

The Oak, a novel

By : froggysowner

Little Emali stumbled across the root covered ground and looked up into the huge, majestic oak tree. A movement caught her eye in one of its many tall branches. A mere glance told her it was a young boy, a little older than herself. He looked down at her as if he were the king and her a small subject. Which was the exact case for he was indeed the next in line for the throne, but she will no longer be a small subject anymore.

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Chapter 1: The Discovery

Chapter 1: The Discovery

Emali woke up to find herself among the courtyards flowers, where she fell asleep earlier that day. She sat up and looked around the beautiful garden and view of big, old and majestic oak trees in the distance. All around her, her faded rose pink dress spread out.

She brushed the pieces of grass from her long, curly, fine, blonde hair. Emali took a pin from her sleeve and tried to pin back her mane of hair from her face. After it slipped out she gave up and pinned back onto her puffy sleeve. To tame her locks she just stuffed it behind her small ear. The small child got up onto her delicate, but dirty, feet and examined her faded dress. She smoothed out its wrinkles and stretched upwards toward the blue, blue sky.

After a few quiet moments Emali decided that she might as well discover what there was to be found over by the oak trees. She began her trek through the soft flower beds and around the intricate bird baths. Her bare feet found the hard ground around the giant trees.

Little Emali stumbled across the root covered ground and looked up into the huge, majestic oak tree. A movement caught her eye in one of its many tall branches. A mere glance told her it was a young boy, a little older than her. He looked down at her as if he were the king and her a small subject; which was the exact case, for he was indeed the next in line for the throne, but she will no longer be a simple commoner anymore.

"Who goes there?" shouted the boy from atop a thick gnarled branch. He scowled down at the small dirty peasant. Although he did not show it, he was surprised, but happy, that this person was around the same age as him. Maybe, just maybe, they would end up friends, but no one wanted to be *his* friend. They were all too scared of him. His small glimmer of hope vanished quickly. *But maybe she is different*, he argued; for she had not run away at the sight of him, but looked calmly up at him from below. His hope began to grow, as he jumped down lower to a better acknowledge his visitor.

"Who are you?" the boy asked regally.

"Well, who are you?" the small girl answered back. His hope diminished slightly. She did not know who he was, but maybe, hopefully, it wouldn't change anything...

"I asked you first," he replied stubbornly.

"Fine, if you must know, my name is Emali Vance. Now you answer my question," she answered just as stubborn.

"I am Prince Ryalnd." His majesty saw a glimmer of shock cross Emali's face but it was quickly replaced with her usual stubborn smile. His hope that she would treat him normally bloomed and he couldn't hide the broad smile spread across his lips.

"What are you smiling for?" She had a look of teasing in her petite features. "Should I bow or something?"

"No, you don't have to bow." He couldn't seem to stop smiling. Emali liked his smile, it was kind. "Do you want to play with me? I'm going on an adventure!" Emali told him.

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"You want me to come with you?!"

"That's why I asked dumbo. Just cause you're a prince doesn't mean you can't play with me." She crossed her arms and gave him a hard look with the hint of a smile underneath.

"Of course I want to come! Where to first?" Ryland couldn't help the pure happiness inside him. He was actually going to have a friend!

Chapter 2: Summer is Coming

Chapter 2: Summer is Coming

Over the months the two became inseparable. Every day they would meet at the base of the biggest oak. The prince and the peasant explored the great trunks to the highest branches. Emali and Ryland became naturals at swinging on the low branches only to soar down to the ground when they let go. Their shoes would always end up discarded and their feet would come home black.

One morning in late spring the duo was up in one of their usual spots in the tree. They sat across from each other on the thick limbs. "How was last night's dinner?" asked Emali, playing with the lace on her dress.

"You know, the usual. Lots of stuck-up, fancy dressed, power hungry people. Be happy that you weren't forced to come, trust me," Ryland replied with a scowl. "So how were things at your place last night?"

"Ugh, don't remind me. Another fight between Gessa and Shawny over something stupid. I think this time it was who got the last piece of cake." Emali rolled her eyes at the memory.

"Sounds like we both had a pretty suckish night," the heir concluded.

"Yeah, and many more to come from now on, I guess, with the new season coming up. I can't wait for summer, but I don't really want it to arrive."

"I know what you mean. More things to attend and more chores to do. But there is also the amazing weather; the huge parties; and seeing family and friends." Ryland got a glazed look over his eyes as he imagined what the summer would bring. Emali snorted.

"What?" Ryland asked.

"You might be excited to see your family, but I'm not."

"Why not? Don't you love them?"

"Of course I do, it's just that I don't have much. And the ones I have are loons."

"Well someone has to love the loons of the world. Why not you?"

"Haha, I guess you're right. So who is coming to see *you* this summer?" she wondered aloud.

"My Uncle Mavric is coming with my cousin Ton! Ton is 2 years older than me! He turned 10 this year! He is always happy to see me!" Ryland's face was flushed with excitement about seeing Ton.

Emali looked back down at her tattered lace dress. She would love a cousin to look up to, but all she had was a couple of whiny babies for cousins. And most of her Uncles had disappeared since before she can remember. "What about your uncle? Is he nice?"

The corners of the prince's mouth drooped slightly. "My Uncle is very strict," was all he said. Emali decided to drop the matter.

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"So what should we do today, your highness?" The commoner loved to tease her friend about his status in the kingdom.

"I think we should play...hmm...Oh! I know! I want to play Deserted Islanders!" He exclaimed, reciting an often played game to pass the time in the tree tops.

"Okay! You go grab some firewood and start the fire and I'll go get us some wild fruit!" Emali shouted as she vanished into the leaves.

Chapter 3: Years Pass

Chapter 3: Years Pass

As the years went by, their playground expanded. The prince and the commoner explored the vast grounds around the castle. The secrets were uncovered, and the fresh grass trodden upon. The lattice vines were climbed and the birdbaths splashed everywhere. The dark green hedges were looked over and the flowers made into necklaces. The masters of the grounds, Emali and Ryland.

One sunny, summer afternoon Emali and Ryland flopped down on the no-longer-dewy grass. They spread their arms wide and made grass angels that didn't show. Blue sky stretched above them. A monarch laded lightly on a daisy nearby. Emali turned to Ryland and giggled.

"What's so funny?" The heir laughed. He loved Emali's smile.

"Nothing, just you," she said with a grin.

Ryland grabbed a handful of freshly mowed grass and threw it over top of the girl.

"Ahhh!" she screamed and tossed some onto her attacker. After a few moments the two were covered in grass and dirt. It was a full fledged grass war.

"Okay, this grass is making me itchy." Emali scratched her tanned calf.

"I say we go jump in the lake. That'll get the grass off!" announced him as he jumped to his bare feet.

"Sounds good to me!" They raced on top of the worn stepping stones to the water's edge. The body of water was more of a giant, crystal clear pond stretching in front of the castle's entrance. Ryland splashed into the water to stop knee deep and wait. Before Ryland could turn around though, Emali came crashing into him with all her force. Both landed in the water with a "*SPLASH!*"

Emali came up spluttering and laughing, soaked to the skin. Ryland broke the surface, covered in sludge from the bottom. 4 years ago he would have been totally freaked out by ruining his fancy, expensive clothes, but with a friend like Emali, he needed to accept that he was going to get *filthy*.

As the girl rubbed the water out of her teal eyes, the prince grabbed her from behind and tugged her under again. The two splashed and dived to their hearts content while the sun slowly got lower in the sky.

Today was not an ordinary day, however, because today just happened to be the anniversary of the first day they met. Their wonderful friendship had lasted 4 years. Prince Ryland would be turning 12 next month. And the young Emali had only 2 months till she was the same age. Their childhood was slowly coming to a close. In the next few years they must face new responsibilities, new people, and new challenges. And one of them must face a bright, but difficult new future.

Chapter 4: A Royal Birthday

Chapter 4: A Royal Birthday

Emali raced through the crowded streets, jam-packed with citizens and customers. Her strawberry blonde hair was in adorable soft curls. A beautiful butterfly clip pinned back the bangs from her freshly washed face. In her delicate, sparkling clean hands were her white strappy sandals, for it was impossible to run in those death traps. Her rose pink dress went beautifully with her hair. It swirled around her as she raced toward the castle. The lace bow hitting the small of her back as she made her way past the many shops.

As she got to the castle gate's side entrance, she slipped on her shoes. Emali walked calmly over to the group on the other side of the courtyard, trying to calm herself.

The commoner went and stood by a young man. He was wearing the finest blue suit specially made just for him. His small gold crown was upon his straight brown hair. The hair was swept aside so they didn't get into his deep emerald eyes. Prince Ryland looked at his best friend and felt happiness explode inside him. The young lady he looked at was at her finest today. He had personally asked her to dress up for the event, well pleaded her more like it. He was very glad he did. She looked amazing. *Maybe now his father would allow...*no, he must not think of that at this moment. Today was the heir's 14th birthday, and he was expecting visitors. The Prince Mavric, his uncle, and Prince Ton, his cousin, was coming to celebrate with him.

"Glad you could make it," Ryland whispered.

"Glad to be at your service, your majesty." responded Emali, side glancing at him and smirking.

Far off in the distance a carriage appeared over the crest of the hill. The king, Ryland's father, stood out to greet his brother-in-law. King Stephyn was a fair ruler. There was no poverty in his kingdom, and everyone had a decent life. He was known across the land for his excellent laws that helped maintain society, but also gave the citizens freedoms. The Kingdom of Kalaria was viewed greatly by many.

As the horses drew closer Prince Ryland stepped forward so he was just behind his father. Ryland's mother, Queen Hethar, came up and put a hand on his shoulder. The only commoner, who did not live or work at the castle, present stood behind the rest of the royals, as the horse-drawn carriage came up the winding road to the castle gates.

Two pages swung the wrought-iron gates open to let the guests of honor enter. The first thing young Emali noticed were the magnificent horses pulling the uncle and his son. They were the whitest horses she had ever seen, and the stable here had lots of horses! The horse on the right had a mane the color of rich dark chocolate; the other had hair the shade of warm caramel. Though she was still a good distance away, she could make out their brilliant blue eyes. Emali had never seen eyes like that, even on a person. At first glance she fell in love with these horses, and couldn't take her eyes off them. The only reason she tore her teal gaze from the steeds was because the passengers had opened the door and were making their way over to the group.

King Mavric was exactly as Emali pictured, tall, broad shouldered, and regal with a mop of wavy black hair with tints of gray. *His deep purple suit makes him look like a giant plum*, thought the commoner. Yet there was something intimidating about Uncle Mavric, but she could not determine what exactly.

On the other hand, cousin Ton did not look anyway how she pictured. She pictured an older Ryland, but she was very off. The young man had flow of golden locks that stopped just below his ears. His face had a hard, superior look to it, and his mouth set in a small, permanent frown. His eyes were a dull gray that clashed with

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his shiny hair. His maroon suit was crisp and bright, like it had never been worn before. Emali did not like the looks of this prince.

The King of Kalaria went forward and shook King Marvic's hand. "Wonderful to have you here again, Mavric. It's so nice to see you and your gracious son!"

"Same to you, Stephyn. Your land is as beautiful as always," replied the guest with a small smile as he shook with his brother-in-law.

Greetings went around and Ryland found himself introducing Prince Ton to everyone there to celebrate the arrival of the King and Prince of the neighboring Kingdom. It was a long process, but eventually he got to Emali. She had a very beautiful smile on her face as they approached.

"Ton, this is Emali, my best friend," announced Ryland.

"How do you do Madame?" he said taking her hand and bowing to kiss it slightly.

"Very well, thank you. And you?" Emali tried not to be rude when pulling her hand out of Ton's grasp.

"Just excellent. Do you live in the castle as well?"

"Oh no, I live down on Burberry Street, but I have to say I know my way around here better than I do my home."

"A commoner? That's interesting." He had his eyebrows raised and his head turned to look curiously at his cousin.

"Is that a problem?" Emali said with a slight stubborn edge to her voice.

"No, no. No problem, Emali. Why don't you join us while I show Ton the castle?" Ryland interrupted before things could get out of hand.

"I would love to, Ry," She said as they made their way to the doors. "Where to first?"

"This way to the entrance hall, Ton."

"This place is very regal, cousin. You are lucky to live in this wondrous castle."

"Why thank you, but I have to say that your home is vastly more regal than mine."

Emali became bored of the conversation and tuned the two princes out as they walk through the amazing castle. It was definitely not the biggest castle, and not the fanciest. But it did have a certain air to it, like it had actually been lived in. The armchairs were always comfy and inviting, the paintings always bright and cheerful. A warm aroma of apple crisp came wafting in as they passed the busy kitchen. They entered the dining hall which had a magnificent mahogany table already set for dinner tonight. A brilliant chandelier hung above. They then paced into a spacious, but cozy living room. A giant, majestic fireplace dominated the right wall and a warm orange fire burned bright in its hearth.

They trio went through the rest of the castle and ended at the castle courtyard.

"So what is the average day here, Ryland?" asked Ton as they strolled through the flower beds.

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"Mostly hanging around and playing out here with Emali," Ryland answered.

"Every day?"

"Unless it is raining, which it only does in the beginning of Spring. We explore the interior of the castle if it is one of those days."

"Hmm...interesting. How long have you two known each other, Emali?"

Emali, who was only slightly paying attention to the conversation, came up beside them. "We were both eight years of age, Prince Ton."

"Wow six years! You would think you would be sick of each other by now!" Ton said with a chuckle.

Emali caught Ryland's eye. They both knew that they had never felt sick of each other, and probably never will. They always had things to do, places to explore.

"Don't you have friends back home, your highness?" Emali asked.

"I have the usual acquaintance, but it's not good to have close friends. It's not good for your kingdom," Ton said raising his chin and looking down on Emali.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Emali said threateningly. Ryland put a gentle hand on her shoulder. He knew what would happen if Emali blew her temper.

"It is supposed to mean that only *royals* are supposed to know castle secrets. *Not* commoners."

Emali's face flushed red. She opened her mouth to retort back. "Maybe it is good, so hot-headed people like you don't rule the entire kingdom!"

Ton opened his mouth angrily, but Ryland intervened. "Guys! Calm down! There is no need to fight!"

"Oh, but little cousin, I think there is. You see you can't expect to be a decent ruler with a lousy, commoner at your side."

Even Ryland looked flabbergasted and angry, but he responded calmly. "I think you might want to go unpack your belongings. A page will show you to your rooms." And with that Ryland put a hand on Emali's shoulder and walked both of them away from the prince.

Emali was fuming, but held in her anger until they reached the safety of the oak trees. "I can't believe he said that!" she yelled, throwing her arms up.

"He's not usually like that," Ryland said, trying to make up for his rude behavior. "I guess he only has a kingdom's best interests in mind, he is going to be king in only a few months."

Emali sighed and looked at Ryland, who was leaning against their oak tree. "I'm so sorry, Ry. It's your birthday, and I'm just making it worse." She kicked her high-heeled sandals off and swung up onto a low branch like it was the easiest thing in the world. Ryland jumped up and sat next to her.

"It's okay, Em. I knew this wasn't going to be the best day ever. It is always crowded and busy when guests are here."

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"Still," she sighed.

"Emali, I know this isn't the best time, but, umm...well my father, he decided...something..." Ryland started, looking at his hands clasped in his lap.

"What is it Ry?" Emali asked, suddenly frightened.

"Well...you know this is my last year before I take the throne...and my father has decided that I must...umm..." said Ry, unable to finish.

"*What Ry?*" said Emali forcefully.

"HesaidIhavetochooseabride," Ryland said in a rush. He looked up at Emali with pleading eyes.

The young lady didn't know if she heard correctly. "What was that?" she responded quietly.

"I have to choose a bride soon."

"Oh"

Ryland looked uncomfortable, and Emali thought that's what she must look like too.

Ryland broke the couple moments silence. "Not for a couple months, but he says I have to pick one in a year's time. He told me this morning."

"Who were you thinking of picking?" Emali asked barely above a whisper.

"He says whoever it is must have some sort of royal blood, typical." He rolled his eyes and scowled down at the ground.

A distant ringing told them it was time for lunch. The two hopped down from the limb and made their way through the courtyard garden in silence.

They entered the dining hall to see a buffet spread out at a far table. They both got in line and served themselves the delicious food. Emali and Ryland followed the group outside to enjoy the beautiful day by making lunch a picnic. They sat together under a small cherry tree. They were soon accompanied by the children of some staff members. About halfway through the meal they were joined by Prince Ton. Emali controlled her temper, but did shoot him evil glares when she thought no one was looking.

The Prince told stories of his country and how he would rule his kingdom. All the other children hung on every word the prince said. Except for Emali and Ryland, who were only slightly paying attention. Their minds were on what was to come in the new year ahead.

The rest of the day passed by in a blur. Soon everyone was gathering in the dining hall again for Prince Ryland's birthday dinner. The main course was the heir's favorite dish, macarroni and cheese. The chef made the best macarroni and cheese recipe in the land, and everyone enjoyed it. For dessert they all had brownies with vanilla ice cream specially made by the head cook. When the last plate had been taken away, everyone's stomach was full, and the moon was coming up over the nearby hills.

Chapter 5: Before They Know

Chapter 5: Before They Knew

About an hour after dinner was over, the entire castle came outside and under the light of the moon and a party began. Ryland and Emali were sitting on a small hill overlooking the big pond that reflected the full moon in the sky. Their shoes were off and their feet were resting in the soft grass. A little while off people were dancing and having a blast.

"So how was your 15th birthday, your highness?" Emali teased.

"It was okay. Nothing great." Ryland answered, looking out at the dark pond.

"That's how I feel, too. It could have been better."

"Much better," he agreed.

"Yeah..." Emali said, running out of words to say.

"Hey, do you want to dance with me?" Ryland asked, surprising Emali.

"Dance? Sure!" Emali got up and wiped the grass off her dress.

She grabbed Ryland's hand and they ran to the dance floor set up in front of the castle.

Chapter 6: Gone, Forever

Chapter 6: Seperate Paths

A shadow of a slight figure ran through the night. Up it went to the castle and in the side gate. The figure was that of a young girl. Her blonde hair dark in the night, swirled behind her. Tears streamed down her face and she did not try to stop them. Her gray nightgown blended in with the dark. She wove through the garden as if she knew exactly where she was going.

The girl stopped in front of a window, one like all the rest, but she knew it was this one. After 7 years she would always get it right. She walked up and stuck a branch in the corner, instantly popping open the window. Although she had not done this in so many years, she knew precisely what she was doing. She lifted herself through the window as if it were a tree limb she was climbing over. When she was in the room she left the window partly open so a sliver of moonlight lit up the room. Barely distinguishable furniture made her trek through the room slow, but she eventually ended up beside the bed. She could just make out the sleeping figure.

"Ryâ !Ry, wake up, Rylandâ !" Emali shook his shoulder, trying to wake him up, but not anyone else. A fresh set of tears started to flow as she looked down at Ryland.

"Whatâ !" Ryland responded groggily.

"Ryland, please wake upâ !" "

"Emali?" Ryland said, sitting up on his elbow.

"Hey, can we goâ !to the oak, please?"

"In the middle of the night?"

"It's importantâ !please Ry." Ryland looked up into Emali's teary face.

"Yeah, sure. Let's go," He said, getting up out of bed.

"Thanks, Ry."

"No Problem."

Ryland followed Emali through the window and across the garden. When they got to the base of their oak, Emali proceeded to the highest branches. She finally stopped when the moonlight lit up their faces and they could see normally.

"What happened, Em?" Ryland said, worried.

"When I got home my parents told meâ !they told me thatâ !" Emali was crying harder now.

"Emâ !?" Ry asked, scarred now.

"They're sending me away, Ry!" Emali burst.

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"Whaâ !When?"

"Tomorrow, at noon." She was trying to stop the flow of tears down her face, to no avail.

"How long?" Ryland asked,

Emali started crying harder, and she shook with sobs.

"How long, Em?" Ryland said, pulling Emali into a hug.

"For-forâ !forever," Emali sobbed. Both were shocked into silence.

"Why?" Ryland whispered, breaking the silence.

"They-they said that I-I have to-to start get-getting jobs, and make a-a living, inst-instead of playing here. They-they said if-if I stay-stayed here I wouldn't g-go anywhere i-in life. I don't want to go!" Emali cried.

Ryland hugged her close. *What am I going to do without Emali?* He thought.

After awhile Ryland pulled away from Emali, whose tears were starting to subside. "Hey, let's go down to the ground." Emali nodded her understanding.

At the base of their oak Ryland sat down and Emali sat beside him. They looked up at the moon, thinking how one day could drastically change their live forever.

They fell asleep there. Thecommonerleaning against the prince. The oaks looming over them, as if they were protecting them from the outside world as they dreamed.

As the sun rose up over the distant hills, the two stirred. Emali sat up and stretched towards the clear sky. Ryland dusted the fine dirt off his pants and stood up. Emali rose as well and they made their way back to the castle. The way there was quiet as they were both tired from the night before.

"Do you have to go home?" Ryland asked, hoping she didn't.

"My parents will know where I am, and I'm starving!" She said grabbing his hand and pulling him along.

They entered the almost empty dining hall. A breakfast buffet was set up on the long table. Eggs, bacon, and other delicious food sat in heaping piles along it. Emali loaded her plate with her usual favorites. Ryland only took a small piece of toast, he couldn't be hungry on a day like this.

As the two sat down at the small tables, the king and queen joined them. Everyone had a nice meal and didn't bring up last night's conversation.

Chapter 7: Seperate Paths

Chapter 7: Seperate Paths

Before he knew it, Ryland was walking Emali through the garden, to the side gate.

"Do you really have to go now?" Ryland asked.

"I should be getting home, I've got to pack" she replied, looking down at the stepping stones.

Ryland nodded. "Em, will I see you again?" he asked, suddenly scared.

"I-I'll stop by before" She did not need to finish the sentence; they both knew how it ended.

"I'm going to miss you Em." was all he could say.

"I'll miss you too, Ry," she said, looking hard at his face, as if trying to memorize it.

At this time they were at the gate. Emali left for her house as Ryland proceeded back to the castle. I'll see him again, she told herself.

Ryland walked into the entrance hall to find his father waiting for him.

"Ryland, I was wondering if I could have a moment?" the king asked.

"Sure, of course," he replied, trying to regain composure. He followed his father into the king's study. It was a nice small room, with a big dark wood desk and a few armchairs in the corner. His father took the desk chair and he took an armchair. They faced each other over the desk.

"Son, I couldn't help but notice that you came in from the yard this morning with Emali," His highness started.

"Dad, she was upset last night and wanted to talk to me, it's nothing," he said as he played with his hands in his lap. Ryland did not want to have this conversation. He was worried he might start crying like a little kid if he had to tell his dad.

"Ryland, whatever she told you wasn't nothing. It's bothering you. What did she say?" The king looked genuinely concerned.

"She-she said that her parents are sending her away," he said, barely keeping in his sadness.

The king looked startled. "And why is that?"

"They said that she was going to get nowhere in life if she stayed here...and played with me." He was on the verge of tears now. He did not want to show to his father that he was weak. He had to show that he was strong, like a true future king. "Father I-

"I think-" King Stephyn interrupted.

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"You go first," Ryland suggested, not wanting to be rude.

"I think that the decision to send the girl away, was a good one." The king looked at his son expectantly.

Ryland was shocked, and hurt.

"Let me explain, son. I was talking to Prince Ton yesterday, and he seems as if you are too close to Emali."

Ryland just sat there, his hurt growing. Amongst the hurt, anger bubbled. He let his father go on.

"For the benefit of the kingdom, I think it is wise to let her go. You need to be spending your time with people of more importance, not that she was not important to you." The king looked at his son with pity. He continued, "Prince Ton agrees with me."

Ryland's anger was starting to overpower. He could barely keep silent while his father spoke.

"Prince Ton has advised that you should be introduced to the princesses and duke's daughters. I know I have told you, you must pick a bride this coming year."

"I recall you telling me," Ryland responded, biting his lip so that no other words slipped out.

"Another thing, Prince Ton has asked for permission to come stay with us and mentor you, before you take on more responsibilities."

Ryland's anger burst. He could not live in the same castle, when Ton disliked Emali so much. He did not want a new bride. He did not want to be mentored. He wanted Emali. He wanted her to stay. He wanted nothing more than to spend every day with her. "No, Father! It's his entire fault Emali can't stay! Father, I could ask to marry Emali! She could stay with me!" he yelled, losing composure completely.

The king looked irritated. "Ryland, you must-

"No!" Ryland yelled, jumping up. "I'm sick of being told what to do! I don't want to meet anyone else! Prince Ton is just concerned about his image as king! Not what is really good as king! That's your problem, father! You care about your subjects, but you won't let them give their ideas about ruling the kingdom!" Ryland shouted.

His father was now on his feet as well, leaning over the desk at him. "Prince Ton has his priorities straight! Unlike you! All you do all day is hang around with that commoner! You need to be ready to rule! And it just so happens that the kingdom of Kalaria is viewed greatly on how I rule it!"

"Emali was right! Sometimes, you need subjects to help, so the kingdom isn't ruled by a bunch of lousy Kings!!" Ryland shouted at his father. He got up and ran out the door. The troubled prince dashed through the busy castle and out into the courtyard. Without even knowing where he was going, he ended up at the base of the oak tree. There he sat, sorting out his confused mind.

He had not realized how long he had sat there until Emali had sat down beside him. They didn't say anything for some time, just sitting there enjoying each other's company.

Neither one wanted this to end, but eventually Emali had to say the dreaded words. "I guess this is goodbye," she whispered. A single tear landed in her lap. It rolled down the side of her faded and old rose pink dress Ryland had come to love.

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Ryland, nodded. He did not think he could chance trying to speak. He looked up at her, she was fiddling with a leaf in her hands. He lifted her chin up so she looked into his face. Then he kissed her. It was just a small kiss, but it said the words neither knew how to voice.

After the brief moment, Emali got to her feet with Ryland at her side. He watched her walk away toward the gates. He did not accompany her out, because if he had he would have never had the strength to let her go. It was better to watch her leave from the safety of these great oaks.

As she went she smelt each flower and touched each branch. Her own little farewell to the place she had called home most of her life. When her bare, delicate feet brought her to the side gate, she turned and raised her hand in goodbye. A little while off, her eyes caught his as she turned around and opened the gate she had so many times before.

When the gate had swung shut and her blonde head was no longer visible, Ryland thought of this place. 7 years ago it was the place their paths crossed. Now it was the place it separated. He would never forget Emali. And he vowed, then and there he would find her again. He would do all in his power to seek her out. *I'll see her again*, he promised.

Chapter 8: A Worried Mother

Chapter 8: A Worried Mother

It had been a week since Emali had left. The castle was exactly the same, because life went on. Well, one thing had changed. Prince Ryland was reserved. He rarely came out of his room, only for meals and various princely duties. Queen Hethar became worried for her son. He had never acted like this before, and she was scared. One evening she confronted her king about the situation.

"Stephyn? Have you noticed the way Ryland seemsâ separated, lately?" she asked casually as they sat in their small library. He was in the comfy armchair, and she was snuggled up on the corner of the fancy loveseat.

"Yes, my dear, I have," The king replied, with a small frown. "Well, I haven't really seen him at all lately, only at dinner and the conference last night. He seemed quite out of it, did not speak at all, except when spoken to. Usually he is in the center, coming up with ideas and suggestions." The king thought out loud.

"Yes, and he seems awfully distraught. I'm worried about him, Stephyn." She looked her husband.

"I am too, Hethar, but we must teach the boy that he must get over the obstacles in life if he wishes to succeed in it! I believe that it is a lesson he needs to learn." The king held his head high.

"Yes, but darling, what if it's too much for him? Little Emali and him played every day. I can't believe the sadness he must be going through." Queen Hethar looked down at the book in her lap. It was about a young lady that goes and lives in another kingdom, to spy on the king and queen. Although, the longer the spy stays in the new kingdom, the more she falls in love with it. It was a truly exciting piece of literature.

"I know my love, but we must not bother him. He will eventually cope with it and get on with his life. I'm sure of it," he says.

With that he comes to sit beside her. The king puts a comforting hand on her shoulders and the other hand grasps hers. "He will be fine, my sweet, we must not worry about him too much. He has lots of things on his plate at the moment, but kings always do. He must come accustom to it." King Stephyn looked deeply into his wife's eyes. She nodded in agreement and cuddled into him close.

There they sat in front of the small fire, thinking about their son, and his future.

Chapter 9: Emali's Journey

Chapter 9: Emali's Journey

Whilst everyone was worrying about poor Ryland, no one thought about the tried, little Emali. She had had a tough journey to the neighboring kingdom.

Luckily it had not been Prince Ton's kingdom. It was on the other side of Kalaria. This was the kingdom of Helenania. It had lots of forest, and tall Sypris trees, in one corner it had a tall, snow capped mountain. It was very different from Kalaria's soft rolling hills.

The journey had been long and rough. She was traveling with a decent neighbor of hers. She had not practically taken much notice of him. He was tall, with faded brown hair. He was maybe 2 years her elder. He had a plain face and similar personality.

He barely spoke, and when he did he only gave simple answers or statements. So far all she had learnt was that he was called Gage, he loved the mountains, and he never wanted to go back to Kalaria.

She sat in their carriage with her head resting on her palm. She looked out at the rainy, overcast view of the surrounding trees. So far she had counted not a single oak tree. And even if she had, it wouldn't have had the same affect on her as her oak tree did. Oh how I miss my oak tree! She thought to herself. She wanted nothing more than to climb to the highest branches and curl up and look out over the magnificent land.

Her heart also ached for her best friend. Not even in Emali's wildest daydreams had she dreamt that Ryland would be separated from her. Wait correction, she had had a terrible dream once that Ryland was taken away from her, and nobody wanted to be her friend. It had been truly awful, even for a dream. She could just feel the emptiness and the sadness. One reason the dream seems so alive right now is because it was happening. The thought brought tears to her eyes.

The thought of Ryland, brought another memory zooming into her head. Their kiss right before she departed would forever be burnt into her brain. Emali would never forget the feel of his soft lips against hers, the smell of his minty breath as he leaned in close to her. The way his eyes sparkled, and the way his hair shone will always make her weak-kneaded. During the boring rides through the kingdoms, she would imagine she was back with him. The funny thing about these daydreams was that the two of them would just be talking, or playing one of their many games. Just the usual things they did together.

Of course every once and a while, she had the rare occasional fantasyâ it was always around the same thing: Ryland asking for her hand, and she would help rule the kingdom she loves with all her heart. Living with him forever, in the castle, with the oak trees outside; their children climbing in its many branches and limbs.

But reality always came back, and she was forced to remember that she was never going to see him again. Never going to splash in the lake with him, or pick beautiful flowers for his mother's vases. Her eyes would sting and her heart would throb. To calm herself Emali had rested her head against the cold window.

The occasional tear would drop and roll down her face. She did not try to stop them once they were loose. If she swept away all evidence that she was missing her home, she would eventually believe she is happier without it. And that thought was not going to enter her mind. Emali would never be happy in any place but Kalaria.

Chapter 10: The Letter

Chapter 10: The Letter

Prince Ryland was in his bedroom. He sat at the small desk beside the window. The window's view was beautiful, but he never put anything under it, just in case Emali decided to come visit him at night. She used to do it often, when she couldn't get to sleep or had a brilliant idea. But as they got older it was not a good thing to have a girl sneak in your window at night. But she did do it occasionally, like that night—it seemed like forever ago, but it had just been a week.

I guess I can have something under the window now, he thought to himself gloomily; for she was never coming back to sneak into his window. She was gone; lost in the world beyond his kingdom. Not for long, he argued. In fact at that very moment he was writing Emali a letter. His letter said:

Dear Emali,

I have missed you. It has felt like a lifetime since I last saw you, but alas it has only been a week. I hope your journey was successful. I did not have a chance to ask you the final destination, but I will give this to your parents, who hopefully know of your whereabouts. I am writing to tell you that I want you home. I hope that you miss me, but I will understand if you don't want to. I know it must be an excellent experience to live in a different kingdom. But I wanted to tell you, that, so if you ever wanted to leave, you are ALWAYS welcome here.

Not much has changed since you left, but the oaks are starting to bud, soon they will be a beautiful sight, like every summer. If you wish me to keep sending you news, then I shall send you a photo of the trees.

Another thing, my father wants Prince Ton to come and spend the summer with us before he is crowned. I really hope that he doesn't.

I haven't really done anything around here. Nothing special. Oh and the date for my coronation has been set. It will be towards the end of next summer. By that time I have to have a bride, and LOTS of training. If it is possible I would love for you to come to the coronation, it would mean a lot to me. But if you can't I understand.

I hope you are happy in the new kingdom.

Your Best Friend,

Ryland

PS: I miss you, a lot.

Ryland reread his letter. Man I sound pathetic, he thought. But he did not crumple it up and write another one. He had always been honest with Emali, and he wrote what he felt. The prince folded the letter in half and tucked it inside the envelope.

When he looked at the neat letter, he did not know how to address it. He knew Emali's parents would get the letter to her, but what should he put on the outside? He settled for just the plain and simple. After printing Emali's name on the back he got up and headed out into the corridor.

The Oak, a novel

He casually left the castle and started down the road to Emali's house. Although he had not been to Emali's very often, he knew where it was.

When Ryland had reached the right residence, he knocked on the door.

A young girl, about 10 years of age, answered the door. She had curly, but frizzy, dirty blonde hair. Her features were similar to Emali's but this girl had freckles and was slightly different. Her pale blue eyes gazed into his.

"Yes? Who are you?" she asked, in a kind of snotty way.

"I am Prince Ryland. Are you Gessa or Shawny?" he asked politely.

"Gessa, and Emali isn't here anymore," looking at him accusingly.

"I know, I was wondering if I could speak with your parents?" he replied, still very polite.

Gessa sighed, "Yeah, one secâ !..MOM!" she yelled, looking behind her.

A small, thin woman with flyaway blonde hair rushed into the hallway.

"Who do we have here, Gessa?" she said coming to the door. "Why if it isn't the prince himself! How do you do, your majesty?" she said curtsying.

"You may call me Ryland, and I was wondering if you could give Emali something for me?" he asked.

"Sure! We were just about to send her a care package. What is it you have to give her?" she asked with a hint of worry in her voice.

"Just a letter, Mrs. Vance."

"Well alright then, I'll be sure to put it in with the other things. Thank you for stopping by," she said, taking the letter.

"Thank you for your time, and helping me," the prince responded. He turned to go.

"Your highness?" he turned around. Mrs. Vance had gone back to where she had been before, but Gessa stood in the doorway.

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to let you knowâ !Emali loved you," she said, full of certainty.

"I loved her too," he said quietly, but loud enough for her to hear. She nodded and shut the door, leaving Ryland alone, again, with only his thoughts.

Chapter 11: Response

Chapter 11: Response

The day Ryland's letter arrived; Emali was sitting in a small inn's dining area. The innkeeper came over and handed her a medium sized package.

"For you miss," he said and left the table.

What is this? Emali asked herself. She ripped away the thick brown paper to find a cardboard box. In the box she found a good number of things. Some candies that her mother made, a letter from both Shawny and Gessa, and letter from Mom and Dad. She also found some money, pictures, and at the very bottom, a letter with one word on the envelope.

Her heart stuttered. There was only one person left that would write her a letter. And Emali would recognize his handwriting anywhere.

She carefully took it in her hand and went up to her room. Her room was small, but comfortable. It had a desk, bathroom, bed and couch. She sat on the bed and gingerly ripped the envelope open and pulled out the scroll of parchment within.

As she read the note, tears gathered at the corner of her eyes. She took a shaky breath and wiped them away.

When she finished she grabbed some paper and a fine pen and sat down at her small desk. As she wrote, tears splashed onto the hard, rough wood of the desk. Emali's replied said:

Dear Ryland,

I miss you like crazy. The journey was long and boring, and I am not quite sure of my destination either. I am traveling with an old neighbor, and for right now I am just following him around the country. I think sending your letters with my parents care package is a good idea. It's easier to lose a letter than it is to lose a big package.

I feel truly sorry for you. Prince Ton for a whole summer? Too bad I'm not there to kick his royal butt for him. And I wouldn't miss your coronation for the world. I'll be there, no matter what.

I have been traveling to different inns in Helenania. They are very hospitable, but none are home. The weather is gloomy, and the trees make me feel caged in. We can see the mountain in the distance and it is a sight. In a way, though, it reminds me of your uncle. It is beautiful, and regal, but it has an intimidating quality about it. Like it is looming over you, waiting for you to make a decision.

About your bride, look for the right girl. Keep a watch out, but don't do anything drastic, and just be yourself. I'm sure there are many lady's that would fancy being at your side.

I would also love some photos of the trees. I could look at them when I feel homesick. They would be greatly appreciated.

One more topicâ I would trade anything to be home with you, but I promised myself I would try it out here. Like you said, living in a new kingdom could be fun. Although it is not yet excitable, I'll wait it out. But I promise I will be back to visit by the end of next summer.

The Oak, a novel

I can't wait to hear from you again.

Love,

Emali

PS: I miss you too, a lot.

Chapter 12: Thoughts Upon the Throne

Chapter 12: Thoughts Upon the Throne

The weeks slowly dragged by. Over time the two would exchange letters back and forth.

Emali's life got easier, but she still followed her companion across the neighboring country. She was now used to the traveling and made many friends on her journey.

Ryland attended more royal functions and events. He studied hard and earned himself a good reputation. Although the prince had come out more, he was still closed up. He no longer played in the yard, but studied in his room.

The oak trees grew and their gnarled branches hung empty. The ground was starting to grow grass from not being trodden upon every day. The sky was clear and quiet, with no shouts of laughter or squeals of joy. The water in the lake was still and calm. Although everyone was ignorant to the emptiness outside the castle walls, the evidence that the two explorers no longer ran through the pretty flowers was quiet clear. Each flower longed to be sniffed or picked for a flower bouquet, and the trees wished for someone to climb to the tallest branches.

Nature wasn't the only one missing the old times. Ryland looked out his window at the horizon in the distance. Somewhere Emali was out there, looking out a similar window, toward the same horizon. Even though both were unaware of these little experiences, they enjoyed reflecting upon the past. Both felt as though it cleared their heads and brought happy thoughts floating into their minds.

Ryland breathed in the great smell of late summer and early fall mixed together in the breeze. His window was open, and the drapes flowed in the slight draft. He thought about the future today, and what it would bring. He thought about becoming king and managing a kingdom. So far he was heading on a path to rule it alone, but then he realized he was never going to be alone. The prince would always have his court and the servants around him, giving him advice. They had always given him support and gratitude when he needed it. Somehow, he knew he was ready to be king. And he knew he would like it. His dream was coming true after so many years of dreaming it.

Although it was this close, he didn't quite feel the accomplishment he thought he would. Sure he was happy and content with being king, but he wasn't exuberant. His deed was to be done and he was going to make the best of it.

Chapter 13: New Friend

Chapter 13: New Friend

One midsummer day Emali was walking in a small town's market. She wove in between the consumers and vendors. A middle aged man came up to her and held up a quartz necklace.

"Don't you fancy this lovely garment, miss?" he said with a strange accent. He looked at her intently.

"Yes, it is very charming, but I don't have much money today_" she said pulling away, but he had grabbed her wrist tightly.

"No, no. I insist. You must have it to go around your pretty little neck!" he said forcefully, getting up in her face. His hot breath wafted into her nostrils, making her gag.

"No really, I'm fine," she said still trying to loosen his grip on her. His hair smelled and was matted; his teeth yellow and crooked. Emali was frightened. She looked around desperately for help; her long, curly blonde hair swirling out around her helpless face.

The man began pulling her toward a building, through the crowd. She flailed her arms wildly, but it was hard to without hurting pedestrians.

"Sir, I really don't want-" she tried.

"No, no come! You must see the other jewelry. It would look so nice on you!" he begged.

"No! Please, I've really got to go!" she begged pulling at his fingers clutching her still. Emali still looked frantically around, hoping someone would come to her rescue.

Directly to her left, she caught the eye of a girl slightly older than she. This girl looked deep into Emali's eyes, knowing the problem at once. She pushed through the crowd and came to Emali.

"Sir! You must! Someone is robbing your stand! Go quick! Hurry! I saw him run that way!" she yelled at the man. His eyes got wide with anger and Emali thought they had been caught, but he let go and rushed in the direction the stranger had pointed.

Emali sagged and let out a sigh of relief. She thought of her helper and looked up into a very pretty face. The rescuer had small tight curls framing her round, tanned face. She smiled down at Emali with worry and interest. Her white teeth shined in the sun. Her eyes were a perfect green, but unlike Ryland's emerald ones, hers were almost lime. She wore a navy tank top with cut-off jeans.

"Th-thanks," Emali said, looking into the girl's face.

"You're welcome, and are you alright?" she said taking hold of Emali's forearm. She held it gently, to make sure Emali wouldn't fall. Emali liked her grip better than the old man's.

"Yes, I'm fine," Emali said straightening up and brushing off her blue cotton dress. She held out her hand to the stranger. "I'm Emali Vance."

The girl shook her hand, "Nice to meet you Emali, I'm Syra. Syra Jenkins."

The Oak, a novel

Syra walked with Emali around the market.

"Sorry, you have to be on alert at all times in the city. There are a lot of beggars, that just won't take no for answer." Syra grimaced and rolled her eyes. "Where are you from? I haven't seen you, before."

"I'm a traveler. I follow around my neighbor, who for some reason is touring the entire kingdom of Helenania. I grew up in Kalaria."

"That's cool! I've never been out of this town, never mind to another kingdom." She sighed and leaned against a rail off to the side of the street. "I would love to get out of this place; to leave it forever." Syra looked off into space imagining her life in a nice, clean, safe place. She had always wanted to leave. She liked the quiet life. Syra wanted to live in a big house, or castle, that was miles from the nearest town, but close enough you didn't have to travel far to get groceries. She wanted a big yard and lots of children. She daydreamed of the running over the grassy hills and playing tag around the house. What would she give for a life like that?

Chapter 14: Needing Help

Chapter 14: Needing Help

By that time the pair had reached the postal office in town. For some reason Emali knew this is where they had headed, even though neither had said anything. They walked into the small store.

"Is there anything for Emali Vance, kind sir?" she asked the old man behind the blue counter. He smiled a grandfatherly smile at her and went to go check behind.

"How does your mail know where you are?" Syra asked.

"We set out a calendar on when we would be where before we left. We have stuck to it, fortunately.

Emali turned back to the counter just as the man came through the back door, holding a letter.

"Here you go, miss. Have a good day." He smiled a sincere smile as they left the tiny place.

Outside Syra sat down on a bench and Emali sat beside her.

"Who's it from?" she asked looking at the back.

Emali recognized the handwriting at once. Her heart ached, but glowed at the sight of it. Her teal eyes traced over his fine "K's" and "R's". It took her a moment to open the letter. She did it gingerly, so as to not rip the envelope.

Inside was a thick piece of parchment.

"Who's Ryland?" Syra asked Emali.

"My best friend," she said simply.

"Well, what does the letter say?" she urged.

"I'm getting to that!" she said laughing as she unfolded the paper. As Emali read her playful smile got lower, and lower on her face, until it was turned down at the corners. Her eyes scanned the paper, wondering if it was lying to her. She never wanted this.

"What is it? What happened?! Emali?!" Syra asked the unresponsive girl. Unable to wait any longer for an explanation, she grabbed the note out of Emali's weak grasp.

Syra read the letter from the Prince of Kalaria.

Dear Emali,

I have rather awful news. I overheard my father telling a court member. Apparently, my father had just been sent a letter from Uncle Mavric. He seemed quiet distressed, so I decided to hide around the corner and eavesdrop.

The Oak, a novel

I'll get to the point: Prince Ton has disappeared. No sign of him anywhere. Uncle Mavric was asking if he was with us, but he was not. Everyone seems quiet worried, and from what I learned he has been missing for almost a week. Uncle thought he would turn up eventually, but he got desperate. He searched the kingdom with not a clue. We have sent out a proclamation to the people of Kalaria.

Emali, I need you here. I have a hunch, but I can't solve it alone. Please send your reply back ASAP!

Love,

Prince Ryland

PS: I know you two don't get along, but you know we have to save him. I am fearful that he is in trouble. He would NEVER leave him kingdom without notification, especially 2 days before his crowning. Please, hurry!

PSSS: I have sent a carriage along that will arrive shortly to bring you home. I can't wait to see you!

Chapter 15: Going Home

Chapter 15: Going Home

"Oh my GOSH! Why didn't you tell me he was a prince!! And he signed it with love!! You have to go! Why are you just sitting there! Come on, get up, we've got a prince to find!" Syra squealed jumping up and pulling Emali to her feet.

"Syra? Didn't you read the letter? Prince Ton has disappeared. I don't know how Ryland expects to find him! He could be anywhere!"

"Yeah, but he has an idea of where to find him! You have to at least try!" she wailed.

Emali couldn't help the smile spread across her rose lips. She was going to see Ryland. Even better, she was going on an adventure with Ryland. They had basically trained for this moment all their lives. Excitement bubbled inside her as she followed her new friend toward the house where Emali had been living in.

As she packed and got ready to leave she wrote a note to her companion. After explaining the situation and leaving it on the bed she put her bag over her shoulder and proceeded out the door. Outside the house Syra was waiting with a carriage that would take them to Kalaria Castle. Syra had jumped on the chance to leave and had told her family she would travel with a friend to her kingdom, which was true, but they had left out the finding a rescuing of the missing prince. Some parents would think that could end up harmful, though she argued that wandering around here was far more dangerous.

"Let's get this adventure started!" Syra yelled jumping into the carriage. Emali followed her exuberant friend into the very thing that would take her home.

Luckily they had been close to the border, or else it would take several days to reach the home of the oak trees Emali loved. When they set out, they had planned it would take a day's time.

It did not take a day however, because the driver knew of the missing prince, and if there was any hope of saving his highness, he knew it would have to be Prince Ryland and little Emali. The driver had grown up close to the castle, and valued the two best friends with great likeness. He also knew how important Prince Ton was to the royal family, and hated to see them sad. Another secret reason he got the friends there quicker was because, when Emali and Ryland were small, they would sometimes help him with his horses, and when Emali left he could see the sadness in the prince that had never been there before.

As aforementioned, the driver got Emali and Syra to the palace in less than 7 hours. Emali witnessed the rolling hills growing close each mile that they traveled. The sweet smell of Kalaria swirled around her and she breathed in deeply. The gates loomed in the distance as they drove into her hometown. Her eyes started to fill as she realized how much she had missed it here. The small peach colored buildings and the orange roofs flashed by as they sped up the slow crescendo to the castle.

Emali's window was pushed open so she could hear snippets of conversation going by her.

"Wonder who's in there?" a little boy asked his mother as they strolled the streets.

As they got closer to her house, she spotted her sisters playing nearby. Her heart melted at the sight of them playing, and not arguing. She remembered all the good times she had with her sisters when Ryland was busy. It took time away for her to see that she loved them. Emali thought of calling out to them, for them to know

The Oak, a novel

she was close. But she knew she would have time for that later, maybe before they leave on their journey.

Her breath caught in her throat. They had reached the castle gates. The carriage slowly came to a stop outside them. Emali got out of it in a trance. After 2 months she dreamed of this so many times. Coming home.

Chapter 16: Reunion

Chapter 16: Reunion

Syra got out and stood next to her at the gates. For once the girl was at a loss for words. She looked around her, her face bright with wonder.

"It's amazing," she whispered.

"I know." Emali looked up proudly at her home. She had never really recognized the beauty of the castle before. With its high towers, two on either side with one at the back in the middle, made of warm smoky brick. The castle entrance was made of dark wood and had the royal family crest over top.

Instead of going in the front entrance Emali went around the side out of habit. Syra followed behind.

At the side gate Emali wiped the small tears from her face. Under the oak trees stood a figure, too far away to recognize. Even though you could not tell who the figure was Emali knew. She knew with all her heart and her eyes did not leave him all the way across the garden. She was only aware of the gaze that held hers. Her small feet found the hard ground at the base of the oak trees. She could feel the familiar ground under the layer of grass.

The king had watched the visitors arrive out the front window. He followed them as they made their way into the garden. The little girl he knew so well walked slowly, taking her time; the stranger trailing behind, taking in the spacious land.

As the two reached the edge of the trees, King Stephyn moved closer to see that his son stood under the greatest oak. Queen Hethar came up behind him at peered over his mighty shoulder. The husband and wife watched the young lady enter the safety of the trees. She walked slowly over to their son.

Prince Ryland stepped forward toward the girl he thought of constantly. She looked beautiful even after many hours traveling. Her skin had tanned and her hair had gotten lighter. Her teal eyes locked his. As she ran toward him, her shoes flew off and landed far off.

Emali ran into the prince she so dearly missed. She held him as tight as she could, and he did the same. Neither noticed the tear tracks down both faces glinting in the evening sun.

Syra, the King, and the Queen watched this joyful cross of paths. Syra felt as though she should not have been there, but she could not leave. She knew from that one embraced that these two loved each other, and that their love would never fade.

Chapter 17: Into the Treetops

Chapter 16: Into the Treetops

The oaks towered over the two people. The breeze swirled the young lady's hair around them.

"I missed you so much," Emali whispered.

"I missed you too," He replied. He breathed in her sweet scent. He felt the frizz of her curly hair against his face. She was wearing his favorite dress: the faded rose dress. His hands felt the smooth and worn out cotton and he never knew he could yearn for even the familiar fabric.

She fit right onto his shoulder. She smelled the familiarity of his shirt and felt its soft, but rough fabric against her cheek. Emali felt the ground beneath her feet, and the breeze against her neck.

After the touching moment, the two broke apart. For a millisecond Emali's teal eyes looked deep into Ryland's emerald ones.

Inside the castle the King and Queen left the window, to leave the friends in peace.

Syra crept up to the edge of the massive oaks. She looked curiously up into the many branches.

Emali seemed to remember her companion right then. "Oh! Ryland, I want you to meet someone!" She said, breaking free of his grasp and running over to Syra. She grabbed Syra's hand and rushed her back to Ryland. "Ryland, this is Syra! I met her in Helenania. She wants to come with us to save prince Ton!" Emali said excitedly.

"Nice to meet you your highness," Syra said curtsying.

"Nice to meet you too, Syra. And you can call me Ryland." Ryland smiled at the new friend. She seems nice, thought Ryland, but she looks tough too. We will need her in our journey.

"So Ryland? What happened? I need details! Your letter hardly said anything!" exclaimed Emali. She couldn't help being ecstatic, she was just so filled with energy.

"I don't know many details, but the things I do know!" he lowered his voice in a whisper, "I need to tell you without anyone over hearing!" .hmmm" "let's go up." Ryland climbed up onto a low branch.

For a second Syra was kind of surprised, she hadn't expected him to do that. She watched as he climbed to a branch about halfway up and then motioned that they should follow. "Um" "Emali?" Syra said, looking worried into the treetops.

"Oh don't worry; we do this all the time! I've got you!" With that Emali pulled herself onto the same branch Ryland had climbed then reached out a hand. Syra looked uneasily down at the ground, where solid earth was beneath her feet. Reluctantly, she grabbed the helpful hand and hoisted herself up beside Emali. She had to admit it was cool to be up here, but the hard, rough wood did hurt her hands and knees a little.

Chapter 18: The Hunch

Chapter 18: The Hunch

So to the top they climbed. When sunshine beat down on the three they stopped. They weren't as high as they could be but they were high enough nobody on the ground could hear them.

"Explanation. Now." Emali looked at Ryland. Syra couldn't see how they could be totally fine 15 feet in the air. She clung onto her branch for dear life.

"Okay, Okay!" Ryland said smirking. He loved to have Emali back. "One morning father came in with a letter from Kredawn, Prince Ton's kingdom. I followed him into the study where he read it silently. I was checking to make sure he wasn't coming to stay." Ryland looked at us and continued, "His face got troubled so I stayed and listened, but making sure father didn't see me. I heard the whole conversation between him and his High Court."

Emali didn't know who a High Court was, but she assumed it was a member of the King's Court.

"That's all I heard, that he was missing and if he was here. After that they started to come out of the study and I had to run," Ryland said with an edge of disappointment in his voice. "All that I can figure is that they can't find him. Father received another letter in the mail the day prior to yesterday. That was when he sent out the proclamation to Kalarian residents." Ryland looked troubled. But there was one thing he hadn't mentioned yet.

"So where do you think he is?" Emali coaxed.

Ryland looked at Emali, with a hint of embarrassment. "It's kind of silly" Ryland spoke quietly.

"Come on! You can tell us, we won't laugh, promise!" she pleaded.

"I think he is hidden in Kredawn castle," Ryland stated.

Emali sat there silent, but you could just hear the gears turning in her head. After a moment she nodded. "Yes, I think so too."

"What? But then they would have found him by now!" Syra protested.

"That's what King Mavric wants you to think," Ryland explained.

"Wha? Who?" Syra stuttered, trying to keep up.

They quickly filled her in on King Mavric.

"You think he 'kidnapped' Prince Ton, and hid him in the castle?" Syra concluded.

"Yes, it appears so." Ryland replied.

"But how do you know?" Emali asked, her eyebrows were scrunched together.

"Prince Ton has wanted nothing more than to be king, and then suddenly only 2 days before his coronation, he disappears? Only two days before King Mavric lost his throne. It makes perfect sense."

Now Syra nodded too.

"So that's where we are going." Emali had glued the pieces together.

"Yes, Prince Ton's castle, Kredawn, to face my Uncle."

Chapter 19: Plans are Arranged

Chapter 19: Plans are Arranged

After much planning and a few delicious snacks, they had devised a plan to rescue Ryland's cousin.

"So when are we starting this?" Syra asked the two best friends.

Emali and Ryland looked at each other. They would love to wait a week and catch up, and maybe visit with Emali's family, but someone had to take action.

"Tomorrow," Ryland announced.

Syra nodded, "Good, then I think we are set!" She was ready to leave these treetops. After a while her fingers hurt from clinging on so tightly. Syra didn't know how Emali and Ryland did it.

"Wait one more thing. Where are we going to stay?" Emali looked at Syra.

"Here," Ryland said, and by the look on his face, it was not up to them on where to stay.

Emali smiled. She was glad to be back in Kalandia. The task ahead did not bother her; they knew what they were doing. Every detail was heard and all scenarios were voiced. It was a real adventure.

The three climbed down (Syra had a lot of help) and headed toward the castle.

In the grand entrance hall Syra got her first glance at the King and Queen. They were standing at the end of the hallway, looking at the trio.

Ryland led them down the rug-lined hallway toward his parents.

When they reached the first doorway, the King stepped forward. "My! Emali, nice to have you in our castle again," he proclaimed shaking her hand.

Queen Hethar stepped forward. "Glad to see you safe, Emali," she said, pulling her into a hug.

"And who is this?" the king asked, gesturing to Syra.

"This is Syra! She came with me from Helenania," Emali explained.

After Syra had shaken both of the parent's hand they proceeded. Ryland led them to the spare bedroom, which was across the hall from his own chambers.

Inside the guest room was two twin beds up against the far wall with a table and lamp in-between. The walls were green to match the bedding. A small closet and tall dresser dominated one wall. It was simple, but lovely.

Syra's bedroom at home was only half this size and even though she had to share with Emali and it was only one night, she enjoyed it. It reminded her of the big house she wished to have one day.

"This should do for one night," Ryland said, surveying the room.

The Oak, a novel

"Thanks, Ry!" Emali said, plopping her stuff down on the bed closest to the door. Syra did the same.

"No problem. So what do you guys want to do? We have a few hours." Ryland replied.

"I don't know, but it has to involve food. I'm hungry!" Syra said.

"I would love to go visit my family, we could have dinner with them," suggested Emali.

"I'm good with that," Ryland agreed.

Chapter 20: Visit Home

Chapter 20: Visit Home

Emali led the way to her house. She was looking forward to seeing her family after 14 months. She recognized the kids outside playing and waved to them. It was good to be home.

As she approached the gate, she was hesitant. Did she want to see her family, only to leave again tomorrow? But it's going to be easy, we'll be back fast, she told herself. That powered her to take the step and open the door.

"Mom? Dad? Shawny? Gessa?" she called out. Footsteps were heard coming from around the corner.

Gessa was first to see the visitors. Her hair was as frizzy as always, and her freckles prominent on her face. Shawny came next. Her hair was cut short, so it framed her face. A slight dusting of freckled was found across her button nose. Her pale green eyes lightened with excitement. She was a head shorter the Gessa.

Both sisters ran to meet the third, and oldest. Emali hugged both close and looked up to see her parents in the hallway, smiling at her.

Emali ran to them and the family of five shared a hug, as the 2 friends stood in the doorway, slightly uncomfortable.

As the family spread apart, Emali introduced Syra. Hugs and handshakes went around.

"What brings you home Emali?" her mother asked.

"Let's go into the kitchen and you can tell us everything, sweetheart," her dad said, leading everyone through the small crowded living room to the clean kitchen.

They all took seats around the table and Emali's mom fed them home-made tacos; which everyone made a mess of eating, but had fun.

While they devoured the food Emali told them about her journeys across Helenania. When she got to the part about Prince Ton, she let Ryland explain.

"So, that's why Emali is back," he father said, looking at his daughter.

"Why?" Emali asked, puzzled. They had not voiced their plans to rescue him, just said simply that he was missing.

"Well it's fairly obvious. You're going to rescue him!" Shawny announced gleefully. "Can I come too?" she pleaded.

"Yes, your right. We are going to rescue him. And I think you should leave this to us," Emali said to the youngest sister.

"But I can come though, right?" Gessa asked with puppy dog eyes.

The Oak, a novel

"No, you have to stay here with Shawny. And besides, we have everything planned out. It's going to be easy." Emali assured.

"But where is he, then?" he mother asked.

Emali caught Ryland's eye. He nodded briefly. They could trust her family. "We think he is at Kredawn castle."

What's and gasps filled the room. They told them their hunch.

"But what if you're wrong?" her father questioned.

"Then we'll get more evidence to where he could be," Ryland said.

Emali's father nodded.

"When are you leaving?" Shawny asked Syra, whom she had taken a liking for.

"Tomorrow, sweetie," Syra replied, wiping sour cream from the corner of her small mouth.

"That soon?" her mother asked, her voice full of worry.

"We've got to find him, and why wait?" Emali said, "Like I said before, we have a plan."

"Okay, but don't do anything that would be dangerous, you three!" she warned.

Syra, Emali, and Ryland promised.

The rest of the dinner passed by and the guests were soon walking out the door.

"Honey, are you sure you don't want to stay here for the night?" Emali father said, putting a fatherly hand on her shoulder.

"No, we have to get up early and it would just be easier," she assured him.

"Alright. We'll be here if you need anything." He stood in the doorway and watched them make their way up to the castle.

Chapter 21: Unexpected News

Chapter 21: Unexpected News

They spent the rest of the night up in Ryland's bedroom going over the plan. After they had finally got it memorized, Syra announced she was off to bed.

Emali was sitting up crossed, legged on Ryland's bed. Ryland was bellow her with is back resting against the bed. Syra got up from the chair she was sitting in and went across the hallway to her and Emali's room.

Once she was gone, Emali scooted over to the end of the bed and Ryland sat on top of his pillow, with his back against the wall. They sat like that, facing each other. This is how they would sit when Emali sneaked into his room at night to talk to him.

Emali looked down at her hands. "Do you think we can pull this off?" she whispered.

"I really don't know Emali; I think we have a good plan thoughâ!"

"Yeah, but what if it's not enough?" she whispered, looking up into his eyes. "What do we have against a king and his guard?"

"We have to hope that he hasn't told his guard."

"He must have told some, otherwise Prince Ton would have escaped already!" she said.

Ryland looked down and traced the pattern on the bed sheets.

"We'll just have to think quickly then," he said, wishing he had something better to say.

Emali nodded, but she still looked troubled.

"Something else is bothering you." He stated. It wasn't a question, it was a fact.

Emali shrugged. "I'm just thinking of what I'm going to do after we rescue him."

"You could stay here until my coronation," Ryland suggested, hoping she could.

"Your coronation is in 2 weeks right?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's the date we set."

"I think I can. I mean, if Syra wants to stay too."

Ryland had forgotten about Syra. She would want to go home.

"You could stay, even if she went home," he whispered.

Emali looked up at him, "Maybe she won't want to leave,"

"Maybeâ!"

The Oak, a novel

"So have you found the future queen, yet?" Emali said, changing the subject.

He thought about it, and then he nodded.

Emali was taken aback. He hadn't mentioned this in his letters.

"Ohâ is she nice?" was all she could say.

"Yeahâ she's really nice, and sweet. I like her a lot," Ryland said kind of uncomfortably.

"Where did you meet her?" Emali seemed to have many questions zooming around in her head. When she opened her mouth they all wanted to come out of it.

"Here, at the castle." He said simply.

"Oh," she said. She could help the emotions exploding inside her. She knew she should be happy he had found someone, but she couldn't push down the hurt and jealousy rising to the surface.

"Well, good that you found the right girl!" her voice was forced.

Ryland smiled and nodded, still uncomfortable.

"Well I should be getting to bed, a long day tomorrow!" she said as she got up from the bed. She should have found out more about this girl her best friend had fallen for, but the truth was she didn't want to hear to find out; it would just make her hurt more.

"Okay, goodnight." Ryland said.

"night," was all she said as she left the room.

Ryland stood there. If only he had enough courage to tell her who the perfect girl was. If only he had the courage to tell her it was her.

Chapter 22: The Start of the Journey

Chapter 22: The Start of the Journey

Emali was the first one awake the next morning. She woke up Syra in the bed next to hers.

"Syra, Syra, it's time to get up," she whispered.

"Mhmmâ 'kay," she said groggily, sitting up.

They got dressed and ready silently. They had set to meet outside in the hallway when they were done.

As they quietly opened their door, Ryland opened his. They proceeded into his room. Light was just barely coming up over the hills, and it shone through his window. They wove their way silently through his room, too tired to speak. Once they reached the window, as they had planned, they opened it noiselessly. Once Emali, Syra and Ryland were out into the cool air, Ryland shut the window.

They had chosen to go this way as to not wake up the castle. Before Ryland had gone to bed he had written a note explaining that they were off to find Prince Ton and would return shortly. It was easier than trying to explain that their hunch to his parents. This way they couldn't ask questions.

Emali passed the giant oak trees, and looked up into their huge, high branches. Who was this girl Ryland had chosen? She wondered. Emali looked behind her to sneak a peek at the prince. He was wearing his normal attire, a plain brown shirt and comfortable cotton pants.

They had chosen to dress comfortably, because their plan had a lot of running and hiding. Emali wore a snug grey cotton dress she had brought with her, and Syra was wearing long black cotton pants with a white tank top.

As Emali looked at the prince, he looked up and had caught her eye. From the slight glance he saw something in her face. It was hard to describe but was that hurt he saw?

He had convinced himself after she had left that he would tell her today. He would tell her, he didn't want her to leave him again.

Syra was anxious for the trip ahead. She wanted to see more of the world and couldn't wait to see yet another castle. This was turning out to be a great journey!

Soon the trio arrived at their destination: the stables.

They had chosen to take a carriage, as that would be the fastest travel. Ryland had contacted the driver from the day before, to take them to Kredawn. He was more than happy to assist his highness again.

As the driver had promised, he was ready to go when they arrived. They loaded themselves, and the few belongings they had chosen to take with them, into the carriage.

On the way out of the kingdom, they discussed the plan again, just to make sure they knew it. They also discussed what to do if something went wrong.

The Oak, a novel

Kredawn castle was close to Kalaria's. It was only about a 4 hour's ride. Before they knew it, the carriage had pulled up in front of the little town bordering the castle.

Ryland had remembered the area from the last couple times he had visited here. They had decided it would be less conspicuous to arrive walking than to be driven in a carriage.

"Thank you, and if you could meet us here at the same spot around dusk?" Ryland said to the driver.

He nodded his understanding, "Good luck, your highness." With that he drove off to find a nearby stable to shelter his horses until he was needed.

As they walked, Syra surveyed the village. It was full of medium-sized grey houses. Each house had a nice, manicured lawn. But as they got closer to the middle of the city, the houses got smaller, until they were more like townhouses. This part was clearly more populated than the outside of the city.

Syra looked toward the castle. She could just make out the huge, towers over the small patches of trees here and there. The towers were tall, and majestic. They were made of fine white stone, with grey tops.

When Syra got closer she could see the fine white gates surrounding the giant, majestic castle. The whole castle was made of that fine white rock. Rounded windows faced the front and a small garden surrounded the big, grey doors. Around the point where wall met grass, many short Sypris trees grew all around the castle walls. Green grass wound itself around the castle. A tiny lake was set on the left hand side of the property.

At last they had reached the castle's gates. This was one of the crucial parts of their plan. The sun had now fully risen and the town was just starting to awaken.

Emali followed Ryland to a small thicket of trees bordering the fence. From there they could see the gates. Now all they had to do was wait for the daily baker to come and deliver fresh pastries.

Ryland had explained that the head cook ordered fresh breakfast every morning; because it was the only meal he lacked skill in. The three waited silently, for the truck to come.

In the distance they heard a low rumbling, like the sound of a medium-sized truck coming up the hill towards the gates.

Emali, who was the quietest on her feet, inched forward and carefully looked down the winding road. She motioned for Syra and Ryland to come forward.

They slowly made their way to the edge of the forest. They had to stay undercover as long as possible, because they had about a split second to hop into the back of this moving vehicle.

As the three stood there, barely moving so as to not alert anyone of their presence, the truck slowly ambled by. It stopped at the closed gate. The driver got out and went up to punch the code into the automated doors, to let his truck in.

While he did this however, he was unaware of the three teenagers quietly opening the back door, and very carefully wedging themselves inside.

Ryland's nostrils filled with the sweet scent of fresh bread, and could barely resist the urge to sink his teeth into one of the many pastries.

The Oak, a novel

Emali too had her mouth hanging open as she stared at the scrumptious breakfast. She even put her hand out to grab a nice blueberry muffin, when Syra caught her.

The food had diverted them from the real plan, and they almost missed their stop.

Ryland seemed to understand their mistake and quickly grabbed both girls' hands and jumped in the awaiting bushes.

If anyone knows, jumping into bushes is a lot more harmful than you would think.

Emali came up with a gash on her cheek and several on her arms and legs. Syra had almost missed the bushes completely, and scaped her elbow on a side branch and bruised her knee on the hard ground. Ryland had gotten many leaves stuck in his hair, as did Emali, but one big scrape bled on his upper right arm.

They dove into the trees that lined the castle walls. From there, nobody could see them, but they could see out.

Emali almost screamed when a big, yellow and black spider was inches from her pale face.

Ryland pulled her back away from it, and clamped his hand over her mouth. She stood there like that until her breathing had returned to normal.

"Just a garden spider; not poisonous." He assured, but they kept a close eye out after that so as to not step anywhere close to another one.

Emali kept a firm grip on Ryland's forearm as they weaved their way toward the back of the castle. Even though Emali had spent her life climbing through trees, she had always hated small and cramped places.

Syra kept Ryland and Emali within site, but she hung a little behind. This place made her happy. She could just not feel the terror, and hurriedness, that Emali and Ryland felt. She felt as though this place were safe. She had never felt safe before.

Chapter 23: Into the Castle

Chapter 23: Into the Castle

Ryland could finally see the light. He crept toward it, with Emali still holding tight to his forearm. He peeked out from between the branches.

The line of trees ended just as the patio started. For Ryland's luck, no one had been on the patio; otherwise they would have been caught.

Emali poked her head out next to Ryland's. The flagstone patio went on for about 20 more feet then stopped as the next line of trees wound around the castle. Freshly manicured grass grew from the patio to the small forest of pine trees at the fence.

A small spurting fountain dominated the center of the patio. It was an intricate sculpture of a beautiful mermaid, and a flow of water came out of the tips of her graceful fingers into the basin below.

Few flowers grew along the edges of the patio. Pinks, purples and whites gave the backyard a splash of color.

Where the castle wall met with the stones of the patio, a door stood center in the middle; directly across from the fountain. The door was plain dark wood against the light patio and the white rock of the walls.

Emali's hand felt behind her, and Syra grabbed it. Carefully, Ryland stepped onto the hard stones. With batted breath Emali waited for something to happen to her best friend as he casually crossed the space to the door. She gripped Syra's hand as he hesitated outside the door.

Ryland's head was level with a tiny window on the door. Through it he could see a deserted corridor beyond. Although he did not know how deserted it would be in a few moments, but he took the risk. His hand grasped the bronze handle and pulled.

Cold air blew at him, making him almost retreat to the trees, but no one noticed the door opening. He sighed a breath of relief, as did his companions.

Now that they were this far into the mission, Syra realized their plan was mediocre. Any moment someone could look out and notice the unannounced visitors. Although every ounce of her screamed to run far away, she knew they had to carry out the deed.

Ryland looked back at Syra and Emali, hiding in the safety of the trees. He could tell them to go home now, and let him go on alone. But even as the thought crossed his mind he knew it was worthless. Emali would never abandon him. And he could never take away her adventure. Although he didn't want too, he gestured for them to follow his lead.

Emali saw the gesture and stepped cautiously onto the stone and follow Ryland into the building with Syra close behind.

The corridor was lined with soft carpet, and beige walls. Tapestries and paintings hung on the walls.

The three walked along. On Ryland's right side was a door. He remembered vaguely that this door would lead him to the front entrance. From the front entrance, there was a door down to the basement. That was where they suspected the prince was being held captive.

The Oak, a novel

Ryland got down on his hands and knees, as planned, and looked out the crack between door and floor. His eyes could see no one, but who knew if someone was on the banister above?

Again, he took his chances and opened the door. Again, luck was on their side. The entrance was empty.

Now all they had to do was sprint to the door across the hall. Ryland took to the walls and blended in with the shadows. The walls were made of soft grey stones all concreted together.

Emali followed without a word. Syra, on the other hand, stood frozen, looking out at the entrance. It was like dÃ©jÃ -vu. She had seen this place before, although she could not remember where. She was only brought back to earth by Emali's small cough.

She fixed her mistake, and hurried after the two.

Chapter 24: Gone Wrong

Chapter 24: Gone Wrong

Emali was curled up on the hard, cold cement. Tears streamed down her face and into her hair. Her brain is reeling with what went wrongâ

flashback to earlier

Emali, Ryland and Syra had made it to the dungeon's door without been spotted.

Ryland looked back at the other two and gingerly opened the dungeon door. Beyond it was dark and musty. In the half-light they could see a narrow staircase leading down.

With one last look at the bright hall, Emali followed Ryland down the steep flight.

When they had reached the bottom was when things started going all wrong.

The cells were empty, all of them. At first it looked completely deserted, but as Emali's eye's adjusted to the lack of daylight, 2 figures emerged from the darkness.

Ryland jumped back and sprayed his arms wide. "Go Back! Get Back!" he screamed, pushing them towards the stairs.

The guards were fast though and had quickly grabbed the back of Ryland's shirt. Emali watched in horror as her best friend was thrown across the room.

Ryland smashed into the concrete wall. He tried to focus, but his sight was blurry. He could barely make out the two guards in front of him. They had their backs to him, as if walking towards another target. With a jolt Ryland remembered Emali and Syra. It all came flooding back, and that gave the burst of strength to catapult himself at the attackers.

For a moment the guards were startled, but they quickly recovered. The right one lifted his hand up to pull Ryland off his back, but Emali quickly grabbed his beefy arm. She hung onto it like it was a tree branch. She swung her feet and they connected with his gut. He toppled over with pain.

Syra, on the other hand was taking care of the other man. She had run around him, as he tried to pummel her with his mighty fist. She kept dodging his flailing limbs, but she couldn't hold this up forever. With a jump, she grabbed onto his hair, but his arms grabbed her middle. He swung her hard, down to the ground.

Ryland and Emali got up and rushed toward the unconscious Syra, leaving the guards unattended.

Emali reached Syra first, and knelt down beside her.

"Syra? Syra, please, wake upâ Syra!" she whispered. Emali shook her shoulder and tried to sit the girl up.

Ryland came around to help her, but the guards were quick.

They reached out to grab the unsuspecting Emali, but in a flash, Ryland had jumped in front.

The Oak, a novel

Emali's breath caught in her throat as their fists connected with Ryland's shoulders, and sent him flying yet again. Unlike last time, he hit the ground with a sickening bang.

Emali felt faint. She was alone. Both her best friends were unconscious or worse. She was tired, and two big men were coming closer to her. Her head hurt and it was getting harder and harder to breathe.

Even before the 2 castle guards had reached the young girl she fainted.

Chapter 25: Betrayed

Chapter 25: Betrayed

Emali had woken up in the cold musty cell. She had cried and screamed herself hoarse. She had to find Syra and Ryland; make sure they were okay.

When she had finally laid down her head, the 2 people entered the dungeon.

Her eyes snapped open and she flung herself at the rusty bars.

"Ryland! Oh Ryland! Help!" She shocked out in between sobs.

She reached her hand outside to make sure he was real, and she hadn't already fallen asleep. But Ryland had stopped, just short of her finger tips.

That was when she looked up into his face. Ryland looked down at her with no emotion.

"Ry...?" She started to ask. Then she caught sight of the man behind her best friend.

"Why I'm sure glad you are awake, Emali. We were starting to worry." King Mavric looked down at her as if she was a savage dog finally chained up.

"You. What's going on?" she demanded, looking at the king with loathing.

"We've come down to say that you mustn't draw attention to yourself down here, people may start to worry. And you don't want that, do you my dear?" he sneered.

Emali decided to give up on him, and she turned to Ryland. "Ryland, what is going on?" she demanded looking into his eyes.

He looked down at his feet, not meeting her gaze. "We were wrong, Emali. King Mavric wasn't to blame. It was Prince Ton. He was going to take the throne from my Uncle," he barely said above a whisper.

"I don't under-" she started, but she was interrupted.

"Why, my dear, see when Prince Ton visited you and your Prince, he brought back some rather interesting ideas. He thought it was wise to consult with the people!" He said this statement as if it were preposterous.

At least I got something through to him, Emali thought. But that still didn't explain why she was in this position. She waited for him to go on.

"But when I heard of your little scheme to come rescue my son, I couldn't have that. I quickly put guards around the castle. Yet you still got past!" he looked impressed.

"How did you know about us saving the prince?" Emali asked, suspicious.

"Why, your dear King and Queen alerted me straight away of your quest. I presume that they thought this would higher my spirits, and in fact it did!"

The Oak, a novel

Emali shook her head, unable to keep the information in line. "Butâ why?"

"Why was I happy? Well look who showed up! The next in line for my dear brother-in-laws throne! Your friend Ryland here is the perfect heir!" When Emali looked up at him in disbelief, he continued, "See when Ton never returns, we will need an heir to both kingdoms. And Ryland has agreed to take on both lands!" with that he put a hand on Ryland's shoulder.

Emali was very confused. Ryland would neverâ , she thought. But she stopped herself. She hasn't seen Ryland in months. But a person can't changeâ and why would he? He was the most loyal, smart, creative, admirable person Emali knew. He would never side with this monster.

She searched her best friend's face. He showed nothing. His mouth set in a straight line and eyes down.

"But then Ryland would rule and you wouldn't?" she said, trying to come up with an excuse for Ryland.

King Mavric chuckled, "Oh, but you seeâ Ryland here has accepted that I will be his closest adviser! It will be as if I still were king! Ryland would just deal with all of the unimportant parts of ruling a kingdom!"

Emali looked disgusted and confused at the evil king. Her Ryland would neverâ but then a thought struck her and she had to grip the bars to keep herself from breaking down again. Ryland's not mine anymoreâ he loves someone else now, she thought, letting a small tear run down her cheek.

King Mavric noticed, "Don't cry little Emali, you will be close to your prince forever! He is going to stay here at the castleâ and so are you!" he said with glee.

"Whaâ What?" She had thought that he would let her leave eventually. She was never going home; never going to see the rolling hills of Kalaria. I'm probably never going to see sunlight either, she thought hopelessly.

She looked up into the cruel king's happy face. "Why keep me here?" she said stubbornly.

"A smart girl like you, I would think you would have figured it out by now," he paused looking down at her, "You know too much, it's as simple as that, my sweet."

Emali was glaring with revulsion at the king. "So I'm just going to sit here and rot while you destroy the kingdoms."

King Mavric thought for a second, "Hmmâ yes that seem so!"

Emali was going to be sick at the site of his greedy smile plastered on his face. Her lip trembled with a mixture of self pity and loathing.

A thought came her crashing back to what happened earlier. "Where's Syra?!" she yelled.

"Don't worry, Syra will be joining you shortly, my dear Emaliâ !"

Emali was hit with a wave of guilt. What had she done by bringing Syra on this journey?

As the king went to leave, Ryland turned as well. "Ryâ !" Emali whispered, desperate.

The Oak, a novel

He looked back at her with such sadness that she was momentarily speechless. Before he followed his uncle out of the dungeons, however she got the words out.

"I love you Ryâ !" she croaked. She had been too late. He hadn't heard. He was gone.

Chapter 26: Questions

Chapter 26: Questions

Emali sat huddled in a corner of the dusty cell. Her tears had run out long ago. When they had left she had only her thoughts.

Questions swirled around in her mind, giving her a horrible headache.

Why is Uncle Mavric doing this?

Why is Ryland playing along?

Does he have a plan?

Has he left me?

Thoughts on Ryland made her want to scream and shout, but she kept in her hurt.

Ryland had already chosen someone else; this was just to get you out of the way, a small voice said in her head.

"No! " she said to herself. Emali had to believe that Ryland was indeed worried about Prince Ton and wanted her to come rescue him with him. She wanted to believe that he really cared about her.

But if he cared about you, why would you be in this cell in the first place? whispered the voice.

But if he really wanted me out of the way, then he could have just told me! She argued. And why did he get beat up by those guards if it really was all a plan?

Maybe he wasn't really getting hurt. Maybe he was faking it.

Emali shook her head, not wanting to believe a word of it. Ryland was her best friend and she knew he would never intentionally do this.

Maybe he is just thinking of the kingdom. Maybe he is trying to be a noble king by stepping up, even though it sends your best friend to jail, and getting controlled by a devil.

Yes, Emali thought that had to be it. On that note, her aching head dosed into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 27: A Confusing Night

Chapter 27: A Confusing Night

Ryland rushed through the corridors. The moonlight shone through the high windows, casting his shadow alongside him.

He had to do this while the king was asleep; while everyone was asleep.

His feet slapped lightly on the entrance hall's shiny ceramic flooring. His eyes were focused on door on the other side. All he had to do was make it to that door, and he would be safe, well at least until he had to go back.

Ryland had cursed himself for not setting his alarm clock before he had gone to bed. He was planning on having all night, but unfortunately he had woken up with only a half hour till dawn. Barely enough time.

Finally, he had arrived at the door. Silently he opened it and stared at the flight of stairs heading down. The day before yesterday, this was the flight where everything went wrong.

He gulped the fresh air before descending downward toward his goal.

His eyes adjusted to the almost black dungeon. Straining his eyes he looked around until he spotted the right one.

"Em?" he whispered through the bars. He could see a sleeping figure on the floor roll over.

"Emali? Please wake up!" he begged. He wanted to wake her up, but not alert anyone above.

"Mmm... Ryland?" she said, blinking. When her eyesight came into focus she stared at him. Could he be her imagination?

She reached out and put her dirty, delicate fingers onto his cheek. Her eyes started to fill with tears.

Before she could speak Ryland started. "Emali, please, I don't have much time! There is no time to explain, but!" he looked deep into her eyes, "Emali, when you get the chance, run. Far away. Run home and tell no one. There is no saying what my uncle would think up to try and keep you quiet. Go back to your family. Stay down. Please," he pleaded with her, holding her hands tight through the bars.

"I'm not leaving without you!" she told him, thinking him crazy for telling her to do so.

"Emali... please," he pleaded again.

Emali shook her head, "No, we are a team."

"Emali, there is no team. You are stuck down here in the dungeon. If it weren't for me you would be!" Ryland could not continue.

Emali looked into her best friend's face. She loved him. But she knew that he would never stop pleading her to go to safety. Slowly, reluctantly, she nodded.

The Oak, a novel

Satisfied, Ryland relaxed. He looked up at the open door. Light was dimly shining through it. He was out of time.

Through the bars, he quickly kissed Emali and ran up the steps away from her.

Chapter 28: Who Does He Love?

Chapter 28: Who Does He Love?

Emali sat on the floor in front of the bars. She had just been kissed. By Ryland. She had forgotten what it had felt like. It felt like love.

But waitâ said that voice in her mind. He loves somebody else. Not me.

Her mind was confused. Did he love her or someone else?

He had said the night before they came to this dreadful castle that he had found someone else. She could remember the conversation. He had met her at the castle. He thought she was pretty and niceâ Emali's thoughts wanderedâ

She had met Ryland at the castle. Did Ryland think her pretty? She had been told many times that she was. She wasn't particularly nice, but on occasion, she could be as sweet as she wanted. She fit into all he had saidâ and those small kissesâ But if he loved me, then why doesn't he just say it?

And what had he said? How was her friend saying that Uncle Mavric was right, then telling her to escape as soon as she could?

She was getting confused, but one thing was certain: Tonight Ryland had seemed like his old self, not some slave of Mavric's.

Whatever he had mentioned tonight, he probably meant. But then why put up the charade? Why not just escape with her now?

Syra is still here somewhere, she reminded herself. And with that goal in mind she began devising a plan.

Chapter 29: Syra Returns

Chapter 29: Syra Returns

Emali woke later that day to a bright light streaming down onto her. Her dirty hand went up to shield her eyes from the brightness. She could just make out a door opening at the top of the winding stairs.

Emali sat up straight. She wished with all her might that something good was coming down the steep stairs.

Her stomach growled. Emali was starving. The last meal she had eaten was yesterday's breakfast.

It has hard to believe they had left Kalaria yesterday morning. She had counted it out and it could only be the next day. She had only spent one night in this dreadful cell.

She eyes darted back to the figures walking down the flight before her. Emali's heart yearned for Ryland, or at least Syra, but unfortunately all she got was 2 burly guards.

They were carrying a dish with what looked like-

"Food!" cried Emali through the bars. They slid it under the gap between the bars and the floor.

On the plate was, Emali presumed, the leftovers from breakfast this morning. Cold scrambled eggs and a small no longer warm biscuit laid upon he metal dish.

"Hey, you," one of the guards grunted.

Emali looked up from her pitiful meal. He thrust his meaty hand inside her cell. In his grip was a cup of plain water. She took it delicately, not wanting to spill a drop. Emali raised the glass to her lips and took small, refreshing sips. The less she took at once the longer it would last.

The guards turned to go, but Emali who was happier with part of her breakfast now in her stomach, called to them, "Excuse me sirs?"

They turned around with blank expressions. The young prisoner noticed them exchange a quick glance.

Both guards minds were wondering if they should answer or not.

The left one turned to face Emali and spoke with a gravelly voice, "Yes?"

"I was just wonderingâ what-what happened to my friendâ I haven't seen herâ" Emali said, with her voice full of concern.

The guards took another uneasy look at each other. How much should they tell her?

The right one answered this time, "She will be joining you shortly." With that both guards walked up the staircase and out of sight.

Emali sat there frustrated, chewing her biscuit slowly. So she would see Syra soon. But that statement did not specify the state that Syra was in. She could be very injured, considering the hard crash to the floor yesterday.

The Oak, a novel

Emali sat eating her small, but decent meal, thinking.

She didn't realize how fast the time went by and suddenly the light returned. Emali squinted up at the 2 figure descending the staircase.

Relief bloomed inside her. She got up close to the bars and watched as the guard, who had his firm grip on the upper arm of a slight figure, come closer.

When Syra saw Emali she almost passed out from relief. "Emali!" she screamed, trying to run forward, but was held back by the guard.

"Syra! You're okay!" Emali squealed back.

The guard put Syra into the cell next to Emali's.

Once the guard had disappeared through the door, both girls spoke.

"Where have-"

"Are you-"

"You first," Syra suggested. A smile escaped her lips; it was wonderful to see Emali alright.

"Are you okay? Last time I saw you, you had just been slammed into the floor!" Emali said, exasperated.

"I'm better now, but I have to admitâmy head and shoulders hurt pretty badâ!" she said, "But the last thing I remember is being grabbed from one of those huge men. Next thing I knew I was laying on a hard bed. My vision was really blurry. I could feel the bandages covering my head, neck and shoulders. I don't know what they did to me, but if they hadn't, I would probably be deadâ!" Syra finished in a whisper Emali had to strain to hear.

"Oh Syra, I'm so sorry! If only I had helped you with that one guard!" Emali wailed.

"No, it's really okay, Emali. You were busy taking down the other one with R-" Syra stopped mid-sentence.

"What is it, Syra?" Emali asked, her brow furring together.

Syra didn't speak for a moment, as if trying to pick the right words. "Have you seen Ryland, Emali?" she said, with a hint of worry in her voice.

It was Emali's turn to be silent. After a moment she answered, "Yes."

"Was-was the King there too?" Syra asked.

Emali nodded, and then realizing Syra could not see her, replied for a second time, "Yes."

"Why would heâ!" Syra said, at a loss of words to go on.

Emali understood though. She began telling Syra of her midnight visit from Ryland.

The Oak, a novel

Once the young girl was done, the other squealed. "Why didn't you tell me this when I first got here?! This changes everything!"

Emali could hear her friend get up and start pacing her cell. She was murmuring quietly; Emali couldn't make out a word she said.

At last Syra spoke louder, so that Emali could understand.

"Well you realize what we have to do right now, don't you?" Syra asked.

"No, what?" Emali responded, bewildered.

"We have to find out where Prince Ton is!" Syra said excitedly.

"Syra! How are we going to find him, if we are stuck in the dungeon?" Emali asked, a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"They have to come down and check on us! We could bombard them with questions!" Syra said, completely ignoring Emali's lack of enthusiasm.

"Yesâ but Syra they won't answer! Why would they?" Emali said, trying to get Syra to see reason.

It took Syra a moment to get a comeback to that one. "Next time Ryland comes!" she yelled her voice full of triumph.

Emali sighed. "What if he doesn't come back Syra?"

"Why wouldn't he come back?" Syra asked, it sounds as if she had come to a halt on the other side of the wall.

"He told me to leave!" Emali sighed, "And I told him I would."

Silence followed her words. "You forgot to mention that earlierâ !" Syra said awkwardly. The she said in a happier voice, "But I'm sure the king would tell him we r still locked in here and he'll come down!"

Emali looked around her chamber, what was she to do?

After a moment Emali spoke, "Okay, we need a plan to get out of here. We came here on a mission, and we have to finish it. And save Prince Ton."

Chapter 30: The Sudden Inspiration

Chapter 30: The Sudden Inspiration

Ryland was sitting in his guest chamber. His head was in his hands. He had just finished a very stressful board meeting.

Uncle Mavric had sent word to his father. His father had agreed for him to stay here. How was he going to do this? He ran his hands through his dark hair.

Then there was Emali. He knew she would never desert him, but how was he to get her to safety? He couldn't let her live forever in the dungeons.

With a flash like a lightning bolt, Ryland had a sudden inspiration. He knew how to save his friends.

He raced to his feet and threw open the door. Out in the hallway, he proceeded to his Uncle's suite. With one quick rap on the door, it opened.

"Yes, your highness?" asked the butler.

"I need to speak to the king," announced Ryland regally.

"One moment, Sire." With that he turned on his heel and walked swiftly into the room beyond.

In a moment he was back with Mavric following closely behind.

"Ryland, so nice to have you visit!" he said, gripping Ryland's upper arm. He steered him into a highly polished living room with fancy, stiff furniture. He forced Ryland into an embroidered armchair and sat down on the velvet couch to face him.

The butler had followed, and he set down two glasses of cool water; the condensation dripping down the glass. Once he was done, the servant left the room.

As the door swung close, the smile melted off the king's face. "What do you want?" he sneered.

"I have come to request a meeting with your son," Ryland said, with his head held high.

King Mavric snorted. "Yes, I am going to let you discuss with my dear son, no doubt planning to overrule me!" he barked.

"I merely want to ask his advice, sir. I do not know the ways of your kingdom quite yet, and I'm sure he would be of help," Ryland declared.

It took his uncle a moment to digest his words. He raised his head and answered, "You may speak to him, but in the presence of a guard only," he stated.

"Thank you, Uncle." Ryland said bowing his head in respect.

"Yes, yes, Simon!" he barked, indicating the butler to come forward into the room.

The Oak, a novel

"Yes, Sire?" he said tentatively.

"Fetch young Ryland here an elite guard at once," the king demanded.

"Yes, at once." He swept from the room.

The king eyed his nephew with uncertainty. He was not sure what he was up too, but whatever it was, he would surely obey the king.

Simon came back into the room followed by a burly guard. Ryland was relieved it was not one of the guards that had beaten him, Syra and Emali up yesterday.

This guard surveyed Ryland with scrutiny. He was positive the young prince would be no trouble.

Ryland sat in the uncomfortable chair, looking up at his guard, a plan swirling in his mind.

Chapter 31: Speaking With The Prisoner

Chapter 31: Speaking With The Prisoner

The 2 people walked along the narrow hallway. The smaller one was in front, leading the way as the bigger one lumbered behind.

At last they had reached the thick, wooden door. It did not have a doorknob. Ryland reached out his hand, and pressed a knot in the wood. Like a button, it sunk into the door and stayed even when Ryland had removed his hand. After a moment they heard a pop and the door swung open an inch.

Ryland grasped the heavy door and pulled it open. Behind it was a dark staircase. Lamps hung along the wall, covering the damp steps with dimness.

With a slight hesitation, Ryland started down, the guard keeping close behind.

The whole way down the guard's breath was on the back of the young boy's neck. The guard did not like coming down this flight. It made him skittish. His one secret was that he was very claustrophobic.

Ryland sensed his guard's dislike, and flew faster down.

At long last they had reached level flooring. It was made of bricks, each glued together with thick mud. In the middle of the room, a set of bars stood. They separated the visitors from the prisoner.

Ryland's breath caught in his throat as he looked down at his elder cousin. How could someone do this to him?

Prince Ton looked up at the visitors. His face showed no sign of surprise at his cousin's face. He was used to surprises and betrayals now. He had no emotion left for such things.

Ton's clothes hung on him like drapes. Even after 2 weeks of no sunlight and small meals, the prince looked ghastly. His face blank and his hair lay greasy on his head. His eyes were dulled.

"Ton?" Ryland whispered.

"Ryland?" He replied, a hint of sarcasm in his flat voice.

"I have come with a request." Ryland paused then continued when a small prick of curiosity showed in Ton's features, "I need your help."

"How am I to help you? You are free, I am not."

Ryland looked deep into the soulless eyes. "I am as free as you are, my cousin."

Ton raised an eyebrow, "What do you need my help with?"

Ryland shot a glance at the guard. The guard, who was standing at the bottom of the stairs, looked down at him. After a moment, the guard nodded his head, and Ryland turned back to his cousin.

The Oak, a novel

Suspicion formed on the heir's face. He did not voice his mind however, but remained silent and let Ryland explain.

"I'll cut to the point. Your father has Emali and her friend," he paused and corrected, "My friend, Syra looked up in the dungeons."

"And you want me to rescue them?" Ton asked.

"You need to. I cannot explain why I cannot, but you need to trust me," Ryland begged.

"How do you expect to get me out of here, rescue your friends, and get us all to safety, without getting caught?"

"Gregory." Ryland gestured to the guard behind him.

The man jerked his head up at his name.

"And how is that?" the prince wondered, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

"Gregory worked at my castle, before he was transferred to yours."

Surprise and glee lit up the prisoners face.

Chapter 32: Flaw In The Plan

Chapter 32: Flaw in the Plan

It was dark. The moonlight cast shadows along the walls. Although the castle was asleep 3 men stood in the places they had planned.

Ryland stood at the top of the stairs, awaiting the arrival of Ton, who was now striding toward the marble base of the majestic staircase. Gregory, the guard stood at position in front of the hallway branching off from the entrance hall.

Once at the top, Ton turned to his partner. "Proceed?" he asked.

Ryland swerved his head and the guard nodded. Ryland whispered, "Yes and Hurry I cannot be seen out of bed. It's up to you." Ryland continued down the corridor to his rooms. There he would wait.

Ton walked slowly down the stairs again, toward the door. As silent as a mouse he crept along the hall and down the steep steps.

Gregory had been sure to leave the dungeon door open a crack when he had delivered Emali and Syra's meal earlier that day. He had also made sure that Prince Ton's cell was unlocked when he went to bring him his meal. It had all gone to plan, so far.

Ton crept toward the door and slipped through it out of sight.

Ryland stepped inside his rooms. His heart was pumping wildly in his chest. He couldn't think of what would happen if they were caught or unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, Ton was stepping lightly down the steep stairs, not daring to make a sound. In the slight sliver of moonlight coming in the crack in the door, his eyes caught the keys dangling on their hook. With careful hands, he grabbed them. A small tinkling sounded as they bumped together. Even though it was the slightest of noises, he winced. The sound echoed in the near-empty dungeon.

Finally, he had reached the cells. His eyes, which had now adjusted to the darkness, could see two shapes in both cells. Choosing the one closest to the stairs first he began to fit the key into the lock. With a small click the door popped open.

No was the tricky part: he had to wake up the girl. Without wanting to scare her he gently put his hand on her shoulder.

In the semi-darkness (for the door had now slowly opened a fraction more because he had forgotten to close it fully) Ton could make out the mass of fine curls on the prisoner's head.

So this must be Syra, Ton thought. "Syraâ !" he whispered, not daring to raise his voice higher.

She murmured something intangible, and turned to face him. Her face showed surprise and shock, but she did not call out. In the dim light she could make out his figure, and knew at once who he was. With a nod, she got up with his hand still on her shoulder.

The Oak, a novel

Syra followed Ton out of the cell and into the light of the windows above. But as Ton turned toward Emali's cell, they heard it.

A faint whistle was coming from above. Ton eyes widened with fear as he glanced up at the door. After a moment's hesitation, he took a fleeting look at Emali's sleeping form and then at Syra's face hidden in shadow. With a quick decision he grabbed Syra's disbelieving hand and yanked her up the steps.

"But Emali!" Syra whispered to Ton.

"We'll come back for her! That was the signal, hurry!" he said back.

The two raced up the steps but made sure not to make a sound. Once they had reached the top, Ton pushed Syra up against the wall, into the shadows. They stood like that breathing for a moment as Ton's eyes swiped the entrance hall.

His eyes faltered on the empty places his companions had stood. There was no sign of a struggle, yet he wished there was at least a sign of which way the intruder had gone.

With another decision, he grabbed hold of Syra's hand and led her through the long corridor Gregory had been guarding. The door's window at the end of the hallway was casting an eerie glow over the walls. Moonlight light up the prince's face. Once at the door, Ton leaned down and slid a small key from his boot. Ryland had given it to him earlier.

Syra looked down the nearest hallway. Nothing was stirring in this castle that she could tell. Her head ached with dread. Where were they going? Why did they have to leave Emali?

Finally, Ton got the door open, and steered Syra outside. With the moon rays to guide them they crept in the shadows to a small clump of trees in a corner of the gated in area. After a few feet of trees they came to a clearing. Ton sat down on a near-by bolder and took a shaky breath. Then, while looking at his hands, he gave a small chuckle, "I'm freeâ"

Chapter 33: Caught

Chapter 33: Caught

Ryland paced his living room, fretful. His heart raced inside his chest, threatening to burst. A minute had gone by. There was no noise at all, which he hoped meant that things were going as planned.

Gregory's mind spun with the same thoughts. It was hard not knowing what was going to happen the very next moment.

Ryland was very pleased that he had met up with Gregory. When Ryland and Emali were little they used to watch the knights train, and often spoke with them during their breaks. Many knights were very glad to speak to the young prince and his friend. Gregory was one of knights that came to train everyday and got to know the heir and commoner quite well. But Gregory was an excellent knight, so he went up the ranks quickly. After only a few months he was sent to Kredawn to guard the castle. Of course he had taken this high honor, but he did miss the youngsters.

The sound of soft footsteps brought Ryland back to the task at hand. His heart beat furiously against his chest and he knew that the late night intruder must have heard it as well. His door crept open.

He spun around to face his uncle. When Ryland's eyes connected with those of the king's, Mavric stopped. A moment's silence crept over Ryland's skin as he thought about what was to happen next.

"Well, well, wellâ what do we have here?" He walked up to Ryland and looked down at him with suspicion etched in his features. "What is the prince doing up, fully dressed in the middle of the night?"

Ryland could barely keep his voice straight, "I j-just can't sleep is all," he said, making up a lie quickly.

"Then why are you fully dressed, as if for a quick departure?" His uncle had a smug smile playing at the corner of his lips.

He knows, Ryland thought desperately. "I was thinking of getting a midnight snack." He looked up into his uncle's eyes, hoping against hope he didn't see through the lie.

"Right, and if I walked right down to that basement, and asked your little friend if you had been visiting her at all, she would deny?"

"Yes," Ryland said confidently. He hadn't been down to the basement at all since the first night. And Emali would never tell him anything anyway.

"Hmmâ lyesâ !" King Mavric said, unbelieving. "Be careful not to wander, especially at night, young prince. You know of the price to pay if you are caught doing so."

Ryland looked at his uncle silently. His brain whirred with things he might do.

King Mavric took one sweeping glance around the room. With that he spun around and proceeded back to his chambers. Before the door swung shut behind him Ryland raced silently across the room. With a dim pain, he stopped the door with his foot, with just enough space for him to peek through.

The Oak, a novel

In the darkness he could make out the retreating form of his uncle. Hoping with every fiber of his being Ryland wished that his uncle would go straight back to his bedchambers.

When the king kept on walking Ryland had to do something. He let out a soft, shrill whistle. He prayed Ton would hear it and hurry out before his was spotted. Nothing would be worse if they were caught.

But the consequences of sounding the whistle were answered. The king swung around to face his nephew.

"What did I just hear?" he snarled, looking exceptionally frightening.

"J-just the door closing, I promise," Ryland said, wide-eyed and pleading.

The king's eyes squinted in suspicion, but he did not elaborate on the matter.

King Mavric, it seemed, gave up on his destination and proceeded into his bedroom, much to Ryland's relief.

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