

# Spindle's End

Robin McKinley

*Random House Children's Books*

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Also by Robin McKinley

Praise for *Spindle's End*

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## About the Book

The princess has been missing since she was a baby. And Rosie, an ordinary girl, is growing up in an unremarkable little village far away from the royal city.

Unremarkable, that is, in a land where magic is so common that it settles over everything like dust. But a fairy curse is the kind of magic nobody wants, because it always comes true. And Rosie cannot stay ordinary for ever ...

Robin McKinley, winner of the Newbery Medal, reweaves a classic fantasy tale, sparkling with magic and adventure, some wonderful animals and birds and - of course - fairies, both good and bad.

# SPINDLE'S END

*A tale of magic and adventure*

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ROBIN MCKINLEY



CORGI BOOKS

*To the Lodge, my Woodwold  
and to the other Dickinsons who love it too*



PART ONE

## CHAPTER 1



THE MAGIC IN that country was so thick and tenacious that it settled over the land like chalk-dust and over floors and shelves like slightly sticky plaster-dust. (Housecleaners in that country earned unusually good wages.) If you lived in that country, you had to de-scale your kettle of its encrustation of magic at least once a week, because if you didn't, you might find yourself pouring hissing snakes or pond slime into your teapot instead of water. (It didn't have to be anything scary or unpleasant, like snakes or slime, especially in a cheerful household - magic tended to reflect the atmosphere of the place in which it found itself - but if you want a cup of tea, a cup of lavender-and-gold pansies or ivory thimbles is unsatisfactory. And while the pansies - put dry in a vase - would probably last a day, looking like ordinary pansies, before they went greyish-dun and collapsed into magic dust, something like an ivory thimble would begin to smudge and crumble as soon as you picked it up.)

The best way to do it was to have a fairy as a member of your household, because she (it was usually a she) could lay a finger on the kettle just as it came to a boil (absentminded fairies could often be recognized by a pad of scar-tissue on the finger they favoured for kettle-cleaning) and murmur a few counter-magical words. There would be



a tiny inaudible *t h o c k*, like a seed-pod bursting, and the water would stay water for another week or (maybe) ten days.

De-magicking a kettle was much too little and fussy and frequent a job for any professional fairy to be willing to be hired to do it, so if you weren't related to one you had to dig up a root of the dja vine, and dry it, and grate it, producing a white powder rather like plaster-dust or magic, and add a pinch of that to your kettle once a week. More often than that would give everyone in the household cramp. You could tell the households that didn't have a fairy by the dja vines growing over them. Possibly because they were always having their roots disturbed, djas developed a reputation for being tricky to grow, and prone to sudden collapse; fortunately they rerooted easily from cuttings. 'She'd give me her last dja root' was a common saying about a good friend.

People either loved that country and couldn't imagine living anywhere else, or hated it, left it as soon as they could, and never came back. If you loved it, you loved coming over the last hill before your village one day in early autumn and hearing the cornfield singing madrigals, and that day became a story you told your grandchildren, the way in other countries other grandparents told the story of the day they won the betting pool at the pub, or their applecake won first place at the local fête. If you lived there, you learnt what you had to do, like putting a pinch of dried dja vine in your kettle once a week, like asking your loaf of bread to remain a loaf of bread before you struck it with a knife. (The people of this country had developed a reputation among outsiders for being unusually pious, because of the number of things they appeared to mutter a blessing over before they did them; but in most cases this was merely the asking of things it was safer to ask to remain nonmagical first, while work or play or food preparation or whatever was being got on with. Nobody

had ever heard of a loaf of bread turning into a flock of starlings for anyone they knew, but the nursery tale was well known, and in that country it didn't pay to take chances. The muttered words were usually only some phrase such as 'Bread, stay bread' or, in upper-class households, 'Bread, please oblige me,' which was a less wise form, since an especially impish gust of magic could choose to translate 'oblige' just as it chose.)

Births were very closely attended, because the request that things stay what they were had to be got in quickly, birth being a very great magic, and, in that country, likely to be teased into mischief. It was so common an occurrence as to occasion no remark when a new-sown field began coming up quite obviously as something other than what was planted, and by a week later to have reverted to what the farmer had put in. But while, like the pansies and the thimbles, this kind of magic was only a temporary aberration, it could be very embarrassing and onerous while it lasted. Farmers in that country worried more about falling asleep during the birthing times of their stock than they worried about the weather; the destruction a litter of baby taralians caused remained, even after it had reverted to piglets. No-one knew how the wild birds and beasts negotiated this, but human parents-to-be would go to extreme lengths to ensure a fairy was on hand to say the birth-words over their new little one.

Generally speaking the more mobile and water-dependent something was, the more likely magic was to get at it. This meant animals - and, of course, humans - were the most vulnerable. Rocks were pretty reliably rocks, except of course when they were something else that had been turned into rocks. But rocks themselves sort of slept through magic attacks, and even if some especially wild and erratic bit of magic decided to deck out a drystone wall as a marble fountain, you could still feel the drystone wall if you closed your eyes and touched the fountain, and the

water would not make you wet. The lichen that grew on the rock, however, could be turned into daisies quite convincing enough to make you sneeze if real daisies did so; and the insects and small creatures that crept over the lichen were more susceptible yet.

(There was an idea much beloved and written about by this country's philosophers that magic had to do with negotiating the balance between earth and air and water; which is to say that things with legs or wings were out of balance with their earth element by walking around on feet or, worse, flying above the earth in the thin substance of air, obviously entirely unsuitable for the support of solid flesh. The momentum all this inappropriate motion set up in their liquid element unbalanced them further. Spirit, in this system, was equated with the fourth element, fire. All this was generally felt to be a load of rubbish among the people who had to work in the ordinary world for a living, unlike philosophers living in academies. But it was true that a favourite magical trick at fêtes was for theatrically-minded fairies to throw bits of chaff or seed-pods or conkers in the air and turn them into things before they struck the ground, and that the trick worked better if the bits of chaff or seed-pods or conkers were wet.)

Slower creatures were less susceptible to the whims of wild magic than faster creatures, and creatures that flew were the most susceptible of all. Every sparrow had a delicious memory of having once been a hawk, and while magic didn't take much interest in caterpillars, butterflies spent so much time being magicked that it was a rare event to see ordinary butterflies without at least an extra set of wings or a few extra frills and iridescences, or bodies like tiny human beings dressed in flower petals. (Fish, which flew through that most dangerous element, water, were believed not to exist. Fishy-looking beings in pools and streams were either hallucinations or other things under some kind of spell, and interfering with, catching, or - most

especially - eating fish was strictly forbidden. All swimming was considered magical. Animals seen doing it were assumed to be favourites of a local water-sprite or dangerously insane; humans never tried.)

There did seem to be one positive effect to living involuntarily steeped in magic; everyone lived longer. More humans made their century than didn't; birds and animals often lived to thirty, and fifty was not unheard of. The breeders of domestic animals in that country were unusually sober and responsible individuals, since any mistakes they made might be around to haunt them for a long time.

Although magic was ubiquitous and magic-workers crucially necessary, the attitude of the ordinary people towards magic and its manipulators was that it and they were more than a bit chancy and not to be relied on, however fond you were of your aunt or your next-door neighbour. No-one had ever seen a fairy turn into an eagle and fly up above the trees, but there were nursery tales about that too, and it was difficult not to believe that it or something even more unnerving was somehow likely. Didn't farmers grow more stolid and earthy over a lifetime of farming? Wasn't it likely that a lifetime of handling magic made you wilder and more capricious?

It was a fact much noticed but rarely discussed (and never in any fairy's hearing) that while fairies rarely married or (married or not) had children, there never seemed to be any fewer fairies around, generation after generation. So presumably magic ran in the blood of the people the way it ran in all other watery liquids, and sometimes there was enough of it to make someone a fairy, and sometimes there was not. (One of the things ordinary people did not like to contemplate was how many people there might be who were, or could have been, fairies, and were masquerading as ordinary people by the simple process of never doing any magic when anyone was around

to notice.) But there was a very strong tradition that the rulers of this country must be utterly without magic, for rulers must be reliable, they must be the earth and the rock underfoot for their people. And if any children of that country's rulers had ever been born fairies, there was not only no official history of it; there were not even any stories about it.

This did mean that when the eldest child of each generation of the ruling family came to the age to be married (and, just to be safe, his or her next-younger and perhaps next-younger-after-that siblings) there was a great search and examination of possible candidates in terms of their magiclessness first, and their honesty, integrity, intelligence, and so on, second. (The likelihood of their getting along comfortably with their potential future spouses barely rated a mention on the councillors' list.) So far - so far as the country's histories extended, which was a little over a thousand years at the time of this story - the system had worked; and while there were stories of the thick net of anti-magic that the court magicians set up for even the cleanest, most magic-antipathetic betrothed to go through, well, it worked, didn't it, and that was all that mattered.

The present king was not only an only child, but had had a very difficult time indeed - or his councillors had - finding a suitable wife. She was not even a princess, finally, but a mere countess, of some obscure little backwater country which, so far as it was known for anything, was known for the fleethounds its king and queen bred; but she was quiet, dutiful, and, so far as any of the cleverest magicians in the land could tell, entirely without magic. Everyone breathed a deep sigh of relief when the wedding was over; it had been a wait of nearly a decade since the king came of marriageable age.

But the years passed and she bore no children.

Certain of the king's cousins began to hang around court more than they used to - his generation was particularly rich in cousins - and one or two of these quietly divorced spouses who were insufficiently nonmagical. There had not been a break in the line from parent to child in the ruling of this country for over five hundred years, and the rules about how the crown was passed sideways or diagonally were not clear. Neither the king nor the queen noticed any of this, for they so badly wanted a child, they could not bear to think about the results if they did not; but the councillors noticed, and the king's cousins who divorced their spouses did themselves no good thereby.

Nearly fifteen years after the king's marriage the queen was seen to become suddenly rather pale and sickly. Her husband's people, who had become very fond of her, because she was always willing to appear at fairs and festivals and smile during boring speeches and to kiss the babies, even grubby and unattractive ones, which were thrust at her, were torn between hoping that whatever she had would kill her off while the king was young enough to remarry (and there was a whole new crop of princesses grown up to marriageable age outside the borders as well as a few within), and hoping that she would get well and come to more fairs and festivals and kiss more babies. The givers of boring speeches especially wished this; she was the best audience they had ever had.

The truth never occurred to anyone - not even when she began to wear loose gowns and to walk more heavily than she used to - because there had been no announcement.

The king knew, and her chief waiting-woman knew, and the fairy who disguised the queen's belly knew. But the fairy had warned the king and queen that the disguise would go so far and no farther: the baby must be allowed to grow unmolested by tight laces and the queen's balance not be deranged by high-heeled shoes. 'A magician might make you a proper disguise,' said the fairy, whose name

was Sigil, 'and let you dance all night in a sheath of silk no bigger around than your waist used to be; but I wouldn't advise it. Magicians know everything about magic and nothing about babies. I don't know nearly as much about magic as they do - but I know a lot about babies.'

Sigil had been with the king's family since the king's mother had been queen, and the king loved her dearly, and his queen had found in her her first friend when she came to her husband's court, when she badly needed a friend. And so it was to Sigil the queen went, as soon as she knew for sure that she was pregnant, and begged for the disguise, saying that she had longed for a child for so many years she thought she could not bear the weight of the watchfulness of her husband's people, who had longed for this child all these years too, if her pregnancy were announced. The king, who had wanted to declare a public holiday, was disappointed; but Sigil sided with the queen.

The poor queen could not quite bring herself, after all the long childless years, to believe it when her friend told her that the baby was fine and healthy and would be born without trouble - 'Well, my dear, without any more trouble than the birth of babies does cause, and which you, poor thing, will find quite troublesome enough.' And so the birth of an heir was not announced until the queen went into labour. The queen would have waited even then till the baby was born, but Sigil said no, that the baby must be born freely into the world, and freely, in an heir to a realm, meant with its people waiting to welcome it.

The country, that day, went into convulsions not unlike those the poor queen was suffering. An heir! An heir at last! And no-one knew! The courtiers and councillors were offended, and the highest-ranking magicians furious, but their voices were drowned out in the tumult of jubilation from the people. The news travelled more quickly than any mere human messenger could take it, for the horses neighed it and the trees sang it and the kettles boiled it and

the dust whispered it - an heir! The king's child is born! We have an heir at last!

It was a girl, and the names chosen to be given her on her name-day were: Casta Albinia Allegra Dove Minerva Fidelia Aletta Blythe Domina Delicia Aurelia Grace Isabel Griselda Gwyneth Pearl Ruby Coral Lily Iris Briar-Rose. She was healthy - just as Sigil had said she would be - and she was born without any more trouble than the birth of babies does cause, which is to say the queen was aching and exhausted, but not too exhausted to weep for joy when the baby was laid in her arms.

The eldest child of the reigning monarch was always next in line for the throne, be it boy or girl; but it was usually a boy. There was a deeply entrenched folk myth that a queen held this country together better than a king because there is a clear-eyed pragmatic common sense about an unmagical woman that even the most powerful - or rather, especially the most powerful - magic found difficult to disturb; it was thought that a man was more easily dazzled by pyrotechnics. Whether this was true or not, everyone believed it, including the bad fairies, who therefore spent a lot of their time making up charms to ensure the birth of male first children to the royal family. The royal magicians dismantled these charms as quickly as they could, but never quite as quickly as the bad fairies made them up. (As it was difficult to get any kind of charm through the heavy guard laid round the royal family, these charms had to be highly specific, with the knock-on effect that third children to a reigning monarch were almost always girls.) But the folk myth (plus the tangential effect that first-born princesses were rare enough to be interesting for no reason other than their rarity) guaranteed that the birth of a future queen was greeted with even greater enthusiasm than the birth of a mere future king; and so it was in this case. No-one seemed to remember, perhaps because their last queen had been



nearly four hundred years ago, that that queen had left some unfinished business with a wicked fairy named Pernicia, who had sworn revenge.

The princess' name-day was going to be the grandest occasion that the country had ever seen, or at least that the oldest citizen could remember - grander than the king and queen's wedding sixteen years ago - grander than the king's parents' wedding, almost fifty years ago, and certainly grander than the king's own name-day because he'd been born eighteen months after his parents' wedding and no-one had realized he was going to be the only one.

The king and queen wanted to invite everyone to the name-day. Every one of their people, they felt, should have the opportunity to join them on their day of joy and celebration. They were talked out of this ridiculous idea by their councillors - uncharacteristically in agreement on this particular topic - with some difficulty.

It had been the queen's idea to begin with. Her native country was just about small enough that everyone could be invited to a major royal occasion (although the royal list-makers and caterers and spare-chair-providers would hope that not everyone came), and the king and queen recognized by sight a substantial minority of their subjects. While she found her husband's country rather intimidatingly larger (and it seemed all wrong to her that many of his subjects would never meet their king), in times of great importance she reverted to her upbringing. The king was lucky enough to love his wife, and had been rather struck by her tales of a king and queen who had open court days, when anyone who wished to speak to them could turn up and do so. He thought an open name-day a splendid notion.

It will not do, said the councillors and courtiers. (The magicians were still nursing their snit about not having been told of the queen's pregnancy, and refused to attend the discussions about the name-day. What they were really

outraged about, of course, was that a mere fairy had successfully thrown fairy dust in all their eyes.) You must, said the councillors, have the sort of name-day that other countries will send emissaries to - we will need their good wishes, their favourable memories, in nineteen or twenty years' time. And you cannot make the sort of fuss that an emissary is going to remember pleasantly if a hundred thousand or so of your people are milling around the city walls, trampling the fields into mud, and demanding to be fed and housed.

This made the king and queen thoughtful, for the king remembered the long difficult search for his wife, and the queen remembered what a shock it had been when the envoy had presented himself at her father's rather small and shabby castle, and she had had to be rushed out of the kitchens where she was boiling sweetmeats and up the back stairs to wash her face and comb her hair and put on her best dress to meet him. (He had been eating her sweetmeats with a look of great concentration and contentment, when she had made a stately entrance into the front room, slightly out of breath from having hopped down the corridor on one foot and then the other, pulling on her shoes. She hadn't realized that her sweetmeats, excellent though she knew them to be, would render even a king's envoy happy to wait.)

A compromise was reached. It was the sort of compromise that made the councillors gnash their teeth, but it was the best they had been able to wrest from their suddenly obstinate rulers, who would keep insisting that their daughter belonged to her people. Heralds would be sent out to every village - each and every village - to proclaim at the town centre, which might be anything from the steps of the mayor's house in the larger to the town well or watering-trough in the smaller, that one person, to be chosen by lot (if the magicians had recovered from their snit, they would provide cheat-proof lots; otherwise Sigil

would find fairies to do it), was invited to the princess' name-day. And that one person, whoever he or she was, need only present the lot, as good earnest of the invitation, to be allowed entry into the royal grounds on the name-day.

The councillors and courtiers could only see the fabulous amount of organizational work, and, magicians or no magicians, the infinite amount of cheating that would go on - or at least would try to go on - as a result of this plan. And while the court folk were applying court mores to many ordinary people who wouldn't know a political intrigue if it grew butterfly wings and bit them, it was true that the heralds, who were themselves ordinary people under their livery, tended to let it be known, especially at the smaller villages, at the local pub after the official announcement was made, that the king and queen had wanted to invite everyone, really everyone. And that if the person with the royal lot showed up with a friend or two, chances were they'd all get in.

That took care of the common citizens, and, barring the number and manner of them, that was the easy part. Much harder were the high tables: who would sit near the king or the queen, who would have to make do at a slightly less high table headed by a mere prince or duke or baron, which countries were to be invited to send emissaries, and whether the fuss made over the emissaries should have more to do with the size and status of the country, or the number of unmarried sons in the royal family.

But hardest of all was what to do about the fairies.

Court magicians were members of the court, and there would be special high tables just for them, where they could compare notes on astrological marvels, cast aspersions on the work of other magicians not present to defend themselves, and be slightly worldweary about the necessity of coming to so superstitious and ridiculous an event as a royal name-day.

But fairies were a different kettle of imaginary watery beings. Some fairies were nearly as powerful as the magicians, and what they thought and did was much more varied and unpredictable. Magicians had to attend the Academy for a number of years, and anyone calling himself a magician - since it was usually a he - had a degree in hippogriff leather to show for it, although no-one but another magician would be able to read the invisible writing on it. Magicians could make earthquakes happen if they wanted to, or a castle go up (or down) in a night, and a properly drawn-up magician's spell could last a lifetime. Mostly they were hired by powerful people to spy on their powerful neighbours, and to demonstrate their existence, so that the powerful neighbours didn't try anything with their own magicians. (Fêtes where the magicians of rival families would be present were always well attended, because the spectacles were sure to be exceptionally fine.) Magicians without a taste for this sort of flash stayed at the Academy, or at other academies, pursuing the ultimate secrets of the universe (and philosophies concerning the balance of magic), which were, presumably, dangerous, which was why Academicians tended to have long sombre faces, and to move as if they were waiting for something to leap out at them. But the point was that magicians had rules. Fairies were the wild cards in a country where the magic itself was wild.

Even the queen was a little hesitant about issuing a blanket invitation to fairies. Several hundred fairies together - let alone several thousand - in one place were certain to kick up a tremendous dust of magic, and fate only knew what might be the outcome.

'But most fairies live in towns and villages, do they not?' said the queen. 'So they are, in a way, included in the invitation our heralds are carrying.' The fact was that no-one really knew how many fairies - even how many practising fairies - there were in the country; the ones

people knew about were the ones who lived in the towns and villages with other people and visibly did magic. There were known to be fairies who lived in the woods and the desert places (and possibly even in the waters), but they were rarely seen, and it was only assumed that they were fewer than the known ones.

There were also, of course, wicked fairies, but there weren't many of them, and they tended to keep a low profile, because they knew they were outnumbered - unless someone angered them, and people tried very, very hard not to anger them. It was the malice of the wicked fairies that gave the good ones a lot of their most remunerative work putting things back to rights, but generally speaking, things could be put back to rights. People were diligently cautious about bad fairies, but they didn't worry about them too much; less than they worried about the weather, for example, a drought that would make crops fail, or a hard winter that would bring wolves into the towns. (It was actually easier if droughts or hard winters were caused by a bad fairy, because then what you did was very straightforward: you hired a good fairy to fix it. The capriciousness of real weather was beyond everybody, even the united efforts of the Academy, who periodically tried.)

'I think,' said the king slowly, 'I think that's not quite enough.'

The queen sighed. 'I was afraid you'd say that.' There had been relatively little magic in her father's country and she had never quite adjusted to the omnipresence of magic, and of magical practitioners. Magic had its uses, but it made her nervous. Sigil she loved dearly, and she was at least half-friends with several of the other fairies strategically employed in the royal household; the magicians she mostly found tiresome, and was rather relieved than otherwise that none of them were at present speaking to her because they blamed her for the secrecy of her pregnancy.

There was a pause. 'What if,' said the queen at last, 'what if we invited a few fairies to be godmothers to our daughter? We could ask twenty-one of them - one each for her twenty-one names, and one each for the twenty-one years of her minority. Twenty-one isn't very many. There will be eighty-two magicians. And it will make the fairies seem, you know, wanted and welcome. We can ask Sigil whom to invite.'

'Fairy godmothers?' said the king dubiously. 'We'll have a time getting that past the court council - and the bishop.'

Sigil had been worrying about the fairies too, and thought that inviting one-and-twenty fairies to be godmothers would be an excellent idea, if they could hedge it round first with enough precautions.

'No gifts,' said the king. 'Too controversial.'

'Oh, godmothers must give gifts!' said the queen. 'It would be terribly rude to tell them they mustn't give their godchild anything!'

'The queen's right,' said Sigil, 'but we can tell them they must be token gifts only, little things to amuse a baby or flatter a baby's parents, nothing - nothing - difficult.' What she meant, the king and queen both knew, was nothing that would make the princess unduly visible on the ethereal planes. That sort of thing was the province of heroes, who were old enough to choose it and strong - or stupid - enough to bear it. 'And I think we should invite at least one man. Male fairies are underappreciated, because almost no-one remembers they exist.'

'You must be the first of the godmothers, dear,' said the queen, but Sigil shook her head.

'No ... no,' she said, although the regret was clear in her voice. 'I thank you most sincerely. But ... I'm already too bound up in the fortunes of this family to be the best godmother for the new little one. Give her one-and-twenty fresh fairies, who will love the tie to the royal family. And it can be quite a useful thing to have a few fairies on your

side.’ The king remembered a time when he was still the prince, when one of the assistant chefs in the royal kitchens, who was also a fairy, was addressed by a mushroom, fried in butter and on its way to being part of a solitary late supper for the king, saying, ‘Don’t let the king eat me or I’ll poison him’. There was always a fairy or two in the royal kitchens (the rulers of this country did not use tasters) and while it took the magicians to find out who was responsible for the presence of the mushroom, it was the fairy who saved the king’s life.

Sigil took the queen’s hands in her own. ‘Let me look after the catering. What do you think the cradle should be hung with? Silk? And what colours? Pink? Blue? Lavender? Gold?’

‘Gold, I think,’ the queen said, glad to have the question of the fairy godmothers agreed upon, but disappointed and a little hurt that Sigil refused to be one of them. ‘Gold and white. Maybe a little lavender. And the ribbons should have pink and white rosettes.’

## CHAPTER 2



THE SHAPE OF the country was rectangular, but there was a long wiggling finger of land that struck down south-east and a sort of tapering lump that struck up north-west. The south-east bit was called the Finger; the north-west lump was called the Gig, because it might be guessed to have some resemblance to the shape of a two-wheeled vehicle with its shafts tipped forward to touch the ground. The royal city lay a little north of the Finger, in the southeast corner, nearly a month's journey, even with frequent changes of horses and a good sprinkling of fairy dust for speed, to the base of the Gig.

The highways that bound most of the rest of the country together gave out at the beginning of the Gig. The local peer, Lord Prendergast, said, reasonably, that he (or his forebears) would have built a highway if there had ever been any need, but there never had been. Nothing exciting ever happened in the Gig, or at least hadn't since the invasion of the fire-wyrms about eleven hundred years ago, before the days of highway-building. So if you wanted to go there you went on cart tracks. (The lord's own travelling carriages were very well sprung, and he would upon occasion send them to fetch his less well equipped, or more easily bruised, friends and associates outside the Gig.)



And what you needed, muttered the royal herald, bearer of a little pouch of cheat-proof lots (almost empty now) and important tidings about the princess' name-day, was not swift horses but six-legged flat-footed ponies that could see in thick mist and the green darkness of trees. He had given up riding, after his fancy thoroughbred had put its foot in a gap of root and stumbled, for the umpty-millionth time, and he was now leading it, half an eye anxiously upon it, for he thought it was going a bit lame. He sneezed. Also needed were human beings impervious to cold and damp. The Gig was a damp sort of place, and most of its village names reflected this: Foggy Bottom, Smoke River, Dewglass, Rainhill, Mistweir. Moonshadow didn't sound very promising either, although at least it didn't utterly guarantee wet; and the last village of the Gig, right out next to the wild lands where no-one went, was called Treelight. He had thought this was a very funny name when he was setting out from the royal city. It was less funny now, with the leaves overhead dripping down his neck, and he not yet arrived at the first village of this soggy province. He sneezed again.

To think that Lord Prendergast preferred to live out here and leave his seat at court empty from year's end to year's end! There must be some truth in the stories about that family, and the house they lived in, Woodwold, a vast mysterious place, a thousand years old or more, full of tales and echoes of tales, and with some uncanny connection with the people that lived in it. But it was still a grand and beautiful house - grand enough for a highway to have been built to get to it. Except it hadn't been.

The herald blinked, distracted. The sun had suddenly cut through the leaf cover and a gold-green shaft of light fell across his path. He looked at the sunbeam, scowling; there was no reason, this far off the highway and with soggy leaf-mould the chief road surface, for there to be so much dust to dance in a sunbeam. The thick dust and moist air would

conspire to leave ineradicable chalky smudges on his livery. He sighed again. Maybe Foggy Bottom – which should be the first village he came to – would have a blacksmith who could look at his horse’s foot.

Foggy Bottom had heard of the princess’ birth as quickly as the rest of the country; one of the village fairies had a particular friend who was a robin whose wife’s cousin’s sister-in-law was closely related to a family of robins that lived in a bush below the queen’s bedroom window, and had heard the princess’ first startled cry. Foggy Bottom was expecting something like the herald (and was accustomed to travellers who had never been to the Gig before, by the time they reached Foggy Bottom, looking cross and rather the worse for wear), but was not at all expecting his announcement.

They had turned out eagerly to hear him – this was one of those villages where the herald stood at the public watering-trough to make his proclamation – but they were only expecting some cushiony, royal adjectives to ornament the known fact of the young princess’ birth. They were so startled by the invitation to the name-day they forgot to relish her name.

‘From *every* village?’ said Cairngorm, who ran the pub. There was a square, although it was not square, at the centre of the village, and the watering-trough stood across from the blacksmith’s, with the pub at ninety degrees, and the wrights’ yard opposite. The herald stood next to the watering-trough, as he said the familiar words, his natural inclination towards the pub in this case counterbalanced by his anxiety to learn if his horse was sound enough to go on.

The herald stopped thinking about his horse and nodded. He still enjoyed this part, enjoyed creating astonishment, enjoyed watching the faces in front of him shift from pleased anticipation to surprise, even shock, enjoyed handing out the special cheat-proof long straw that would instantly look like all the other, ordinary straws as

soon as it was laid among them. In the bigger villages the straw had to go to the mayor; the little villages were his call. He favoured pub proprietors; he thought Cairngorm would do nicely. 'Every village. Heralds have been sent to every village - at least,' he amended, 'every village we know about from the last census.'

'If that don't beat all,' said Grey, who had a farm outside the village and was only in town today because he had a broken plough-handle that had to be mended before he could get on with business. 'Well, I can't go.'

'Make yourself popular by selling your lot!' shouted a friend across the heads of the crowd; several people laughed, and then the conversation became animated and general. Katriona, who had been standing with Cairngorm's elder daughter, Flora, the two girls holding each other's hands in excitement, said to her friend, 'I must go!', ducked under a few arms and round a few bodies and fled back to her aunt's house. 'I *told* her she should come for the herald's announcement!' she muttered between breaths. 'I *told* her!'

But when she burst in through the door and babbled out her news, her aunt was unflustered, and her hand holding the spindle, and her foot on the pedal, never faltered, and the woollen thread went on spinning itself fine and true. 'I'm not at all surprised,' she said, although she let her wheel come to a stop so she could hug her frantic niece into some calm. 'I've always liked the queen; robins don't nest outside just anyone's window.' Katriona's aunt was the fairy whose robin friend had told her of the princess' birth. She was generally considered the best fairy in Foggy Bottom; some said in the entire Gig.

The herald was gone the next day after a merry evening telling stories about the royal family (some of them true) in Cairngorm's pub, and a beautiful sleep in her best feather mattress. He had been able to give himself over to jollity because the blacksmith had told him his horse would, after

all, be able to go on the next day - although he had had a funny way of putting it, almost as if some magic would be worked overnight, which in a smith's forge was, of course, nonsense. Smiths were often rather enigmatic - it was one of the perquisites of the job - as was the face-obscuring thatch of beard which this smith did not have. Perhaps that was the reason the herald had found him odd; he had never seen a clean shaven smith before.

The herald was a little sorry about the early start in the morning - wistfully recalling the beer of the night before, thinking that perhaps there was something to be said for some bits of the back of beyond - but his horse was waiting for him, snorting red-nostrilled at dust motes and dancing round on all four feet uniformly. The herald looked at him a bit waspishly; he wanted a riding-animal, not an adventure. The smith said neutrally: 'He'll have got used to our roads by now. You just climb on and point him.' And hang on, thought the herald, and was catapulted down the village street in the direction of Smoke River.

The lot-drawing was held that same evening in Foggy Bottom. There was some joshing with Katriona's aunt and Nurgle, the laundress, and especially Snick, who wasn't a real fairy but couldn't help winning at cards, and one or two others of the local fairies, about not using magic to mind how the lots went - and with Katriona herself, although she kept shaking her head and saying, 'I don't *do* that, you know I don't do that,' while her aunt, who could but wouldn't (and was privately rather disparaging about the magicians' supposedly tamper-proof lot), only smiled and said something bland, and Snick, who didn't think he could but wasn't sure and couldn't do anything about it if he did, looked worried. Foggy Bottom liked its fairies - Nurgle was even married - and didn't make them hold sprigs of hawthorn and rowan as charms against magical meddling, as some towns had done - although Snick had a bit of both in his pocket, just in case.

There was a hush as everyone drew - Grey held the straws, because he had declined either to have a lot or to bestow it on anyone else - and as more and more were drawn, and fewer and fewer were left in Grey's fist, the tension was pulled tighter and tighter. But Gash, who had drawn last, held up his straw, the same length as all the other losing straws, and said, 'Then who has it?'

There was a silence, and Katriona burst into tears. Cairngorm made her way to the girl's side - her aunt already had an arm around her - and prised her fingers open. There lay the single long straw.

'You *knew*,' Katriona said to her aunt later, when they were back home again. Katriona was sitting so close to the fire that her face was starting to scorch and in a minute her heavy petticoats would start to burn her legs. The heat and brightness were reassuring, as if she were about to be drawn away to some cold dark unguessable fate. The tap and whirr of her aunt's spinning wheel went on behind her. 'You knew. I thought it was funny you came to the drawing. I knew you'd never go to the name-day even if you drew the long straw. You knew I was going to.'

'Well, yes,' admitted her aunt. 'It was a surprise to me - knowing, I mean; I haven't had a pre-vision since you were a tiny child and I saw you would come to me. I hadn't known about the invitation till you told me, but it stood out so very clearly that you would draw the long lot I knew it must be true. I thought it might come as rather a shock to you, and I wanted to be there when it happened.'

'Maybe I won't go.'

*Tap. Whirr.* 'Why not?'

'You admitted you wouldn't go.'

Her aunt laughed. 'I'm an old lady, and I like to sleep in the same bed every night, and ... I hear more from my robin than I tell you, not because I don't want to, but because I can't.' Katriona knew about this. Beast-speech often didn't translate even when you'd think it should. 'I know as much

about the royal family as I need to. I think you'll like the little princess. I think you should go.'

'I won't get near enough to like or dislike her,' said Katriona. 'She'll just be a lot of gold and white and lavender silk with pink and white rosettes.' One of the translatable things the robin had told her aunt was how the cradle would be decorated.

'I'll give you a safety charm,' said her aunt. 'So you won't be eaten by bears or attacked by robbers. I can even give you a charm so that there are never stones under your blanket when you lie down to sleep at night.' Katriona laughed, but the laugh quickly faded and her face was moody as she stared into the fire.

'My dear,' said her aunt. 'It's a rather overwhelming enterprise, I know.'

Katriona moved abruptly away from the fire and began to flap the front of her skirt to cool it off. 'I haven't been farther than Treelight since ... since...'

'Since your parents died and you came to live with me,' her aunt said gently. 'Yes, I know.'

'And I've never been off the Gig since then.'

'What better reason to go farther than the invitation to the princess' name-day? You go, dear. Go and have a wonderful time. I'll be very interested to hear what you have to say about everything. Robins tend to see the big and the little and leave out all the human-sized bits in the middle.'

And so Katriona went.

Barder, who was the wheelwright's First Apprentice, offered to go with her - 'Not the whole way,' he said, peering at her anxiously. 'I'm not trying to take what isn't offered,' - although the herald had made the usual unofficial announcement that a friend or two of the person with the long lot would not be turned away. 'But - it's a