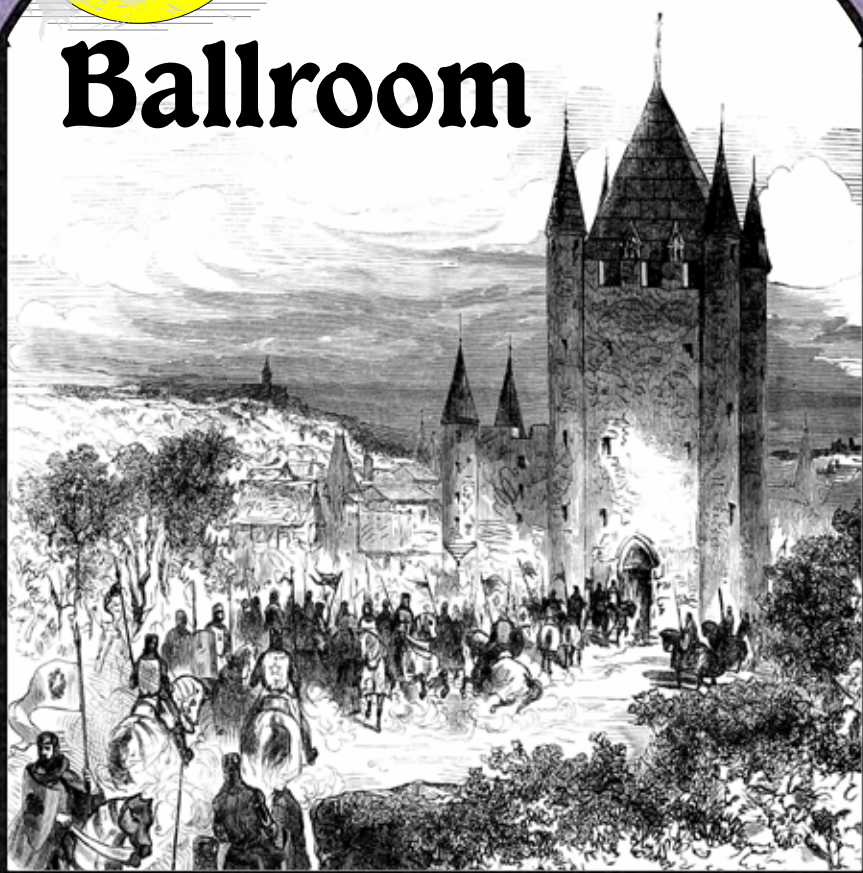


Once Upon a Journey ♦ V

Belle of the Ballroom



SMSMITH

For those who immerse themselves in what the
fairy tale has to communicate, it becomes a
deep, quiet pool which at first seems to
reflect only our own image; but behind
it we soon discover the inner turmoils
of our soul—its depth, and ways
to gain peace within ourselves
and with the world, which is
the reward of our struggles.

~ Bruno Bettelheim ~

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Dedicated to Janice, Cathy, Debbie, & Cheryl for their many contributions to our family.

Journey ♦ V ~ Belle of the Ballroom

The only daughter of an elderly king and queen is subjected to a nightly ball by her gregarious, overbearing parents, all in pursuit of the perfect knightly mate. How will quiet Belle survive the nightly balls? And is there such a being as the "perfect" knightly mate?



Once Upon a Journey series:

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Belle of the Ballroom

LONG AGO in the days of bravest knights, there lived in a land called Tribbles an old king and his once-lovely queen. They had but one daughter who had grown so beautiful that the fame of her spread into every land—and into the dreams of many a knight.

Soon, it came to be in Tribbles that every day heralded the arrival of not less than fifty such knights, each exhausted from long journeys and fierce battles, yet newly energized to court the one and only princess named Belle.

Soon, it also came to be in Tribbles that no sun could set without trumpeted announcement of a nightly gala in honour of the ineffable Belle.

Now Belle was indeed beautiful. She was also gracious, kind, and gentle. She was everything that any knight could ask or wish for—which, of course, each one did. But alas, to their great and almost inconsolable sorrow, Belle refused even the most enticing proposals.

In truth, Belle had pled mightily against the nightly balls, but the king and queen remained firmly insistent. Their dear Belle, they said, had become an unparalleled attraction in Tribbles. Why, without the nightly galas, everything would be as before—dreary day following upon dreary day. Besides, they said, Belle would in time be required to choose a consort for the throne, and what better way than at a grand ball where the best of all lands and kingdoms came to proffer themselves. There was, indeed, no place like a grand ball, the king said, for putting a best foot forward.

Belle had wanted to ask if *feet* were the best measure for good choice, but she did not for no one would have heard. Thus, against her heart's

desire she bent to the will of the kingdom, save in that one matter of manifesting preference.

Soon that one matter became a sore point of increasing irritation to the anxious king and queen. Surely, they declared, were not some suitors preferable to others! Could dearest Belle *not* begin to define the princely perfections that would be required?

At last, Belle gave up trying to explain her feelings and tried to accept the demands of the nightly balls where she would graciously grant each attending knight his dance in turn. In truth, Belle had not time for more than one each. As it was, she danced far into every night.

Her mother would often say, "Belle, you are the envy of every maiden in every land," and Belle would blink back the threatening tears for she had become desperately unhappy. But being a princess, she thought she had to conceal her true feelings. Each night she assumed a brave face—to dance and curtsy and smile. Everyone thought her sweetly shy for she kept her eyes

lowered in what seemed the purest modesty. But again, in truth, it was more than modesty. Belle simply could not bear to look into all those beckoning eyes that did not see her.

"But of course they see you. What are you saying?" her mother had scoffed when Belle had tried to explain why she could not raise her eyes but for moments only.

"You have the finest, ivory skin that ever was," her mother exclaimed. "You wear the most ravishing creations from the most gifted designers of all time. Your strawberry hair is softer than silk. You are forever crowned with wreaths of freshest and wildest flowers. Oh yes, my dearest Belle, they see you, and for that they cannot take their eyes from you."

Belle's mother then kissed Belle on the top of her head and said, "But there is this one thing, my dearest Belle, that you must amend. You must share more of your beautiful eyes."

The queen raised Belle's head to look into Belle's emerald eyes, but suddenly Belle could

not lift her lashes. Beneath them a gushing of tears began to spill.

"Now don't be foolish, Belle," her mother scolded. "There is not a lass who would not trade with you this instant. Why, it is silly you should cry when you have everything any maiden ever dreamt of!"

"I know," Belle sobbed. "I don't know what is the matter with me."

"Well, perhaps you need a new hairstyle," her mother said. "Though how we shall improve on these exquisite tresses of yours, I cannot imagine. But I shall think of something so do not worry. Your mother shall take care of it all."

Now Belle's mother did not realize, but Belle was a thinker herself and had been for some time. Every morning, no matter how late she had danced the previous eve, Belle would rise at the crack of dawn, cover herself in a servant's cloak, and escape alone into the forest. There she would sit by the emerald pool of the nethermost clearing. It was the nethermost clearing because

a great stone wall towered behind it, and from the stone wall, a rivulet ran into a streamlet that feed the sunken pool.

There in the nethermost clearing, Belle would play upon her mandolin and cry out her night's sorrows. When at last she was cleansed by her tears, she would sing songs of hope till the birds would perch to listen and soft creatures would creep forward in rapt attention. Then Belle would think and think and voice her thoughts to the wide-eyed gathering, yet never did a solution to her sadness reveal itself.

Thus had Belle's life been until one fateful day. It was the third day of the third month of the second year of the grand balls. It was also Belle's birthday. But there at the emerald pool, Belle fell asleep—the first time ever she had done so in the forest. Always before, she had taken her recuperating rest in the privacy and safety of her room at the castle. But this day, she slept long and peacefully as the sun sped its downward course in the sky.

Then suddenly, Belle was rudely shaken from a sweet dream in which she was dancing with herself. Gazing up with sleepy eyes, she saw the laughing self of her dream. This so startled her she leapt up, but catching her foot in a fold of cloak, she tripped and fell like a tumbling weed into the sunken, emerald pool.

As Belle surfaced gasping and sputtering, the dream-self, who had so startled her, was reaching out a helping hand as bubbles of laughter filled the air.

"Belle, Belle," the girl cried, "do not be frightened so. I had to waken you for we must hurry back or they shall come searching, and then this place shall be lost to you."

Belle blinked and stared, and blinked again. To see the laughing girl was to see herself as in a mirror—save that Belle was shivering wet in the emerald pool while this other self stood dry and happy upon the grassy edge. Belle feared to accept the girl's slender hand, so she tread the chilly waters.

"Wh-wh-who are y-you?" Belle stammered, wondering if she were awake or yet dreaming.

"I call myself Emaja," the girl said. "And if you would take my hand, you would know I am real. I am here to help you."

"H-h-how?" Belle stammered again, between chattering teeth.

"Come out and I shall tell you," the girl said.

Belle swam forward thinking she would scramble out by herself, but the stone walls of the pool were too steep, so she was forced to take Emaja's hand to be pulled up and over the edge.

Dripping and shivering, Belle bent for her cloak, but Emaja was already enfolding her in fleecied thickness.

"Wh-where," Belle stuttered, intending to ask about the warm, absorbent wrapping, but the dream-self seemed to know the full question without hearing it.

"I brought it just in case," Emaja said as she tousled Belle's hair into near dryness. And sooner

than Belle could have expected, she felt dry and cosy. But now she felt tongue-tied to be looking at herself. It was too confusing.

"Well, I suppose I should explain why I am here," Emaja finally said. "You see, it is because I can come only in forest dreaming and you have never let it be before. That is why I am come."

"I still do not understand," Belle said, feeling more confused.

"That is often so for the best of us," Emaja said, sounding nonchalant. "But as we do not have much time, I am compelled to say, it is the doing, not the understanding, that must be our first concern. So I suppose, what I have to ask is, What do you want of me, now I am here?"

"What do I—?" Belle stammered. "I thought you came with a purpose."

"Oh, I did," Emaja said. "Whatever you want. Or more accurately, I should say, whatever you feel."

Belle furrowed her brow. She must think this through most carefully.

"Oh, no," Emaja said. "This is not a matter for thinking. This is for feeling."

"Oh, I know what I feel," Belle said, "but it's not thinkable. I couldn't disappoint my parents so much. I have to be there. Everyone depends on me. I just have to."

"I could be," Emaja said.

Belle's eyes expanded wide. Her mouth opened in utter surprise.

"We could try it once and see how it was," Emaja said, "and if you were happy, then everything would be settled."

"But what of you?" Belle cried. "How could you stand it?"

"Oh, I should like it very much," Emaja said.

Belle felt a shiver course through her for no accountable reason, but witnessing with her own eyes this remarkable means of deliverance, she could not help but think that one time could not hurt. It would be wonderful, beyond imagining, to be free of the nightly galas—even for one night: especially the very night of her birthday.

How could she not do it when everything was so perfect?

"All right," Belle said at last. "Just once and then we'll decide."

"Perfect," Emaja said. "And you don't have to tell me a thing. I know it all." With that Emaja ran up the path away from the emerald pool and vanished.

Belle was full of joy—and then it occurred to her. My goodness! where would she go for the night? They had not talked of that. Where and what would she eat? And most of all—what would she do with herself?

Belle realized in the sun's descending that she had little choice but to return to the castle. She knew it was far too scary to stay in the woods. But how could she return, now that there were two, one and only Belles?

Then again she had a thought. Why she could disguise herself. That way she could see how things proceeded at the ball, and maybe even find a place to stay and some food. And best of

all, the means to disguise herself was right in the forest.

Belle knew exactly where to go because once, when hurrying back to the castle after a morning in the forest, she had almost run into her mother's secret maid—or rather, the maid whose secret was to collect powder-filled pods from the tukka tree that kept the queen's hair so dark and shiny. At the time of their near encounter, Belle had thought it a most unfortunate timing, but now it proved most useful. She knew the place and means of her disguise.

Off Belle sped, and soon she was back with a brimming pod. Taking a small bowl from the basket that held supplies for her forest trips, she filled it with water from the streamlet. As she mixed in a tiny bit of powder, she saw how very dark it looked, but dipping in several strands of hair, she could see how her hair would become a rich, earthy brown.

Dipping and swishing her hair in the brown liquid, she was suddenly horrified to see how

her hands had turned the colour of her hair. Rushing to the streamlet she scrubbed her hands only to see in further dismay that though the colour washed out for the most part, it flowed as a blob of scum into the pure pool. Then to Belle's amazement, she saw a tiny eddy appear and suck the earthy brownness away.

Belle did not wish to further harm the pool, so when she was done, she poured the residue from the bowl around a flowering tree. She did so without fear for her mother always said the pod water was really to nourish the flowers of the royal garden—and it really seemed to.

But as Belle was pouring the stain out, it came to her that shaded skin *might* be just as well, too. So taking what was left, Belle diluted it with more water and spread it everywhere her skin might be seen. The shading came upon her in a warm, sun-touched tone.

Then securing her reddish-brown hair in the fashion of servants, she felt herself ready. She carefully placed the remaining tukka powder

in her basket—for future use if ever the need should arise—and left the nethermost clearing as tidy as she had found it. It was coming dusk when she reached the castle. And as fortune would have it, she came upon a quarrel.

"I care not your daughter be sick or dying," the cook was shouting at an old woman, "and I care less she has run off with some disappointed knight. What I care about is that she be here and that she be here now."

"But it's not like that," the old woman said. "She wed him this day, and she told you she was going away—too far to remain of service."

"I hear many things," the cook cried, "but that I did not hear."

"But I was here when she—" the old woman began again, but the cook interrupted.

"Well, I am here—and in a royal fix," the cook cried, "so what do you intend about that?"

The old woman looked perplexed and in the heavy silence of the cook's angry stares, Belle spoke.

"My good lady," Belle said, "I am in need of work and a place to abide, so perhaps I—"

"Wandering wenches, I do not need," the cook scoffed without even one look at Belle. But the old woman looked and in a flash she said to the cook, "She lives with me. She's one of mine."

"What?!" the cook said looking from Belle to the old woman.

"She's one of mine," the old woman said again.

"Well, why didn't you say at the outset," the cook grumbled angrily.

"You did not give me chance," the old woman said, bowing her head to hide a tiny smile.

The cook turned to Belle. "Do you know anything of kitchens?" she grouched. "You don't look much strong for kitchen help to me."

"I can do many things," Belle said. "And I am a most quick learner."

"Well, you had best be, working in my busy kitchen," the cook said. "So what do you call yourself?"

"Belle," Belle said, then clapped her hand over her mouth in dismay. But her slip did not seem serious for the cook burst into scoffing laughter.

"She's named for our beautiful princess," the old woman promptly said. "And rightly so."

"Rightly so!" the cook said in astonishment. "Why, she is no more like our princess than a bowl to a beater. And furthermore, there shall be no kitchen wench called Belle, in the very castle of the one and only Belle."

"Then perhaps you may call her, ... Essa," the old woman said, "though that shall be Belle's decision."

Belle was deeply grateful for the suggestion of a name for her mind had become stuck in a crazy spin of bowl and beater. "I—I guess that would be all right," Belle stammered a little stunned at all that was happening, and at this old woman who was being so kind and helpful.

"All right, Essa," the cook growled, thrusting a great apron at her. "You may commence in scrubbing that pot."

As Belle began her duties, the old woman smiled and said, "I shall come to show you the way home at the second hour of the morning. So do not worry, it shall all work for the best." With that, Belle was left to the cook's devices.

It was immensely strenuous work. Belle had never imagined all that was entailed in preparing midnight dainties for the grand galas. And this night, being the birthday celebration, meant even more work, but Belle did not mind. It was wonderful just to be ordinary.

In all the necessary fussing, Belle did not have one moment to peek into the ballroom—especially as she was newcomer kept to the lowly grindstone. Yet from ballroom reports, nothing seemed out of ordinary, save that the princess appeared remarkably gregarious and happy.

Soon, it seemed to Belle that her ballroom days had happened long ago, though it had been but a day. Yet even with all the hard work, she was not sorry. She loved the peace and quiet of her duties, though peace and quiet were odd

words to describe the cook's bustling kitchen. It felt wonderful to do something with her hands, especially after the first shock of scrubbing the pot and then not daring to take her hands from the water. But strangely their complexion had not diminished in the castle's water. Or perhaps it had just taken time to adhere. Whatever it was, Belle decided not to worry. There was too much newness to wonder about such things.

She was greatly pleased to discover how the castle staff had their own share of midnight dainties. These were things about which she had never, ever thought.

As the evening passed, Belle became increasingly amazed and relieved that no one saw any resemblance to their one and only princess. The new girl Essa seemed just a pretty lass with fine speech and manners—whose refinement was sure to get her promoted to assistant lady's maid in no time at all.

Well, that "no time at all" came sooner than any could have imagined. At the stroke of one

hour in the morning, the chief steward came into the kitchen and announced that the one and only Belle had heard how a refined country maid was seeking work, and the princess desired to employ Essa as her maid-of-the-morning.

Of course, Belle had never had a maid-of-the-morning because morning had been her precious solo time in the forest while everyone thought she was tucked in beauty sleep till long after lunch. All were under the strictest orders not to disturb Belle until she rang. And of course Belle never rang too soon, ever.

Belle was not sure she liked this sudden grand promotion, but then she remembered. In all the haste, she and Emaja had not had time to make arrangements for anything, so this could be Emaja's clever way of meeting to discuss things. And what with all the profuse, happy reports from the ballroom, it was clear Emaja would not need the solace of the forest. She must be in love, some were now saying, but none knew yet who this first love might be.

Belle of the kitchen did not know either and she tried not to worry, but to think only how she herself was in love with being ordinary, busy, and useful. This had been the best night of her whole life, even with all the cook's grumblings.

Belle was thus in high spirits when the old woman came to collect her at the hour of two. But strangely, the old woman did not ask Belle anything about herself. She talked of gardens and seeds, and of her many children—so many that Belle could not imagine.

The old woman's name was Adeah. She was the sweetest old lady Belle had ever met—not that Belle had met that many, but this one was a gem; and Belle knew all about gems. Her good mother had treasures of them preserved for a time, as the good queen said, when youthful beauty could no longer speak for itself.

As far as Belle was concerned, she would have traded every gem for the timely friendship of Adeah, but incredibly Adeah had come without even the conscious asking.

Adeah's home was not far from the castle. It was plain and simple with everything needed and nothing extra. Belle could not believe her good fortune. With joyful exhaustion, she fell into a deep sleep—but it was not untroubled. She dreamt Emaja had not really pulled her from the emerald pool, but had watched with bubbling laughter as the frigid waters had sucked the last drop of warmth from Belle's blue-cold body.

Just as a powerful eddy began to swirl her round, Belle woke with a gasp to see the sun streaming in her window. She could hear a kettle whistling upon the fire and remembered at last where she was, and that maid-of-the-morning duty would soon be upon her. But the dream had left her shivering; it had felt so real.

My goodness, Belle thought as she controlled her shivers. How can you be so distrusting? Why Emaja had not the slightest hesitation in pulling you out of that pool and she wrapped you in the nicest warmth, and she took your place, and you had a wonderful time, and so did she. And

you have sweet Adeah, and everything is more wonderful that you can imagine.

So with resolution, Belle put it all from her mind as she dressed in a pleasant homespun frock that she found draped upon a quaint old chair. It was a perfect fit.

After a nourishing breakfast, Belle thanked Adeah again for her wonderful kindnesses and kissed her goodbye—it seemed so natural, as if they had known each other forever. But as Belle stepped into the cobbled street, Adeah said the oddest thing. Belle pondered it all the way to the castle. Adeah had said, “Remember who is what, my dear.” And then in the same jolly tone, Adeah had added, “And have a wonderful day.”

Of course Belle intended to, but she had not counted on Emaja who greeted her in a state of ecstatic, laughing tears, and news of a huge, ticklish dilemma.

“I am utterly smitten,” Emaja cried, “with two incredibly handsome heirs to their father’s incredible fortunes. Whatever am I to do?”

Needless to say, Belle was both alarmed and dismayed, and ten-fold more so when Emaja described how she had flirted and cajoled all sorts of information from each suitor. Soon Belle hardly heard what Emaja was saying for the shock of it.

"I have weighed and weighed their lands and riches and I cannot decide," Emaja lamented. "One has more castles and one more lands. One has more treasure and the other more fame. How is one ever to choose?"

My mother must have been shocked at this, Belle thought. But apparently not for Emaja was speaking of even that.

"Your mother was so pleased with last night," Emaja said. "She thinks I should choose the one with more castles for he had more treasure too. And his father is so very much older. It would be by far the better choice, she thinks. What do you think Belle?"

Belle didn't know what to think. "Emaja," Belle began, "you must remember this bargain

is just temporary. You are merely playing a part. I don't think you are real. You came out of my dream, and well, I don't know how real that makes you, or how long this can go on."

"Well, that is rather what I wanted to talk about," Emaja said. "You see, I love being Belle of the Ballroom, and I know how you hated it. And if we could just agree to this—"

"But Emaja," Belle interrupted, "how could this be? if you commit yourself, or rather myself, to some prince or knight, I don't even know! This makes me rather frightened."

"Oh, yes, yes," Emaja said, "I see what you mean. This could become troublesome."

They sat then in silence for a time until they heard the clatter of hoofs. For Belle, the sound only signalled the arrival of the first knight of the new day, filling her with dread. But for Emaja, it was her first full day as Belle of the Ballroom, so she flew to the window and leaned out to see who it might be.

"Belle, come and see," Emaja cried. "This

knight is so magnificent. Why, it is enough to give one goose-bumps."

When Belle did not respond with sufficient haste, Emaja dragged her to the window, and looking out they saw a knight in armour as blue as the summer sky, riding upon a prancing horse of dapple grey.

It was indeed a stunning sight, but a sight all too familiar to Belle. The knight passed from their view and a dreamy look came into Emaja's eyes.

"He was so impressive; don't you think so, Belle? Don't you think so?" Emaja asked.

"What I think, Emaja, is that you cannot be so unlike who I am," Belle said. "And what I further think, is that you saw nothing but armour, which is nothing."

"From where I come, it is very, very much something," Emaja said. "You just don't know."

"Yes, that is true," Belle said. "I don't know how I created you or even from where you come. I just think it might be best if you went back."

"But I don't want to," Emaja pouted. "And what's more, I don't think you want me to either because then you will be right back where you started. Is that what you want?"

"No, that is not what I want," Belle said. "But I also do not want you committing me to some future I don't want either."

"Well, it doesn't have to be your exact future," Emaja cried. "It could be mine. We could just keep on as we are."

Belle felt another shiver down her spine. She didn't know why because what Emaja said sounded strangely reasonable. They seemed as two separate beings! Perhaps it could be! But what had the old woman meant when she said, "Remember who is what"?

Emaja continued. "Listen, Belle. I promise I will be careful, but let us go on for a bit as we are. One grand ball is no time at all to decide anything."

"All right," Belle said at last. "But if you begin doing things you shouldn't, then you will have

to go back from wherever you came, whatever that means for you or me. Do you understand?"

"I understand perfectly," Emaja said, sounding immensely cheerful.

And so it was for twelve, entire months—blissful Emaja attending the grand balls and joyful Belle serving as maid-of-the-morning, though the thing that brought Belle her great joy came to her by accidental good fortune.

In the second month of her royal service, Belle had discovered that it was Adeah's birthday. With permission, she had gathered and arranged an exquisite bouquet from the royal gardens as a gift for her dear friend. And who should chance to see her exquisite bouquet but the steward of ballroom decor himself. He was so taken with Belle's eye for beauty that he had insisted on her help, which was forthwith arranged. Emaja did not really need all Belle's time, so within days Belle had become mistress of flower decor. Her arrangements were so varied and stunning that

before long, ballroom flower decor became a favourite topic and added attraction.

Within days, Emaja excitedly announced to the gala assembly how she, the one and only princess of Tribbles, was the gifted designer of the ballroom's flowered attractions. Since there were only a few who knew otherwise, talk of the amazingly gifted princess spread even more far and wide. But very soon, even the flowers gave way to other talk.

"Poor Belle," one said, "every evening she falls for a new someone—or two or three. Why it is driving the king and queen to distraction."

"Yes, it is dreadful," another said. "It was not so long ago, the queen despaired her darling Belle would ever look up to see a choice. Now, poor Belle looks up continually and never settles down."

A third had chimed in, "Why, the poor king even threatened to end the nightly galas if Belle did not cease her continual re-choosings. And my, oh my! you should have heard the one and

only Belle. She put on such a scene, I heard it took the queen nigh three days to recover."

Tribbles' newly gregarious princess had been passionately logical. "But what if the very, very next ball were to bring the one and perfect choice?" she had cried. "It could be this night or the morrow or the day after. How could one ever know?" So her anguished reasoning had prevailed and the grand galas continued.

All in all, Belle was quite relieved to be apart from the whole business, save for those brief morning hours when she was forced to listen to glowing accounts of the previous eve and to rave imaginings of what the night might bring. Belle was beginning to feel frightfully sorry for her father and mother, but she did not know how to end it all and yet keep the joy and contentment she had found.

Now there was another thing besides Emaja's chatter that Belle was forced to each morning—and that was to the window. The sound of those first morning hoofs upon the cobbled street

drew Emaja forever like bee to honey, and Belle would be drawn along by Emaja's insistence—to listen as Emaja speculated on who might be the night's surpassing preference. And so it came as usual, on the year's fulfilment of their charade, that when the first hoofs sounded, Belle was again unwilling spectator at the high window.

There they watched as a knight in armour black as the starless night dismounted from his midnight horse beside the castle wall. It was always custom for knights to proceed to the main entrance, but for unknown reason, this one had halted and dismounted. The knight carried an ebony shield upon which a fierce red dragon was emblazoned, and in his helmet, a great black plume crested in the breeze.

It was indeed a stunning, almost terrifying, sight, but the sight that caught Belle's attention was not so much the knight as his companion. Usually knight's companions were lads in training to knighthood who followed and adored their heroes. But this companion was such a

twisted, gnarled creature, it was amazing he could sit upon his weary steed. It appeared as if every bone in his body from head to foot had been broken and never properly mended. The broken man's hair was long and white obscuring much of his bony face, yet from what Belle could see, his skin seemed young; his clothing simple and homespun—old, yet seeming new for there were no tears or tatters.

Like Emaja, Belle leaned far out for best view though their gazes rested on different beings. At that moment, the broken man spoke and the black knight raised his helmet's visor. Then, in perfect unison, the knight and the broken man looked up together into the eyes of Emaja and Belle. The piercing blue of the broken man's eyes surprised Belle, but nothing was seen of the knight's for his face remained in deep shadow.

Belle felt mortified to be found peering so and would have drawn back as gracefully as their poor circumstance would have permitted, save that in leaning so far they were wedged.

Belle lowered her eyes and whispered to Emaja. "Turn a bit please that I may escape this squeeze."

Emaja paid no heed; instead, she raised her hand and the squeeze become tighter. To Belle's great chagrin, Emaja merrily waved and spoke. "Welcome to Tribbles," Emaja called down to the black knight. "It's a grand day for a ball, don't you think?" she said.

"It certainly seems so," the broken man said, speaking cheerfully, though it was clear Emaja had not addressed her question to him.

"I am Belle of the Ballroom," Emaja said ever so sweetly to the knight, trying to ignore the broken man.

"One would most certainly imagine so," the broken man said, sounding convinced that it was indeed the truth.

Emaja bubbled with laughter for in her view, a compliment was a compliment whatever its source. Emaja tried again. "Did you know it is my very birthday tomorrow?" she asked the knight.

"Why, that we didn't," the broken man said. "Then truly tomorrow should prove a happy day, indeed."

"Oh, I'm sure it shall," Emaja said to the knight.

Then the broken man spoke again. "Is that your sister beside you?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" Emaja said, her laughter bubbling again. "She is my maid-of-the-morning. Everyone calls her Essa."

"Good morning, Essa" the broken man said.

"Good m-morning," Belle stammered. Then murmuring apologies, she somehow squeezed back into the room leaving Emaja with her strange conversation. Belle did not hear the rest for her mind was in great quandary. What was to become of this thing she had begun and did not know how to end? And who was that black knight with his broken companion? And why had they stopped so strangely?

Belle had still not reached a conclusion when at last Emaja turned from the window.

"Well, of all things!" Emaja said. "That knight never said one word—not one word! So perhaps he is not so impressive after all."

Emaja paced the floor and then a sudden thought appeared. "Why, of course, if he were struck with his good fortune to see me, perhaps he had not the time to recover himself," she said to Belle. "Yes, that must be it. Well, I shall give him opportunity to make amends this night for in appearance he is so impressive, don't you think so, Belle? Don't you think so?"

Again Belle felt herself shiver and realized her shivers were becoming all too frequent in the presence of Emaja; though this time her shivers came more in thinking about the silent, black knight and his strange, broken companion.

Later, as the day wore on, Belle tried hard to concentrate on her flowers. She was doing well when her beloved Adeah appeared.

"I was just passing by," Adeah said, "and thought I'd pop in for a peek at what everyone is talking of."

"Oh, don't say that," Belle said. "I am afraid someone might come to resent the flowers and I so enjoy doing this. Creating beauty is so much better than—" Belle stopped. She had almost said too much.

"One can beedle and doodle too," Adeah said in her cryptic way.

"What?" Belle asked in puzzlement.

"Just a saying," Adeah said, and then she handed Belle a smooth, dark round stone. "I give this for your birthday, Belle. It's a lovely thing."

Belle could see that it was, but she had told no one of her birthday for someone was certain to say how wonderful to be born on the very day as the one and only Belle.

"I don't really have a birthday that I tell," Belle said gently, so as not to sound disrespectful.

"Well nonetheless, tomorrow shall prove a birthday, indeed," Adeah said, "and for that I wish you to have this precious thing."

"Thank you very much," Belle said. "I shall cherish it always."

"So happy day for the morrow," Adeah said. "As for tonight, I have laid out a special dress for you. Be sure to be here by ten for they shall be needing you."

"But I don't think so," Belle said. "I shall be finished here soon and I am very tired."

"Then you must rest as you need, but ten it must be," Adeah said and with those words she bustled from sight.

Well, true it was that messages were sometimes left with Adeah about royal needs, but with the strangeness of the day, Belle would have preferred a quiet night of peaceful rest.

Yet, obedient to Adeah's instructions Belle rested and returned. She was entering the castle on the stroke of ten when she heard the uproar. Even the servants were rushing to the ballroom entrances. Belle was caught up in the crush and arrived to see the black knight standing in full armour in the centre of the ballroom floor.

Now that was surpassing strange for even though knights often arrived in armour, they

never came to the ballroom in armour. It just was not done. It was especially outrageous on this eve of the great ball that would celebrate princess Belle's birthday.

When the din had died somewhat, Belle saw the knight's companion standing to the side. Suddenly the broken man pulled himself as upright as his twisted bones would allow and said in a commanding voice, "The black knight claims consort with the one and only princess Belle."

Everyone fixed upon Emaja for it was shocking that a knight would be so ill-mannered in dress. For a moment, Emaja stood elegantly aloof, then to everyone's dismay, she curtsied and said, "I shall dance with the black knight."

The queen cried, "No, my child. He is not presentable. He's out of order."

But the queen's cry went unheard because Emaja was already in the arms of the black knight; except, to everyone's horror, Emaja was, within a single whirl, traded into the arms of the knight's ghastly companion. Emaja pulled away

instantly, uttering a piercing shriek as she fled into the arms of the queen.

Calmly the knight's companion repeated his words. "The black knight claims consort with the one and only princess Belle."

In the utter silence that instantly descended, Emaja's unfeeling reply seemed to echo through the castle. "Never," she cried as she buried her face in the queen's ample shoulder.

For the third time the lowly man spoke. "The black knight claims consort with the one and only princess Belle."

The queen was frightened, as was the king, but now the queen was also angry.

"Let the black knight attire himself properly and let him speak for himself and he shall have his turn, but not before," the queen cried, with a regal lift to her head and shoulders.

The broken man replied in quiet but audible tone. "The black knight is as he is."

Emaja shuddered and clung more tightly to the queen's bejewelled gown.

"What has the black knight to hide?" cried the queen. "Has he no face? Has he no mouth? Is this why he comes so?"

The broken man enunciated slowly as if such would move them to compliance. "The black knight claims right to dance with the princess Belle," he said.

"The knight has had his turn," the queen cried.

"Not so," the broken man said, "for his turn is to whomever he turns it. Is this not the rule?"

No one dared reply for this was indeed the rule, though it had never been done before. No knight had ever given his turn to another in all the turns that had come and gone—though vast fortunes had been promised for such.

"If this be the rule," the queen cried, "then let it be the rule also, that the princess may give her turn to whomsoever *she* should turn."

There was a long silence as Emaja's sobbing subsided. It was not till Emaja turned to gaze upon the assembled crowd that anyone realized

what had happened: not a gentlewoman in sight, save for the queen and poor, unfortunate Belle. All others had quietly, swiftly vanished into the shadows of elsewhere. By the time Belle realized her precarious place, it was too late. Emaja had lifted her arm and pointed precisely at Belle.

The prim-and-proper queen was ecstatic to find herself so fortuitously relieved of what would otherwise have fallen to her. "Ah-ha," the queen cried. "Your black knight shall have turn then with Princess Belle's maid-of-the-morning."

"A goodly choice," the broken man said. "We shall be delighted, if the lady shall consent of her own free will and choice. What says the lady?"

Belle was speechless. It was fair to say she had not come desiring to dance. Yet suddenly, she wanted it very much. In all the ballrooms of her past, she had hoped every night to dance with something less than glazed rapture, but it had never been. She had grown keenly aware there could never be future in the reflections of such dazzled eyes. But now she, a mere maid, was to

dance with this broken, twisted creature whose sympathetic smile seemed to comprehend even her imperfections. To dance with such an outwardly, flawed partner would be the extreme pendulum of all her prior experience.

With a tremulous heart, she crossed the wide expanse of polished space and curtsied to the black knight. Taking her hand, the black knight placed it in the bony hand of his companion and the music began.

The broken man's dancing was neither smooth nor graceful. Belle could sense the pain in the soft grinding of his bones, yet his conversation was plain and true and from his heart.

He said his name was KinDur; that he had travelled to many far away places; and that he would tell her about some of those places and peoples if she were interested. Of course she was, and so they talked.

When the music ended, the queen, desperate to restore order, cried out, "Which knight stands next in turn?"

A handsome young man, attired in creams and crimson, stepped forward. As it happened, his step brought him beside the black knight who raised his visor as the broken man spoke.

"The black knight wishes to know if this turn shall be turned to him?" the broken man said.

The young man was hotly indignant. As he turned toward the open visor he cried, "Of course n—" but if he intended to say not or knight, it was never known for the young man fainted dead away.

"You have heard his words," the broken man said. And since no one could confirm the young man's intent, the music started as Emaja's outstretched arm signalled her intent once more to turn her turn to her maid-of-the-morning.

When the music stopped, the queen tried again to restore order, but strangely everything happened as before. A second, indignant knight slid to the floor in a dead faint with the identical words upon his lips, and Belle danced a third turn with the broken man.

By the time the seventh knight was carried unconscious from the ballroom, the ladies had begun to reappear, and all remaining knights had proceeded to the clerk-of-order, and with scarcely checked sobs, relinquished their turns to the black knight. None seemed prepared now to face the mounting odds against that mysterious raised visor in the crowded, buzzing ballroom.

The queen was beside herself, as was the king. Their royal child was standing wallflower while her upstart maid-of-the-morning was being whispered round as serving beyond the call of every saintly duty. Beyond that, some were even whispering how it was maid-of-the-morning, not princess Belle, whose flower decor had become such a stunning attraction in and of itself.

Belle became aware of the growing sentiment for the royal faces were in deep cloud.

"Well, my kind friend," the broken man said, "it seems we are partnered for the entire even though it is certainly not our intent to bind you to choices which are not yours."

"Well, then KinDur," Belle said, "please do not misunderstand, but you and this black knight have put me in a somewhat awkward spot. I am dancing and the princess is not. Could we not take a rest and let her dance?"

"She won't dance with me," KinDur said, "and as all have given their turns to the black knight there is not much room to accommodate her, as I see it."

"Could not the black knight dance with her?" Belle asked. "She was willing once, and if he did not turn his turn to you, then we could quietly disappear and perhaps they would forget us. But if this continues, I am surely bound to lose my position and then I won't know what to do or where I'll go."

"Yes, I see that," KinDur said. "But I also see that her dancing with the black knight will not resolve this problem we both have."

Belle wanted to ask what he meant, but of a sudden, she was afraid.

KinDur seemed to understand for he went

on. "Yes," he said, "I think our problems have converged here to a purpose which I confess I am somewhat terrified of myself."

"KinDur, I don't understand the half of what you have said," Belle said trying not to sound worried. But worried she was.

"Well, it's like this," KinDur said. "That black knight is just armour. That's all there is. There's nothing inside you can see—except ... Well, sometimes reflections."

With wide, astonished eyes, Belle turned and gazed upon the black knight who was standing somewhat near the pouting Emaja. The knight turned toward Belle as if conscious of her gaze. Belle did not feel the terror she expected, but that is not to say she did not feel highly alarmed.

"He has proven perfectly harmless so far," KinDur said, and then paused briefly. "But there is something about him that I've got to deal with and I'm not sure which of us will endure."

"So why do you follow him?" Belle asked in a tone of amazement.

"Oh, I don't," KinDur said. "He follows me. However it appears, he follows me."

"This is too, too strange," Belle said.

"As strange as you and she?" KinDur asked, nodding his head toward Emaja.

Now Belle felt very frightened, but she said nothing.

KinDur spoke again, "Perhaps it is best we rest for a time. My bones are not up to so much as I have given. But might I say how kind you have been to have tolerated so long."

"I have not tolerated," Belle said with spirit. "I have never enjoyed a gala so much. It has been wonderful, talking about all kinds of things, and not just about the wonders and wealth of me and you—Oh! I mean them, the royals. Oh, dear! you know what I mean," Belle stammered.

"Why, yes, I think I do," KinDur said.

What a blunder! Belle thought. I have got to pay more attention. I have got to do something about this bizarre situation that is becoming too complicated. But her thoughts were quickly

turned back to KinDur as he caught himself in a small stumble. She could feel how weakened he was, so she assisted him to where Emaja stood. Emaja drew back and the queen puffed herself up for invigorated defence.

KinDur bent low and spoke to Emaja. "The black knight claims turn for himself, if such should please your royalness."

After brief hesitation, Emaja drew herself to full height and accepted the proffered hand of the black knight, but not before she hissed to Belle's hearing, "You are dismissed."

It came so shocking to Belle that she nearly fainted, but she held her composure as the black knight swirled Emaja onto the ballroom floor with a grace impossible for one clad in armour. But then, Belle had to remind herself, everything about this black knight was impossible.

Belle walked with KinDur to a corridor off the ballroom where he sank upon a marble bench. Belle excused herself, but was back in moments with a tall glass of freshest grape juice and some

honey-butter pastries. KinDur accepted with gratitude, but took them with shaking hands.

"Is something the matter?" Belle asked, feeling great concern.

"Fear is mostly the matter," KinDur sighed and then he gulped the juice as if consumed with thirst.

"But there is none would hurt you here," Belle said. "What can it be? The black knight?"

"Perhaps in time, I don't know," KinDur said. "But right now, my fear is that—" he paused for a moment and then, looking her squarely in the eyes, he continued. "My fear is as yours."

"I don't know what you mean," Belle said. "I don't fear except having no place to go now that I have lost my position."

"Don't you fear that no one will ever see you as you really are? that you are just an image? that no one will ever see past the outside of you? Like princess Belle? Like me?"

"Oh my! yes, I see what you mean," Belle said. "With me—I mean princess Belle, everyone

seems only to see her so-called perfections, but with you!—oh, what must it be like for you?!”

In that moment, she desired with all her heart to see into his heart, but KinDur was quiet. After a time, she continued. “You don’t have to talk about it, if you’d prefer not.”

Finally KinDur answered. “It’s a long story,” he said, “and no one has ever asked before.” He paused briefly. “I suppose that’s not entirely true. A few *have* asked, so what I meant was that no one wanted to hear beyond my first words: the part where I would say, I was born a slave.”

“Oh, KinDur,” Belle exclaimed. “I am so sorry no one would listen. If you want to speak of it, I want to hear.”

KinDur spoke again. “I was born a slave is not the complete sentence now. What I now would have to say is: I was born a slave, or so I believed until two years ago.” He closed his eyes and sighed before continuing. “It is a story too long to tell in full at this late hour, but if you want to hear, I will tell just a little—so you will know.

"I want very much to hear," Belle said.

KinDur spoke. "I never knew my parents; I never even knew who my people were. My first master didn't know either, but he was a fair man. And though I had been given to him as slave bounty, yet I learned alongside his son for many years, and then this good master died."

He closed his eyes as a shadow of pain crossed his face, and Belle sensed that in the death of his first master, the hopes and dreams of his life had also come to an end.

KinDur continued. "My second owner was not a good man. After some very bad years, I spent several more in a foul prison, convicted of a crime he himself had committed. Then, I was sold into the mines of the Olphus Mountains. In these three places, they tried to break me, as you can see, but it was my spirit they were after. They nearly succeeded, but I got lucky. It came after they had broken my body beyond further use. For most of us in the Olphus mines, when the body was broken beyond use, they would

resort to just breaking it beyond recuperation. But as I said, I got lucky. A man came along at just the right moment: a man who needed a shepherd, so I became a shepherd. It was one of the few things I could still do.”

KinDur paused again. The quiet endured so long Belle wondered if he had fallen asleep. He looked so weary. But then he spoke on.

“I had lived scarce three and twenty years and thought I should live the remainder of my life as a solitary shepherd. I was content enough—then the black knight came.” He opened his eyes.

“Your black knight?” Belle asked.

“Not the exact one we see in the ballroom,” KinDur replied. “No, this was an old soldier—a dying soldier who was once known as a black knight—known for his fierce reputation in the land of my first master. He had been searching for me for years, he said. He wanted forgiveness. That’s all he wanted.”

Again KinDur paused, and Belle waited in further drawn-out silence.

"I couldn't give it to him," KinDur finally said. "I sat at his bedside as he died, and yet I couldn't give it to him. He pleaded, but I couldn't give it." Again he lapsed into silence.

"You don't have to tell me, if it's too painful," Belle finally said.

Her words seemed to bring KinDur back from far away. When he spoke his sentences were short, as if he could scarce bear the remembrance.

"He told me," KinDur said, "that my father had been the king. I had two older brothers and a sister. I was barely two years old. It was a power coup. He was acting in concert with the usurper; except he saved me contrary to their agreement. His wife would have nothing to do with me. She feared the fierce new king would discover the deception. I was given to a good couple in a far city who knew nothing. They believed I had been born a slave—an orphaned slave."

After another silence, KinDur said, "That is the short version. You are the first to ever hear it—to want to hear it. And now you know."

"But what of this black knight who follows you?" Belle asked.

"When the old soldier died, I became restless. I couldn't bear to sit all day on quiet hillsides with my thoughts. I just walked away early one morning—left my flock with another shepherd. Before the day was out, this black knight was at my side and has been my constant companion. He has never said a word, though sometimes I hear him in my mind. Together, we seem to have fallen into a strange purpose—going from place to place, mending charades; but seeking, too, a place to rest, I think. Strange, isn't it—how many charades there are to mend—all the while living in the midst of one? We are so tired," he said, and sighed again.

Belle's mind was now caught in a swirl of what he had just said about charades. What could he possibly know of her and Emaja? And how was she ever going to mend what she had broken? But still she had questions. "Is this black knight, the old soldier, do you think?" Belle asked.

"In some part, I think he is, waiting upon me to give him peace," KinDur said. "Maybe even trying to make amends in some way through the other broken lives we have encountered. There are so many amends to make."

A sudden thought came to Belle. "KinDur, what if the peace he is waiting upon is not his, but yours—pushing *you*?" she asked.

"I keep thinking—how can I do what he wanted and not feel as if I condone what he did, which I cannot do?" KinDur exclaimed.

A second thought came suddenly to Belle. "Does forgiving mean to condone? I don't think so, KinDur. What if it means to forgo and give—to forgo your sense of things and to give everything into the place where all our stories weave together?"

As she finished speaking her thoughts, Belle wondered if KinDur would think her presumptuous? How could she—a simple flower maid for all he knew—know anything about the torments of his life and how to resolve them?

But KinDur did not seem offended. "When you carry something heavy for so long, it changes things if you set it down. It mends some things, and others it breaks wide open. But it's change and change is never predictable. And so I fear."

He smiled at his own confession. "It's strange," he said, "to fear the mending, but even more to fear there will be no mending, or at least the mending that I want, that I scarce dare hope for. What if I take that on, or apart, or whatever is needed and—?" he gestured toward the ballroom, but then left his thought unfinished.

"Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to go glum. Let us talk of something else."

As backdrop to his suggestion, Belle heard Emaja's bubbling laughter waft above the buzz of the ballroom. She did not know, but would later hear how the black knight had spent the balance of the evening silently turning his turns back to many who had signed off. His pointed selections seemed random. None could fathom why some and not others. But at the sound of

Emaja's laughter, Belle's mind turned back to what KinDur has said about mending charades. It was past time, she decided, except she did not know how to do it. She was mulling her thoughts, when the sound of KinDur's voice interrupted.

"I suppose it comes down to remembering who is what," KinDur said, and gave another deep sigh that rattled in his ribs.

"You know Adeah?!" Belle whispered.

"Not that I know," KinDur replied.

"This is too much for me," Belle said, feeling suddenly desperate to talk to Adeah. "I must go, KinDur, but I thank you so for a most wonderful evening. And for telling me your story. I needed to hear it. Tomorrow, I'll tell you why."

He opened his mouth to speak, but Belle held up her hand and hurried on. "I hope very much to see you again, KinDur. I want to invite you and the black knight to return tomorrow. It has never been done, but I want you to return."

"It is KinDur who thanks Belle," KinDur said and he lightly kissed Belle's hand. She felt great

kindness well up in her as she placed a soft kiss to the broken bones of his forehead.

Only as she was nearing Adeah's house did she realize that KinDur had called her Belle. She went in immediate search of Adeah, but she was nowhere to be found. Finally, Belle lay upon her bed to ponder and await Adeah's return. She would confess her strange story and wise Adeah would know what to do.

When she awoke to bright sun, there was still no Adeah. Belle waited and waited and then she saw the note upon the hearth.

Adeah had written two short sentences: 'I shall be away a fortnight. I wish you well.'

Belle sighed in deep disappointment. That was the whole concern right there in a wish. The how of "well" was the terrifying part.

This is surely contemplation for the forest, Belle thought, so taking up her mandolin, she set out for the spot she had not visited for a whole year. All the way she felt increasingly fearful, but knew she had to face whatever would come.

When Belle reached the emerald pool, she saw that it was as it had always been. She spread her servant's cloak upon the lush grass and sat upon it, determined to slow-breathe her pounding heart into stillness. As she stretched, she felt the smooth stone Adeah had given her. It lay within her deep pocket—entirely forgotten in all the events that had transpired.

Taking it out, she rubbed it and wondered what Adeah had meant in saying it was a precious thing. In rubbing it, she began to feel intensely drowsy. She let her head drop as her hand relaxed upon the stone, and instantly, she was swirled into a panic of blackness. There, in dread beyond telling, she heard screams and sobbings. She felt immobilized beyond escape. But gradually, the black vapours drifted into a gloom where she could see Emaja, raving as a demented soul, clawing and scratching at some invisible face that Belle knew to be her own.

Belle struggled with all her might to turn and run but she seemed rooted to the spot. It seemed

forever that she struggled. It was only when she began sinking into a hot, black-cloyed mire that she remembered the stone, cool and reassuring, in her hand. She clutched it to her heart and in that moment, she felt a surge of energy and the sinking ooze congealed beneath her feet.

"Be still," Belle cried in a voice she had never used before. "You shall behave yourself, Emaja, and beyond that you will cease your pretensions and you will co-operate in getting us out of this mess I have created. You hear me. We are going to mend this whole charade."

The transformation was amazing. "Yes, Belle," Emaja said clasping her hands meekly in front of her. "I didn't mean to cause a fuss. I thought this was the way you wanted it. I thought I was helping. Did I get ... confused?"

"Yes, we most certainly did," Belle said.

"Now, Belle," the queen said, appearing at the edge of shadow and speaking in her most cajoling voice. "Let's be reasonable about this. It has worked so well with—"

"No, mother," Belle interrupted. "It has not worked well at all and you know it. Why this very night past, Emaja danced with armour and nothing else and she was enchanted. That is not working well at all, however you try to mix or shape it."

"It was very expensive armour," her mother said in an injured tone. "It was crafted, I am told, in the very furnace of the great god Hephaestus, and furthermore—"

"Good grief, Mother," Belle interrupted again. "You are worse than Emaja. But this is going to end, so come what may, I am going to make my choice tonight at the last gala which shall indeed be the last, but the choice shall be mine. And it shall be one with whom I can dance or not—as I choose."

"Whatever you say, my dear," her mother said in a meek and mild tone. And even in her dream Belle was thinking how simple dream solutions turn out when confronted, and how nice, if they would all resolve so well in real life.

Belle was just emerging out of her dream, when she heard Emaja's rippling laughter, and looking back into the mists of her dream she saw Emaja swan-dive from the palace window into the emerald pool—an impossible thing—yet it was accomplished with such grace. Then while waving cheerfully, Emaja was swirled into an eddy so vast it seemed the pool was swallowing itself. Emaja's final words rang out and echoed through the trees. "It's Belle. It's all bellissima."

Belle came fully awake with a start, but the pool was as serene as always. Yet there seemed a faint echo in the air—"It's all bellissima."

Dreams are so bizarre, Belle thought. But however bizarre, real life seemed even more so, and she had yet to resolve real life. So hurriedly removing her colour disguises with the pure water of the streamlet, she became once again, Belle of Tribbles.

Thankfully, the dream-Emaja was truly gone from Belle's room at the castle, so leaving the gown she had retrieved from Adeah's, Belle went

to the garden room and began her flower work for the evening's decor. It was there that the chief steward came upon her and stood amazed.

"Is that really you—the princess Belle?" the steward finally asked in a tremulous voice.

"Yes," Belle said, "it always has been—it's just not explainable."

"Ah," the steward said shaking his head in wonder. "Not explainable! Just what those knights of yester-night said—I could get nothing out of them."

"That's about it," Belle said smiling.

The steward smiled back uncertainly, but then he remembered and his face brightened as if certain things were better forgotten in the wake of more important ones. "Why princess Belle, it's your twentieth birthday this very day. May it prove a happy one, indeed."

"It shall be the best I ever had," Belle said.

When all was ready, Belle returned to her room. The maid was just arriving to help her dress, but Belle dismissed her, determined this

last night to go as she had the evening before—in the plain, but beautiful gown which Adeah had given.

When the queen came as usual to inspect Belle's majesty before the grandiose descent, the queen was stunned. "What are you wearing?" the queen cried. "What are you thinking?"

It was clear in the queen's tone that the dream at the pool had been in Belle's vision alone, but there it had fortified Belle to carry her plan to conclusion.

"I am going to my last nightly gala, Mother, and there I am making my choice," Belle said.

"Oh, my precious," the queen cried. "This is joyous news for I tell you there are such grand choices this night, and if I might express my preference, it is the one with the most chocolate-soft eyes that ever I did—"

"Mother," Belle interrupted sternly, wishing she did not have to speak so, but knowing she did. Her mother's eyes started wide at the strength in Belle's voice.

"Yes, Mother, this is Belle, and Belle will make her own choice and it is already made. But in courtesy, I shall honour those who have come, though we shall announce at the outset that this is the last *knightly* gala—with the news to spread forthwith and henceforth."

"But Belle," the queen cried, "you do not—"

Belle interrupted again. "And just so you know, I have instructed the clerk-of-order to add the black knight to the end of this evening's list. I have sent word already that he is to attend once more."

"The black knight!" her mother cried. "You cannot do this. It has never been done before."

"I have never chosen before either, Mother," Belle said.

"Bu-bu-bu," the queen stammered and in her stammer a knock sounded upon the door.

When Belle answered, even she was surprised, though now a little worried, but she concealed it. "Come in," she said graciously, "I do not think you have officially met my mother."

KinDur hobbled in and the queen sank swooning upon the divan. KinDur bowed low with creaking bones. "I am honoured, your highness," he said. But as the honour was not reciprocated by the fainted queen, KinDur turned to Belle.

"I don't know how it will turn out, Belle," he said. "I just wanted you to know that if I don't attend tonight, it's not that I didn't give my all. I don't know how he will react. How I will fare."

"But you said, you thought him mostly harmless," Belle said.

"Yes, I said that," KinDur said. "And I believe it. I just don't know how this is going to work."

Suddenly Belle had an idea. Taking KinDur's twisted hand, she opened it and placed Adeah's gift upon his palm letting his fingers re-curl their unnatural way upon the smooth roundness of the stone. Belle almost cried for the feel of his gnarled hand and for the pain he must endure every moment. She circled his hand with hers and said, "This gave me what I needed; it cannot do less for you."

KinDur placed his other gnarled hand upon hers, and quietly said, "You are truly Belle, and I am KinDur. And this night shall be my birth or perhaps, my final breaking; I know not which."

"It is a grand day for birth," Belle said.

"Ah, yes," KinDur said smiling. "Truly this day should prove a day of birth."

Belle had scarcely shut the door on KinDur's hobbling form when the queen rose up with groans to hold her throbbing head.

"Oh, my child," she said, "I had the most awful vision. I thought that loathsome creature who shadows the black knight came to this very room and that— Oh, well, never mind," the queen said interrupting herself and shaking her head as if to clear it from unpleasant memories. "We have no time for that. We have scarce time to get you into this exquisite gown made for this very birthday, and with it costing half a fortune why the least you can do is—"

Belle cut in again but not harshly, for her mother was her mother; she was what she was.

"I shall not waste it, Mother," Belle said, "I shall wear it at the wedding gala in a fortnight—when my friend Adeah returns."

"A fortnight?!" the queen cried. "A fortnight! What can be done in a fortnight? I need months. I need space. I need materials. I need—" But once again the queen interrupted herself. "Who is this Adeah? And more to the subject, who, in the name of Tribbles, is your chosen one?"

"KinDur," Belle said.

"I have never heard of him," the queen wailed. "What does he look like?"

"He is beautiful," Belle said. "And you shall meet him this night."

"Well, I pray you have seen enough men to be fair judge," the queen said, "but if I don't say so myself, that knight with the chocolate-soft eyes could not be less—"

Belle interrupted again. It seemed to be getting an irksome habit with her. "Sorry Mother, KinDur does not have chocolate-soft eyes," Belle said.

"This does not brook well seeing as how—," the queen began, and would have said much more, save that the sound of trumpets sent her into a frenzy. "It's the descent," the queen cried, and forgetting her silent vow to persuade Belle to a more deserving gown, the queen rushed with Belle in tow to the top of the grand sweep of marble stairs. Not until they were fully half-down did the queen remember her vow. But knowing that queens had to bear many things, the queen raised her eyes and bore on. And in her mind she thanked the gods for the tukka tree and its powder pods that eased the heavy burdens she was forever bearing.

Needless to say, the whole of Tribbles and more were gathered at the night's gala. It was not solely for birthday celebration of the one and only Belle. Word had spread concerning the previous night and gawkers had come hoping for repeat of drama or chaos. In addition, a goodly portion of the previous night's knights had also

returned because of circulating rumours that the black knight's unacceptable behavior was sure to put an end to the nightly balls, and that Belle would be forced to make a choice, dance or no dance. They wanted to be there, just in case.

Many of the elderly of Tribbles who hadn't been to a castle gala in years had also come, telling each other that there was only so much a good king and queen could endure, even for a beautiful daughter. They wanted to see how much endurance that might be, but everything proceeded in order and custom.

Belle seemed even lovelier than the previous evening, despite the vaguely familiar gown. She was manifestly more poised and gracious. Some said the queen had given her a royal talking to.

But for the gawkers, things were proceeding far too placidly. Someone even said, it was going to be a shorter night than usual, for unaccountably, unless one counted the night before, the list of knightly turns was shorter than expected. It seemed that several arrivals, upon conferring

with the humbled seven of the previous night, had not presented themselves for turn upon the list. Several of the unlisted newcomers claimed to have seen a black knight lounging outside the door of the clerk-of-order and had felt unnerved, so to speak. Thus events, some worried, might end well before the midnight hour. But then word began to circulate that the black knight, against all precedent, had been added at the very end of the list of suitors.

Soon it was being whispered that the black knight had terrified the clerk-of-order into a faint and added his mark to the list with his own hand. No, others said, they had unimpeachable witness that it had been written by an invisible hand. No, another said, the princess herself wrote it. No so, a stable lad said, it was far stranger than that—for the knight's black horse was seen to have taken the very quill in its equine teeth and written on the list, as plain as any man.

Thus, in all the speculation, not a soul dared leave. So gowns and tongues twirled in time to

the music and after each dance someone would whisper, "What's the count now?"

Soon the queen thought she heard faint rumblings after each dance—as in "Ten." "Nine." "Eight." "Seven." "Six."

"What, in the name of Tribbles, are they counting?" the queen muttered to the king. But the king was beyond answer for in his ecstasy that this was the last nightly gala he would be forced to, and that Belle was about to make last and final choice, the king had imbibed himself to a bliss that cared for nothing but further bliss.

"Five." "Four." "Three." "Two." The tension became palpable.

Then some one scoffed. "Bosh, that black knight has not even appeared when supposedly his turn is next. Or so we were told. I say it is a sordid trick by the royals to keep us here to the bitter end."

But as the music finished to the collective breath of "One," the black knight appeared alone and in full armour at the far doors from the royal

dais. The ballroom floor cleared in an instant.

The king, who was uninformed of this last listed suitor, started up, his eyes bulging and promptly toppled onto a royal steward who had lost his kingly focus in the drama. The re-focused steward grappled and hoisted the limp and portly king like a fumbled ball until both steward and king collapsed behind the dais in a tangled heap of staggering brilliance. No one saw, save two: Belle, who was hurrying to prepare her father, and the black knight, who was facing the royal dais. Belle's hand already covered her mouth to smother giggles when she heard, as did everyone, the deep rumble of laughter that sounded and echoed from within the black armour.

Belle turned with radiant smile and the queen rose with ashen face. They watched, one in joy, one in fear, as the black knight strode with supple ease toward the queen and the one and only Belle. In the near silence, everyone heard the queen's harsh whisper intended for Belle's ear.

"He's not presentable!" the queen said.

"He is," Belle said joyfully, and everyone heard that, too.

When the black knight reached Belle, he extended his armoured right hand. Belle laid hers upon the black steel and the knight bowed low. The music began, but the knight raised his left hand and the music stopped.

"Is this the lady's considered choice?" the knight asked.

"Is this the knight's considered choice?" Belle replied.

"Yes," said the knight.

"Yes," said Belle.

The knight bowed, impossibly low again, and Belle curtsied.

Then the knight raised his armoured hands and lifted the helmet from his head.

For those still able to count, there was in that moment seven groans as seven knights slid into renewed unconsciousness, but they would be left to recover where they lay for there were none so

magnanimous this night as to turn away from the unfolding scene.

Those in the rear of the ballroom saw a blaze of white hair where there had been black steel but moments before. Those at the side saw the profile of a strong and chiselled face.

Gradually each piece of armour was removed and placed upon the dais until the black knight lay in pieces and KinDur stood tall and straight in a simple white tunic with threads of gold.

KinDur bowed low again and extended his hand. But Belle said, "Wait" and to the wonder and then amazement of all, began to lift the left sleeve of her simple dress away from her arm.

The queen cried, "Belle, no."

But Belle continued until all could see the large, welted, purple mark of birth that covered her inner arm.

"I was born with this," Belle said.

"As are we all," KinDur said. "Now, may I have the honour of these last dances to end the nightly galas?"

"You may," Belle said, stepping gracefully into his arms. He whirled her before the queen and to their surprise, the king as well for he had found his blissful way back to the dais to stand beside his consort. The knight bowed low as Belle spoke.

"Mother, Father, this is KinDur," Belle said. "KinDur, my parents."

"I am honoured," KinDur said.

The king and queen nodded and smiled, each in their own way bereft of words.

Belle stepped back into the mended arms of KinDur. They took up the music with grace and beauty. Soon the gathered throng began to understand that this once crippled companion to a knight—this mended creature called KinDur—would be their new king when Belle became queen. And though they had been confused at Belle's unexplainable lapses of good sense in the past year, yet she seemed fully recovered and in their instincts, they trusted her choice could not have been better.

They signalled their approval in thunderous applause and many joined the dance in timing with their future king and queen.

Belle's laughter could be heard rippling above the music with KinDur's deep tones sounding a certain basso. In their newborn kinship, Belle and KinDur spoke with relieving humour of painful things.

Belle recounted the years of her tears and KinDur, the terror, scarce an hour past, when he had dissembled piece by piece the armour of the black knight and placed it upon himself. The pain of brokenness, he said, had been almost as nothing to the pain of going into and through that darkness. The contrarities of it were not explainable, he said, only experienced. Belle understood in some part. But now that it was accomplished, he was glad, he said, that it had been as it was. But grateful it was over.

At the conclusion of their fourth quadrille to celebrated birth and rebirth, the great castle bell began its midnight toll, and everyone agreed in

joyous shout of "Long live Belle and KinDur" that this day had proven a most happy day indeed. And though within their shout, the nightly galas ended forever, it was a shout to herald new and whole beginnings in the royal and happy house of Tribbles.

THE END

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