

“There’s a reason boots come in pairs. It’s so there’s a spare when you need to escape the children.”

—Old Woman in the Shoe from *Red Boot Diaries*

Chapter 28—WELCOME TO THE DOLLHOUSE

Hydra stopped and yanked me around a quarter turn. “Right there.” She pointed to a house not too far from us.

But it was a very big house, made of large stones and twisted wrought iron. Oh, and it happened to have a beanstalk growing next to it.

Rexi, who had been quiet for a while now, finally spoke up. “We have to get your glasses back from a pixing giant? Nope, no way. This is where I draw the line.” She’d been trailing behind the rest of us, and now she backed up even more and shook her head in defiance. “We keep stumbling into bad situations and now you want to go and invite yourself into one?”

I walked over to her and took her hand. “I have no choice. I’m finally doing what you railed on me for. Taking responsibility and making things right.”

“I just can’t this time. All these close calls . . . I’m out.”

Sometimes Rexi was a big pain in the rump. Like a hedgehog, she put up her barbs to keep people away. I’d grown used to her prickly humor. Come to count on it, really, to lighten a dark situation. Her wanting to leave was sudden, but to be honest, I was surprised she stuck around this long. She didn’t have anything on the line. I’m pretty sure I could guilt her into coming with me, but I didn’t want to put her in danger over a misplaced sense of duty. Even if

things went perfectly, there was a good chance I would never see her again. For some reason my throat was too closed up to say anything, so I simply nodded and hoped she understood.

“Where will you go?” Kato asked.

Shrugging, Rexi looked away.

Kato grabbed her shoulders until she looked at him. “You will always be welcome at my hearth. If you need safe haven, little sister, come to my mountain home.”

Though the two bantered and bickered constantly, there was no true animosity between them anymore. Just a playful sibling rivalry. You can’t go on this kind of journey without forming a bond with your companions.

Rexi gave a small smile and wiggled out of his grip, uncomfortable with the tenderness we were displaying for her. “I’ll keep that in mind. But, no offense, you two are monster magnets, so I think I’ll probably just head in the opposite direction.” She tackled me in a brief hug, then sprinted toward the beanstalk.

I watched as she climbed down, out of sight. “Do you think she’ll be all right?” I asked Hydra.

“Is 50/50. I would have better idea if had crystal ball.” My face fell. “Pardon, me. I am not realizink I vas supposed to lie. This head has not been vorn for century and out of practice. I vill try again.” Hydra cleared her throat, touched her fingers to her temples and stood up a little taller. “Da. I am seeink it now. She vill be fine.”

I wonder why that didn’t make me feel any better.

Hydra rapped on the base plate of the giant’s door. There was no answer. She knocked again and shouted, “Villamena Robin Grumblemire, if you are not vanting to be made into soup, then bring your big sticky fingered, rotten tuckus out here.”

“Vill, I mean, Willamena?” That couldn’t be right. In every retelling of Jack’s beanstalk, the giant was always a *he*.

Thunk thunk thunk.

It sounded like someone was coming. Or a herd of dragons was on stampede. Either option was not sitting well in my stomach at the moment.

The door opened up, just a crack. I could see one big brown eye in the open space. “Go away.” Then the door slammed shut again.

Hydra pursed her lips and beat on the door with her fist. “Perkhaps you vould prefer if I tell your father vhat mischief you have been snerdoodlink.”

The door flew open. “Please don’t tell papa. I’m not a’posed to go out.” The little girl was on her knees, pleading with Hydra.

Of course *little* might not be the right word to describe the person who answered the door. If the two of us stood next to each other, I might reach her shin—if I stood on tiptoes. Regardless of actual size, she was still clearly a giant child. Her brown hair was braided into uneven pigtails with ribbons at the ends. She was wearing a pinafore dress with knee socks and one shoe. There was a smattering of freckles across her nose and her front teeth were missing, probably why the girl had a slight lisp. All in all, a cute kid—that could squash me like a Bumpkin.

“Villa.” Hydra shook her finger sternly. “Are you takink things of not yours again? Ve have been speakink of this before.”

The child shook her head fiercely and bit her lip, looking like she might cry.

Hydra marched up to the giant as she might any kid. “This nose is not just for show. It can tell lie from fifty paces. So vhere are spectacles?”

The giant child got a thoughtful look on her face. I wondered if she was trying to decide if she should just squish the old lady before she could tattletale on her. Then she looked at Kato and me for the first time and her eyes lit up.

“But I didn’t *take* it. I traded. See?” She wiggled her toes on the foot that was missing the shoe. In fact, that shoe looked awfully familiar. I think I had seen its mate in the storage unit. “I’ll take you to them.” She swiped a hand under the three of us and scooped us into her other waiting hand.

Holding us to her chest, the giant shut the door and ran through the house. I had a whole bunch of questions to ask Hydra, but I was too smooshed against the pinafore fabric to move my lips.

“Who was at the door sweetheart?” a voice called.

“Nobody, Papa,” the little girl replied.

“Are you sure it wasn’t that Jack character?”

“Yes, papa. I’m going to my room now.”

“Fine. But make sure you clean it while you’re there.”

Willa tilted her hand back and peered in at us. “Ugh, parents can be so mean.” She whispered, but a giant’s whisper was still a dull roar to my ears.

I considered advising the little girl to appreciate her parents while she had the chance, then I thought better of it. If she got pixed at me, all she had to do was close her fist and grind my bones to make cupcakes in her Susie-Q oven.

She ducked into a room, closed the door, and set us down on the purple carpeting. It was shag and the fibers ended at my knees.

Willa got down on the carpet and propped herself up on her elbows. “This is my room. Do you like it?” Her tone of voice was eager. It was important to her what we thought.

“Yes. It’s really neat. Just like a princess’s room,” I said.

And that was the truth. It reminded me a lot of my own when I was that age, though in ginorma-scale. It looked like Geppetto’s toy store had backed up to the window and dumped out all its stock. Everything a little girl could want was stuffed into every nook or cranny. The thing is, usually the number of toys you have is related to the number of friends. As in, the more the toys, the fewer playmates you have to share them with.

At least that was my experience.

“Villamena, I am losink patience. Give back spectacles now.” Hydra tapped her foot impatiently, unwilling to placate the girl.

“But my Harpy doll *needs* them.” The *e* seemed to stretch out interminably long.

Willa crawled over to a house in the corner. It had a seam at the side, and when she pulled on it, the front opened up. The building was a fully furnished dollhouse, but all the furniture and decor was to scale for a human. My guess was she’d been pilfering—or *trading*—with Hydra for sometime now. She and Rexi might be related.

Kato and I walked over to the house while Hydra, muttering and swearing, trailed behind.

Willa pulled a figure from the upstairs. I can only assume it was her “Harpy” doll. It was a human-size plastic person with bad hair plugs and an ill proportioned body. I mean, there was no way those were real. Its wings, I mean. She was also wearing a simple sundress and glasses with multi-colored lenses.

“See. Doesn’t she look pretty?” Willa fussed with her beloved doll, straightening her dress and finger-twisting her hair.

“Well actually . . . *oof*.” Kato doubled over when my elbow hit his stomach. “Yes,” he gasped. “Lovely.”

“She look like criminal with stolen spectacle.” Hydra stomped over to the doll and made a grab for the glasses.

Willa pulled the doll back out of reach. “Nooo!” she wailed. “Harpy can’t go sunbathing without her sunglasses.”

Hydra rolled up her old lady sleeves. “I have tried being nice old voman, but vill now show vhy bigger fall harder.”

I dragged Hydra back by the scruff of her clinking shawl. “Excuse us just one second,” I called up to Willa and kept walking until we rounded the corner of the house. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Hydra huffed and adjusted her dress. “:Puny princess, what does look like? I am takink back belonglink from little rotten piggy.”

“It looks to me like you’re being a mean old hag to a lonely little kid. Do you realize if she throws a temper tantrum, your glasses will turn into glitter?” The look on Hydra’s face told me she hadn’t considered that. “Let me have a go.” I left Hydra and went back to talk to Willa.

Since I didn’t have any brothers or sisters, I’d never been around little kids before. Munchkins didn’t count. The only thing I could do was think back to what I really loved as a kid. Fashion. “What do you say we make a trade?”

“What kind of trade?” Willa’s pout lifted a bit with interest.

“Well, we really need those glasses.”

She cut me off with a whine. “But so does Harpy.”

“I know,” I soothed, “but what if she didn’t need them anymore?”

Willa's lip turned down in confusion. "Why wouldn't she need them?"

"Because nobody wears sunglasses to a wedding." That got her full attention. "What if I traded Harpy my special wedding dress for those glasses?"

Behind me, Hydra made sounds of protest. I was probably insulting her gypsy code of honor or something, since the glasses were stolen and not Willa's to begin with. Well, the dress was mine and I could do what I wanted with it.

Willa conferred with Harpy. After a lengthy discussion, the doll apparently agreed. "It's a deal!" Willa unhooked and took off the wire-rimmed glasses. I hadn't realized they were more like goggles with a latch in the back. She handed them to me, and I dutifully passed them to Hydra—who grumbled something that didn't remotely sound like a thank you.

Holding out her hand out expectantly, Willa waited for my dress. One problem: I hadn't quite thought through the exchange all the way. I didn't have anything to change into.

"Umm . . ."

Grasping the situation, Willa dropped Harpy and rifled through the little dollhouse dresser. The doll fell directly on Kato.

"Ugh," he grunted. "Now I know how Rexi always feels."

I hoped she'd made it down the beanstalk okay. It was probably a good thing she hadn't come with us. She had less patience for spoiled kids than Hydra did. I know—I had taken the brunt of it on many occasions.

"Here." Willa scooped me up and took a closer look. "Hey, can you make Harpy's hair pretty like yours?"

Only if I had a match, and then only for a minute.

"Sorry," I said out loud.

“That’s okay, I think I can do it.”

Oh Grimm have mercy. I couldn’t wait to see that. She deposited me in the upstairs, then went to work on Harpy’s wedding ’do.

The room she’d placed me in was purple with velvet wallpaper. It was pretty decadent for a dollhouse bedroom. Laid out on the bed was a dress that looked remarkably similar to a potato sack. Not wanting to delay this any further, I went behind the little dressing screen and took off the wedding gown. The dress had been a pain to move in, but I was still sad to see it go. Plus, I really hoped that it was a copy of my mother’s dress and not the real thing. Otherwise, that was not going to be a fun conversation when I got my mom back.

I threw the dress over the screen, where it was immediately snapped up. Next I pulled the sack monstrosity over my head. Oh, how far my fashion has fallen. Once upon a time, I wouldn’t be caught dead in anything not custom made. I told myself that it was for a good cause and if the stitching along the side was any indication, it was probably a Willa original.

When I stepped out from behind the screen, I was very glad Rexi wasn’t here. Even Kato, who supposedly loved me, couldn’t keep a straight face. While I was dressing, Willa had been busy. She’d taken a marker and colored the ends of Harpy’s hair green. She’s also cut holes in the back of my old dress to accommodate the doll’s wings. The fashionista in me screamed in horror, but the diplomatic princess in me pasted on a smile and complimented the little beast doll.

There were no stairs back down to the first floor, and Willa was too busy primping her bride, so I climbed over the edge of the floor and dangled. I dropped down into Kato’s waiting arms.

“My lady.” He smiled and gave a formal court bow.

I could play that, too. “My hero.” I sighed melodramatically and put a hand to my chest.

“My village idiots,” Hydra snapped. “If we are all done may we be on our way to more important task?”

“No!” Willa cried. “You can’t leave yet. You hafta to stay for the wedding.”

The lonely kid in me felt bad leaving her, but Hydra was right. We had a very important place to be. “Sorry, Willa. Maybe we can come back and play another time.”

Her nose flared and her lips scrunched in while her cheeks puffed out. I recognized that face. Hex, I was an expert at making that face. That was the face of someone who was used to getting exactly what they wanted and refused to take no for an answer.

Her hand shot out, grabbing the three of us. “You’re going to play with me *now*.” She dropped me and Hydra in a terrarium of some kind. “You two can watch the ceremony from in there.” She still had Kato in one hand. “And you can be the groom.”

Willa dropped Kato into her pinafore pocket and went to the bedroom door. “I’m gonna go ask papa to pull that big weed out front. That way you’ll never be able to leave. You can stay and play forever and ever and ever. Isn’t that great?”

Yeah. Just great.

“Rule #41: Always make sure to review the emergency exit plan on fairy flights or when staying somewhere new.”

—*Definitive Fairy Tale Survival Guide, Volume 1*

Chapter 29—WHAT GOES UP . . .

“Let me have go.” Hydra mocked my voice in a snippity falsetto that clearly sounded nothing like me. “She’s just a lonely little kid. Mat! I knew I should have locked door and tossed out key the moment I met you troublemakers.”

“Yeah, well, I liked the head with the nose piercing way better.” Lame as far as comebacks go, but it was all I had at the moment. Not to mention she was probably right.

So far I’d faced Bumkpins, demon puppies, a gigan, wicked witches and wizards of multiple colors and rotten attitudes, and I had outsmarted or outlucked them all. Yet here I was, in a terrarium where the bones of the last pet still remained. (I found them underneath a fake plastic plant.)

Still, sitting in here with Hydra was probably ten times better than Kato’s job. Ever since Willa had come back in with the oh so exciting news that her papa said she could keep her new friends, Kato had married Harpy at least ten times by now. He tried giving Willa frostbite, but she squeezed him until his gizzard nearly popped. Ever since then he’d been cooperative.

I had sympathy for the girl. Really, I understood what it was like to have people look at you funny or treat you like you were a radioactive fairy. It can’t be easy to be the *big* kid on the block. But just because you were more powerful than someone else did not mean you had the

right to do whatever you wanted with their lives. For some reason that thought sounded awfully familiar. I think a former frog told me very much the same thing before she slugged me.

“Willamena,” a voice boomed from just outside the door. “Time for supper. Put away your toys and come to the table.”

“Coming,” she called back. The child giant stood. She had her Harpy doll in one hand and Kato in the other. She seemed to be debating which to take with her. In the end she chose Harpy and brought Kato over to the terrarium and set him inside gently. “Sorry you can’t come. There’s no pets allowed at the table, and Papa has a real good sniffer. He’d smell you right away. But don’t worry, I’ll save a few scraps for you.” With that said, she rushed out the door.

I ran over to Kato and checked him over. It was still slightly awkward to have him around as a man. I was definitely more comfortable showing affection for the furry creature than I was with the human. Relationships are tough, whether you’re a princess, a horny toad, or on the run trying to guess which little piece of magic is going to malfunction next.

Aside from a little makeup Willa had plastered on, Kato seemed to be in relatively the same condition that I’d left him in, except swearing a lot more. Good thing Willa took better care of her toys than I did as a child—especially since we were the toys.

“Please tell me you have a plan to get out of here,” Kato said and took his shirttail in hand, trying to wipe Harpy’s lipstick kisses off.

I pointed out a few spots he’s missed. “Define plan.”

Kato groaned and flopped back onto the bark chips that lined the ground. “We’re doomed.”

“No, I have all the basics worked out. It’s just the details that are a little sketchy. Let’s start with the first step: getting out of this cage.” I looked up. The walls of the terrarium were

glass and very high. Even if we managed to climb to the top, there was still the lid to consider. We needed to break the glass, but there was nothing inside hard enough to do it. There was only one thing I could think of.

I knelt in front of the log Hydra had parked herself on. “Before you warned me not to use the flames. Why?”

“Varts and Vidgets, how many times have I to explain? That curse in your self is live and famished. Not only it eat life of you, it drain the power and life of all it touches. Keep feedink that thing like cow, you will be scorched like rotten milk.”

“So then I’d die.”

“Nyet, you twist to somethink which make Blanc seem like kitty cat. She is cold and vicked beyond compare. But you would be no more than a veapon of mindless destruction and chaos.” Hydra looked away, but not before I saw something in her eyes. She was scared—of me.

I thought back to the times I had used the flame, especially at the Ivory Tower. That voice, guiding me to burn it all. The feeling of being invincible, being powerful. Of having control. But who had really been in control? That was the question. If I didn’t use the power in anger, if I only gave it my life to eat, was I strong enough to harness the flame and use it to my benefit? I’d used it to save Kato once . . .

Let’s hope that in addition to my mother’s temper, I also got her strength.

“Move back,” I commanded Kato and Hydra. They both protested but got out of my way. Taking a deep breath, I centered myself and brought the flame to my hands. With no anger calling it, the power felt lazy, like it was sleepy. That was good, because I just needed it for one shot, then it could go back to sleep.

I really hoped it didn’t bounce off the glass.

No need to worry. The fireball hit the glass and exploded, shattering the front panel of the cage. I should have given more thought to the noise, though. After the glass crashed, I heard a girlish shriek and pounding footsteps.

Willa was on her way.

“Hurry, go.” I ushered Hydra and Kato out of the cage. We had just scooted onto the windowsill when the door flung open.

“No!” Willa cried when she saw the broken glass and empty terrarium. “You can’t go. Papa said I was allowed to keep you.” She began throwing toys and clothes frantically around the room in an effort to find us.

My hands still had flickers of emerald flames just above the surface of the skin.

It would be easy. It’s for the greater good.

What made the voice hard to ignore was that it was right. It would be so easy to give Willa a little blast. Just enough to get her out of our way so we could get on with our business. After all, which was more important: disenchanting the star or one giant girl?

Willa wailed, and that’s what broke the flames’ hold on me. Things that deserved to be blasted did not sob over losing their toys. *The important thing was that I didn’t*, I reminded myself. A snarky little voice in the back of my head, which sounded suspiciously like Rexi, said, *Whatever lets you sleep at night*. My stomach lurched at the thought.

Almost as if in response to my stomach, the room lurched as well. The whole house seemed to tilt, and I had to grab onto Kato or go flying off the sill. He gave me a cheesy grin, and I’m sure I turned a lovely shade of red that clashed with my hair.

Willa’s head jerked up from her search, braids nearly smacking her in the face. She ran to the door, her footsteps echoed by larger ones coming from the hall.

“Willamena, outside now!”

“What is it Papa?”

“Cloudquake. Go.” Papa giant pulled Willa by the hand and fled the room, and by the sounds of it, the house.

That was probably a decent plan for us, too. But if Willa pulled the beanstalk by the roots, we didn’t have a way down to the ground. Unless you count falling.

The room shook and tilted again like a ship out at sea. Furniture tumbled out of the dollhouse, and shattered glass tinkled as it scooted across the floor. We were flung from the windowsill.

Kato jumped to the velvet curtain, grabbed my hand, and swung me over. We slid the rest of the way down. Of course Hydra hadn’t managed to grab on, but where did she go? I looked around, following the sounds of grunting and cursing until I found her. She’d landed in a pile of dirty laundry under the sill. Her nose was wrinkled up and her lips puckered more than her usual old grumpy lady expression, all of which told me that giant BO, even in little girl size, was anything but pretty.

When my feet hit the purple shag carpet, the room dropped a bit, like a flying carpet that’s run out of gas.

“Let me guess. The ozmosis has taken the magic that kept this house on the clouds?” I helped Hydra get her leg free of Willa’s purple-heart bloomers.

“Not yet, but matter of time and best not be here when happens.” Hydra scurried off, still holding the underwear.

I hoped she had a plan for them and wasn't just trying to acquire new merchandise for one of her shops. Although, what in story would someone want to do with a giant pair of bloomers was anyone's guess.

We ran from the room as the house continued to rock and sputter. It was definitely sinking. Aside from the feeling in my gut that I now knew accompanied the feeling of going down, through the kitchen I could see Willa and her father standing outside. But only their knees and below, because the house had sunk so much that the roofline was probably at Willa height.

I was happy to see that the ozmosis was just sucking the magic from the cloud foundation of the house and not where the giants stood—for now. But if I were them, I'd definitely look into finding some solid ground.

"Do somethink useful. Grab here and go in chimney." Hydra impatiently shoved Kato and I into the fireplace and handed us an edge of the bloomers.

I coughed. Ash floated in the air, stirred up by the house's shaking. "What are we—" The rest of my sentence turned into the longest- and highest-pitched *weeee!* in history. Without any further warning, the house plummeted toward ground. I'd flunked fizzics, but I'm pretty sure that gravity times the whoosh equaled us shooting up through the chimney and floating down slowly by bloomerchute.

The giant's house crashed against the ground. It actually held up better than I thought it would. Only a few big cracks and . . . oh. Never mind. The stone walls fell inward, crumbling worse than last year's solstice fruitcakes.

With my arms over my head, holding on to my little piece of the lace and elastic waistband, I wondered at exactly which point this had become the new normal of my life.

Escaping death at the last possible moment in some odd or unlikely way that no sane person could ever imagine. I had the distinct impression that someone was looking out for me.

The wind shifted slightly, blowing the panty parachute away from the decimated and pointy stick remains of the giant's home. The three of us landed, not nearly as gently as I would have hoped, but without any broken bones. I struggled to free myself from the immense purple-heart fabric and finally came up for air through one of the leg holes.

In front of me, running around like Chicken Little screaming, "The sky is falling!" was my favorite perma-bed-headed bud, Rexi. Excited to be alive and excited to see her, I ran without watching my feet and tripped on the bloomer, ending up flattening instead of hugging her.

"Ugh. Do we really have to do this every day?" She shoved me off of her with a grunt. "It wasn't enough to try and drop a house on me. You had to make sure I busted a rib or two?"

Kato had freed himself as well and joined us. "Realize that you just can't live without us?"

Rexi got a weird frozen look on her face. "Yeah, something like that." She looked away and wouldn't meet my eyes. Probably embarrassed, since she made a big deal about leaving, that she didn't really want to be all alone.

"If you are done with the lovey dovey, perhaps you might remove these blasted undergarments from off my nose." Her voice was muffled, and there was a small lump that was probably her head. Her body, on the other hand, was crawling away in search of its arguably better half.

I was so happy to have us all together, most of us in one piece, that I didn't even complain about touching her snot dripping gooey head.