Quinda's heart into spasms was the appearance of FooSOR at the far

corner of the stage. She knew him by his imperial manner because his appearance was quite changed. He was now rotund—his eyes peeking out from rolls of flesh. He gazed upward and following his gaze, Quinda saw twenty hawks, at the least, take their places high up between the ears of the stone horses that stood atop the theatre circus. Then it was that Quinda noticed the silver cups attached to the horses' ears and hoped that Tüssa had not forgotten her critical duty.



It seemed she had not for Tüssa was calmly sitting at stage-side gazing up at the hawks. But while Quinda's heart was beating wildly, Tüssa's was in slow rhythm as she willed those hawks toward unquenchable thirst. Quinda saw two hawks dip their beaks before her heart stopped in the sound of a drum-roll.

At the thundering drums, FooSOR twirled his cape in a grand fashion and strode on stage, followed by two burly anvil workers who carried a hooded cage and a heavy stone wheel. They passed within a breath of Quinda before vanishing backstage. It was almost more than she could bear. But focusing her whole will, she closed her eyes to the outward events and instructed herself to calmness, and to cycle through the play in slow motion. Gradually her heart beat steadied. In her deep concentration, she was but vaguely aware that Ruudles had moved her basket backstage; that Vaussi was making her scripted opening speech; and that Hydr had been uncaged and secured at centre stage.

So it passed that as the first applause sounded, Quinda was in a flow of strange consciousness. When Ruudles took her out of the



basket, she just spread her Vaussi wings and flew into her part.

There would be several narrations and sad, sad soliloquies before she could address or even approach Hydr. Vaguely she was aware of Tüssa reading as the narrator and of the script readers at stage right, translating for the benefit of the humans. That was one blessed thing in being a bird, Quinda thought, as one part of her mind seemed to stand apart and observe as spectator. Vaussi had explained how the birds did not need translators for bird or human speech; but at bird plays, the poor humans had to rely on the script readers. Yet the humans always came seeming to find great fascination in the bird plays. Vausi had said it was sort of "but-for-a-whim-am-I" morbid curiosity.

But whatever the motivation, the humans waited upon the script readers and swore at the bird twitter above if it got too loud. And this evening, there was one particular bird who was becoming quite loud.

"Can you believe this!" she was saying. "Why if I had known they meant to humiliate that poor raven, I wouldn't have come at all. How Vaussi could even consider such a thing! Why, if I ever speak to her again, it shall be a far sight too soon. And to think she had the nerve to ask my help and that I almost consented. And to think that Tüssa would or even Ruudles—"

A voice bellowed from below the speaker. "Shut your beak or I shall shut it for you." It was the voice of FooSOR.

"He will too, Dritzi," a neighboring bird whispered. "So shush. This could be interesting. You never know."

Dritzi looked down upon the balding head of FooSOR and flexed her tail threateningly. "A bird-person could almost forget theirselves," she said.

"It's not worth it," her neighbor said. "But I think this play is. There is something happening here. I feel it. Something strange!"

That seemed to silence Dritzi, but Quinda, in

her other mind, was remembering. Dritzi is Fir Dibble! No wonder she's a crow! She had threatened FooSOR enough times with her broom for tracking mud into her bakery, it was amazing she wasn't a cricket. So that must prove it, Quinda thought. FooSOR could not have power to make crickets for if he did, Dritzi would have been a swallowed cricket long ago.

At last it was time to turn and approach the tragic raven. With all her will, Quinda turned and played her part. Except that Hydr was not playing his to the script's intent. He said his lines rather flat as Vaussi had predicted—perhaps even flatter than flat—almost funny flat. Quinda had to bite her beak. This was not expected. Nor was his strange shuffle, for every time Quinda approached to touch him, Hydr moved away.

Oh dear, Quinda thought, if he doesn't shape up—if I can't get closer than this—this is going to be a tragedy indeed. Already there were a few twitters from the audience.

Ruudles came to the rescue. It had not taken

him long, listening and watching the wire moving backstage, to realize what Hydr was about. Hydr was bent on turning this tragedy into a comedy and that was not going to do—not with FooSOR all set for tragedy. So with alacrity, Ruudles put his foot down—right at the curtain—on top of the wire, and Hydr found his tether suddenly shortened. But he was not defeated.

Quinda spoke her line and in reply she heard Hydr skip his line and say the next so it was out of sequence and without sense. It left her almost speechless. She spoke her next line and Hydr said the one he had skipped. Quinda couldn't believe her ears. She tried again, and it was clear in Hydr's reply that the script's flow was not going to guide him in the least. There was nothing Quinda could do but carry on as if nothing were wrong.

But when he said, "My sweet chicken," in place of "My sweet lark," she nearly choked. And when in place of mournfully saying, "My beak is sealed," he said, "My wings are sealed,"

it was almost more than Quinda could do not to shriek, "This is a tragedy." But she could not risk their lives, so she said her lines and let Hydr say whatever came to his mind. Thus, with the script readers oblivious to Hydr's inventions, the weeping humans watched one drama, while the birds heard both.

Soon the birds were so overcome, they could scarcely keep their perches. Some were holding their sides. Others had feathers stuffed in their beaks.

At last, many could contain themselves no longer and fell gasping and hooting into the laps of sobbing, startled tragedians. The chaos could not be ignored. FooSOR stood and roared for silence. And in his roar, Quinda took her chance. Reaching out, she touched Hydr with her very own wing tip and whispered, "Hydr, it's Quinda. Please play this—"

But she never finished for between words, she heard the splintering of wood and the rending of fabric. Looking down she saw a tiny, crumpled,

torn costume at her feet and her human form wrapped in billows of golden chiffon. Looking up she saw Hydr in dark shirt and riding-breeches, and he was quick. Almost as quick as Ruudles who had dashed in to cut the metal clasp that had tethered Hydr for seven long years.

It all seemed to happen in a flash. Hydr was hugging her as if he would never let her go. But with her face pressed in view of the audience, Quinda saw FooSOR gesticulating wildly with his eyes bulging to near explosion—just before Dritz Dibble, in her plump human form, fell smack into him seating him instantly. Out of the mad chaos and untangling of body limbs, Quinda saw FooSOR rise again and in sudden terror, she pulled out of Hydr's embrace and forgetting, raised her arms and cried, "Fly, fly." But she was grounded.

"Hydr," she cried in terror, "we must run. Come, COME." But her pulling did no good. Though Ruudles had cut the clasp that had bound him, Hydr stood rooted to the stage,

staring out at the chaos. Hugging Quinda close to his side, Hydr said quietly. "No, let's indeed play this out. Don't you see something has happened? FooSOR has lost his spell. Look, there are no birds on the wire. That's the chaos. And look at the hawks."

Quinda looked and where there had once been hawks poised between the horses' ears, now there were men lolled upon the horses' necks oblivious to everything but the dreams Tüssa had inspired in their drinking water.

At the edge of the stage, Vaussi, Tüssa, and Ruudles were wrapped in each other's arms, engaged in a jig of joy—laughing and hooting as if they would never stop.

As her gaze swung back to FooSOR, Quinda saw him hopping in rage toward the stage and right before her eyes, in mid-stride, she saw him and then she did not; for suddenly, in his place, an ostrich came bounding onto the stage, shrieking and stomping. And where all FooSOR's shouting for silence had failed, this spectacle

succeeded. A startled quiet fell upon the audience. They became as statues—even those still wildly entangled. The only motions and sounds were in the ostrich.

Gradually, the audience began to think Vaussi had planned this too, and that it was supposed to be comedic. Soon great gasps of laughter arose at the spectacle of themselves and the amazing, thumping ostrich. Those who believed FooSOR had left the theatre were immensely relieved—now they could freely enjoy themselves.

At last, the enraged ostrich made a thundering pass down the stage and sank its squawking head into the pot of sand; and before their eyes, the once frantic creature turned to stone.

The audience sat amazed, and then suddenly the thunderous applause began. "Vaussi. Vaussi, Vaussi," they chanted, until she had to take her bows. Then "Quinda, Quinda, Quinda." Then "Hydr, Hydr, Hydr," till there was nothing to do but appease them with bow after bow, though most didn't have the first idea what had really

happened; except they were soon abuzz with joy as former birds and human friends fell ecstatically upon each other's necks.

After what seemed like a thousand shouts of "Welcome home," and hundreds of handshakes and backslaps, Hydr and Quinda turned toward the stage wings and escape. But first, with their arms about each other, they walked to the stone ostrich and gazed upon it.

"Vaussi dreamed this. It was so, so bizarre," Quinda said, and in so saying she suddenly remembered the other part of the dream. "Do I have a bird head?" she cried in fright. She could see that Hydr did not, but then—

"I'll answer you this way," Hydr said, and he kissed Quinda on her trembling mouth.

Again cheers rose from the watchers.

"So what do you think?" Hydr said.

"I feel wonderfully normal," Quinda said with a twinkle in her eye.

Vaussi's voice sounded behind them. "Come on, you love-birds," she said, "we're going to

have a party. Tüssa is nosing word to a few—and we're sending for Fin Doogur."

"Fin Doogur!" Quinda cried. "He's still alive?!"

"He told FooSOR to his face," Vaussi said, "that he, Fin Doogur, would refuse to die till he had performed a certain ceremony for a certain twosome; and if you want my opinion, he needs putting to rest. He's been a penguin seven years past his due—so we owe him the courtesy, right away, I should think."



"I am willing," Hydr said smiling at Quinda.

"It's settled then—for Fin Doogur's sake," Quinda said, smiling back and winking.

"Then let's get us out of here before this crowd decides they want a real play," Vaussi said. "It's going to strike them all too soon this wasn't quite what they came for."

Vaussi spoke true for as they hurried out they heard the word spreading. "Sure, this was some spectacle," one said, "but, when you ponder it,

what was the plot? What was the message? And that strange ostrich thing? What did that have to do with anything?"

"You're right," said another whom Quinda recognized immediately as Fir Dritz Dibble. "This is going to be very sad," Dritz said, "if Vaussi is taking to that new theatrical style. Nonsensical most of it, if you know what I mean."

"The surprise return of Quinda and Hydr after all these years was right touching though," her neighbor said. "Why, I even wiped an eye, if I don't say so myself. And what a grand way to have announced it."

"That was so fine," another said, "FooSOR sponsoring their return and all. But don't you think it strange he didn't stay for the end?"

"Maybe it was a surprise for him too," a fourth said. "Maybe, it was one of dear Vaussi's drama bombs—and I mean that, of course, in the splendid explosive sense."

"Oh well," Dritz said, "whatever happened, and I, truly, haven't a clue—it's all become very

confusing—except, FooSOR loved her himself, so maybe he just couldn't take seeing them back here, or together, or whatever it was—and so obviously happy. I only hope he forgets that sharp elbow in his eye. It wasn't like I meant it. It was the chaos and all. You know what I mean?"

At last Quinda and her companions were out of the crush, and when Quinda spied Ruudles, she almost flew to hug him in her joy.

"Did you suspect any of this?" Quinda asked through her tears.

"I hardly dared," Ruudles said, "but once in his cups, FooSOR said that you and Hydr could never touch or it would herald great disaster. I could never get more out of him, except that he hated that old wizard of his—said he was a double-crossing, conniving black-heart. So I just hoped—and nearly had to knock you silly, Hydr, to get Quinda where she could touch you just in case. And it worked beyond my wildest dreams."

"Or mine," Vaussi said. "Though come to think of it, I feel downright prophetic—'cause if ever I had a bird head, it's in here still. I feel I could fly!"

"So what's to be done with our new potted ostrich?" Tüssa asked. "Anyone have an idea?"

"They could be needing perching posts at the falcon farm," Ruudles said. "I'll inquire first thing in the morning."

"And is it going to be a glorious morning, or what?!" Vaussi cried flapping her arms like wings and skipping down the pebbled path.

Everyone knew exactly what she meant. It would be the most glorious morning ever in the kingdom of Zuukyn-Pristal.

THE END

Colophon:

Series: Once Upon a Journey ♦ I

Title: The Wren & the Raven

Author: SM Smith

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ISBN: 978-1-928083-02-3 (ebook 2018)

Adobe InDesign & Illustrator CS3

Title font: Kabarett D (URW Studio)

Text font: Shannon™ (Holmes/Prescott-Fishman))

Cover design & book layout by SM Smith

Cover illustrations:

Woodland border © John Woodcock / iStockphoto #7363839

Castle scene © Dover Publications, Inc., DoverPictura.com

Inside Illustrations:

Wren, woodpecker, lark, hawks, penguin © Dover Publications, Inc.

Owl © Nova Development Corporation

Raven © feoris / iStockphoto #141973334

Circa 14,600 words

DO: 1993/06/22

DC1: 1994/01/18

DLR: 2018/01/15

Published by Zanthym House (2018/01/16)

PO Box 115 Mountain View, AB Canada T0K 1N0

zanthymhouse@gmail.com

First distributed as a PDF ebook at Scribd.com (2013/03/01)

Distributed as a PDF ebook at <https://www.zanthymhouse.ca>

(2018/01/16)

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