

# Blanchefleur

by Theodora Goss



They called him Idiot.

He was the miller's son, and he had never been good for much. At least not since his mother's death, when he was twelve years old. He had found her floating, face-down, in the millpond, and his cries had brought his father's men. When they had turned her over, he had seen her face, pale and bloated, before someone had said, "Not in front of the child!" and they had hurried him away. He had never seen her again, just the wooden coffin going into the ground, and after that, the gray stone in the churchyard where, every Sunday, he and his father left whatever was in season -- a bunch of violets, sprays of the wild roses that grew by the forest edge, tall lilies from beside the mill stream. In winter, they left holly branches red with berries.

Before her death, he had been a laughing, affectionate child. After her death, he became solitary. He would no longer play with his friends from school, and eventually they began to ignore him. He would no longer speak even to his father, and anyway the miller was a quiet man who, after his wife's death, grew more silent. He was so broken, so bereft, by the loss of his wife that he could barely look at the son who had her golden hair, her eyes the color of spring leaves. Often they would go a whole day, saying no more than a few sentences to each other.

He went to school, but he never seemed to learn -- he would stare out the window or, if called upon, shake his head and refuse to answer. Once, the teacher rapped his knuckles for it, but he simply looked at her with those eyes, which were so much like his mother's. The teacher turned away, ashamed of herself, and after that she left him alone, telling herself that at least he was sitting in the schoolroom rather than loafing about the fields.

He learned nothing, he did nothing. When his father told him to do the work of the mill, he did it so badly that the water flowing through the sluice gates was either too fast or slow, or the large millstones that grind the grain were too close together or far apart, or he took the wrong amount of grain in payment from the farmers who came to grind their wheat. Finally, the miller hired another man, and his son wandered about the countryside, sometimes sleeping under the stars, eating berries from the hedges when he could find them. He would come home dirty, with scratches on his arms and brambles in his hair. And his father, rather than scolding him, would look away.

If anyone had looked closely, they would have seen that he was clever at carving pieces of wood into whistles, and that he seemed to know how to call all the birds. Also, that he knew the paths through the countryside and could tell the time by the position of the sun and moon on each day of the year, his direction by the stars. He knew the track and spoor of every animal, what tree each leaf came from by its shape. He knew which mushrooms were poisonous and how to find water under the ground. But no one did look closely.

It was the other schoolboys, most of whom had once been his friends, who started calling him Idiot. At first it was Idiot Ivan, but soon it was simply Idiot, and it spread through the village until people forgot that he had ever been called Ivan. Farmers would call to him, cheerfully enough, "Good morning, Idiot!" They meant no insult by it. In villages, people like knowing who you are. The boy was clearly an idiot, so let him be called that. And so he was.

No one noticed that under the dirt, and despite the rags he wore, he had grown into a large, handsome boy. He should have had sweethearts, but the village girls assumed he was slow and had no prospects, even though he was the miller's son. So he was always alone, and the truth was, he seemed to prefer it.

The miller was the only one who still called him Ivan, although he had given his son up as hopeless, and even he secretly believed that the boy was slow and stupid.

This was how things stood when the miller rode to market to buy a new horse. The market was held in the nearest town, on a fine summer day that was also the feast-day of Saint Ivan, so the town was filled with stalls selling livestock, vegetables from the local farms, leather and rope harnesses, embroidered linen, woven baskets. Men and women in smocks lined up to hire themselves for the coming harvest. There were strolling players with fiddles or pipes, dancers on a wooden platform, and a great deal of beer -- which the miller drank from a tankard.

The market went well for him. He found a horse for less money than he thought he would have to spend, and while he was paying for his beer, one of the maids from the tavern winked at him. She was plump, with sunburnt cheeks, and she poured his beer neatly, leaving a head of foam that just reached the top of the tankard. He had not thought of women, not in that way, since his wife had drowned. She had been one of those magical women, beautiful as the dawn, as slight as a willow-bough and with a voice like birds singing, that are perhaps too delicate for this world. That kind of woman gets into a man's blood. But lately he had started to notice once again that other women existed, and that there were other things in the world than running a mill. Like his son, who was a great worry to him. What would the idiot -- Ivan, he reminded himself -- what would he do when the his father was gone, as we must all go someday? Would he be able to take care of himself?

He had saddled his horse and was fastening a rope to his saddle so the new horse could be led, when he heard a voice he recognized from many years ago. "Hello, Stephen Miller," it said.

He turned around and bowed. "Hello, Lady."

She was tall and pale, with long gray hair that hung to the backs of her knees, although she did not look older than when he had last seen her, at his wedding. She wore a gray linen dress that, although it was midsummer, reminded him of winter.

"How is my nephew? This is his name's day, is it not?"

"It is, Lady. As to how he is --" The miller told her. He might not have, if the beer had not loosened his tongue, for he was a proud man and he did not want his sister-in-law to think that his son was doing badly. But with the beer and his worries, it all came out -- the days Ivan spent staring out of windows or walking through the countryside, how the local farmers thought of him, even that name -- Idiot.

"I warned you that no good comes of a mortal marrying a fairy woman," said the Lady. "But those in love never listen. Send my nephew to me. I will make him my apprentice for three years, and at the end of that time we shall see. For his wages, you may take this."

She handed him a purse. He bowed in acknowledgment, saying, "I thank you for your generosity --" but when he straightened again, she was already walking away from him. Just before leaving the inn yard, she turned back for a moment and said, "The Castle in the Forest, remember. I will expect him in three days' time."

The miller nodded, although she had already turned away again. As he rode home, he looked into the purse she had given him -- in it was a handful of leaves. He wondered how he was going to tell his son about the bargain he had made. But when he reached home, the boy was sitting at the kitchen table whittling something out of wood, and he simply said, "I have apprenticed you for three years to your aunt, the Lady of the Forest. She expects you in three days' time."

The boy did not say a word. But the next morning, he put all of his possessions -- they were few enough -- into a satchel, which he slung over his shoulder. And he set out.

In three days' time, Ivan walked through the forest, blowing on the whistle he had carved. He could hear birds calling to each other in the forest. He whistled to them, and they whistled back. He did not know how long his journey would take -- if you set out for the Castle in the Forest, it can take you a day, or a week, or the rest of your life. But the Lady had said she expected him in three days, so he thought he would reach the Castle by the end of the day at the latest.

Before he left, his father had looked again in the purse that the Lady had given him. In it was a pile of gold coins -- as the miller had expected, for that is the way fairy money works. "I will keep this for you," his father had said. "When you come back, you will be old enough to marry, and with such a fortune, any of the local girls will take you. I do not know what you will do as the Lady's apprentice, but I hope you will come back fit to run a mill."

Ivan had simply nodded, slung his satchel over his shoulder, and gone.

Just as he was wondering if he would indeed find the castle that day, for the sun was beginning to set, he saw it through the trees, its turrets rising above a high stone wall.

He went up to the wall and knocked at the wooden door that was the only way in. It opened, seemingly by itself. In the doorway stood a white cat.

"Are you the Idiot?" she asked.

"I suppose so," he said, speaking for the first time in three days.

"That's what I thought," she said. "You certainly look the part. Well, come in then, and follow me."

He followed her through the doorway and along a path that led through the castle gardens. He had never seen such gardens, although in school his teacher had once described the gardens that surrounded the King's castle, which she had visited on holiday. There were fountains set in green lawns, with stone fish spouting water. There were box hedges, and topiaries carved into the shapes of birds, rabbits, mice. There were pools filled with waterlilies, in which he could see real fish, silver and orange. There were arched trellises from which roses hung down in profusion, and an orchard with fruit trees. He could even see a kitchen garden, with vegetables in neat rows. And all through the gardens, he could see cats, pruning the hedges, tying back the roses, raking the earth in the flower beds.

It was the strangest sight he had ever seen, and for the first time it occurred to him that being the Lady's apprentice would be an adventure -- the first of his life.

The path took them to the door of the castle, which swung open as they approached. An orange tabby walked out and stood waiting at the top of the steps.

"Hello, Marmalade," said the white cat.

"Good evening, Miss Blanchefleur," he replied. "Is this the young man her Ladyship is expecting?"

"As far as I can tell," she said. "Although what my mother would want with such an unprepossessing specimen, I don't know."

Marmalade bowed to Ivan and said, "Welcome, Ivan Miller. Her Ladyship is waiting in the solar."

Ivan expected the white cat, whose name seemed to be Blanchefleur, to leave him with Marmalade, but instead she followed them through the doorway, then through a great hall whose walls were hung with tapestries showing cats sitting in gardens, climbing trees, hunting rabbits, catching fish. Here too there were cats, setting out bowls on two long wooden tables, and on a shorter table set on a dais at the end of the room. As Marmalade passed, they nodded, and a gray cat who seemed to be directing their activities said, "We're almost ready, Mr. Marmalade. The birds are nicely roasted, and the mint sauce is really a treat if I say so myself."

"Excellent, Mrs. Pebbles. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to those birds. Tailcatcher said that he caught them himself."

"Well, with a little help!" said Mrs. Pebbles, acerbically. "He doesn't go on the hunt alone, does he now, Mr. Marmalade? Oh, begging your pardon, Miss," she said when she saw Blanchefleur. "I didn't know you were there."

"I couldn't care less what you say about him," said Blanchefleur, which a sniff and a twitch of her tail. "He's nothing to me."

"As you say, Miss," said Mrs. Pebbles, not sounding particularly convinced.

At the back of the great hall was another, smaller door that led to a long hallway.

Ivan was startled when, at the end of the hallway, which had been rather dark, they emerged into a room filled with sunlight. It had several windows looking out onto a green lawn, and scattered around the room were low cushions, on which cats sat engaged in various tasks. Some were carding wool, some were spinning it on drop spindles, some were plying the yarn or winding it into skeins. In a chair by one of the windows sat the Lady, with a piece of embroidery in her lap. One of the cats was reading a book aloud, but stopped when they entered.

"My Lady, this is Ivan Miller, your new apprentice," said Marmalade.

"Otherwise known as the Idiot," said Blanchefleur. "And he seems to deserve the name. He's said nothing for himself all this time."

"My dear, you should be polite to your cousin," said the Lady. "Ivan, you've already met my daughter, Blanchefleur, and Marmalade, who takes such marvelous care of us all. These are my ladies in waiting: Elderberry, Twilight, Snowy, Whiskers, and Fluff. My daughter tells me you have nothing to say for yourself. Is that true?"

Ivan stared at her, sitting in her chair, surrounded by cats. She had green eyes, and although her gray hair hung down to the floor, she reminded him of his mother. "Yes, Ma'am," he said.

She looked at him for a moment, appraisingly. Then she said, "Very well. I will send you where you need not say anything. Just this morning I received a letter from an old friend of mine, Professor Owl. He is compiling an Encyclopedia of All Knowledge, but he is old and feels arthritis terribly in his legs. He can no longer write the entries himself. For the first year of your apprenticeship, you will go to Professor Owl in the Eastern Waste and help him with his Encyclopedia. Do you think you can do that, nephew?"

"It's all the same to me," said Ivan. It was obvious that no one wanted him here, just as no one had wanted him at the mill. What did it matter where he went?

"Then you shall set out tomorrow morning," said the Lady. "Tonight you shall join us for dinner. Are the preparations ready, Marmalade?"

"Almost, my Lady," said the orange cat.

"How will I find this Professor Owl?" asked Ivan.

"Blanchefleur will take you," said the Lady.

"You can't be serious!" said Blanchefleur. "He's an idiot, and he stinks like a pigsty."

"Then show him the bathroom, where he can draw himself a bath," said the Lady. "And give him new clothes to wear. Those are too ragged even for Professor Owl, I think."

"Come on, you," said Blanchefleur, clearly disgusted. He followed her out of the room and up a flight of stairs, to a bathroom with a large tub on four clawed legs. He had never seen anything quite like it before. At the mill, he had often washed under the kitchen spigot. After she had left, he filled it with hot water that came out of a tap and slipped into it until the water was up to his chin.

What a strange day it had been. Three days ago he had left his father's house and the life he had always lived, a life that required almost nothing of him: no thought, no effort. And now here he was, in a castle filled with talking cats. And tomorrow he would start for another place, one that might be even stranger. When Blanchefleur had taunted

him by telling the Lady that he had nothing to say for himself, he had wanted to say -- what? Something that would have made her less disdainful. But what could he say for himself, after all?

With the piece of soap, he washed himself more carefully than he had ever before in his life. She had said that he smelled like a pigsty, and he had spent the night before last sleeping on a haystack that was, indeed, near a pen where several pigs had grunted in their dreams. Last night, he had slept in the forest, but he supposed that the smell still lingered -- particularly to a cat's nose. For the first time in years, he felt a sense of shame.

He dried himself and put on the clothes she had left for him. He went back down the stairs, toward the sound of music, and found his way to the great hall. It was lit with torches, and sitting at the two long tables were cats of all colors: black and brindled and tortoiseshell and piebald, with short hair and long. Sitting on the dais were the Lady, with Blanche fleur beside her, and a large yellow and brown cat who was striped like a tiger. He stood in the doorway, feeling self-conscious.

The Lady saw him across the room and motioned for him to come over. He walked to the dais and bowed before it, because that seemed the appropriate thing to do. She said, "That was courteous, nephew. Now come sit with us. Tailcatcher, you will not mind giving your seat to Ivan, will you?"

"Of course not, my Lady," said the striped cat in a tone that indicated he did indeed mind, very much.

Ivan took his place, and Marmalade brought him a dish of roast starlings, with a green sauce that smelled like catmint. It was good, although relatively flavorless. The cats, evidently, did not use salt in their cooking. Halfway through the meal, he was startled to realize that the cats were conversing with one another and nodding politely, as though they were a roomful of ordinary people. He was probably the only silent one in the entire room. Several times he noticed Blanche fleur giving him exasperated looks.

When he had finished eating, the Lady said, "I think it's time to dance." She clapped her hands, and suddenly Ivan heard music. He wondered where it was coming from, then noticed that a group of cats at the far end of the room were playing, more skillfully than he had supposed possible, a fife, a viol, a tabor, and other instruments he could not identify, one of which curved like a long snake. The cats that had been sitting at the long tables moved them to the sides of the room, then formed two lines in the center. He had seen a line dance before, at one of the village fairs, but he had never seen one danced as gracefully as it was by the cats. They wove in and out, each line breaking and reforming in intricate patterns.

"Aren't you going to ask your cousin to dance?" said the Lady, leaning over to him.

"What? Oh," he said, feeling foolish. How could he dance with a cat? But the Lady was looking at him, waiting. "Would you like to dance?" he asked Blanche fleur.

"Not particularly," she said, looking at him with disdain. "Oh, all right, Mother! You don't have to pull my tail."

He wiped his mouth and hands on a napkin, then followed Blanche fleur to the dance floor and joined at the end of the line, feeling large and clumsy, trying to follow the

steps and not tread on any paws. It did not help that, just when he was beginning to feel as though he was learning the steps, he saw Tailcatcher glaring at him from across the room. He danced several times, once with Blanchefleur, once with Mrs. Pebbles, who must have taken pity on him, and once with Fluff, who told him that it was a pleasure to dance with such a handsome young man and seemed to mean it. He managed to step on only one set of paws, belonging to a tabby tomcat who said, "Do that again, Sir, and I'll send you my second in the morning," but was mollified when Ivan apologized sincerely and at length. After that, he insisted on sitting down until the feast was over and he could go to bed.

The next morning, he woke and wondered if it was all a dream, but no -- there he was, lying in a curtained bed in the Lady's castle. And there was Blanchefleur, sitting in a nearby chair, saying, "About time you woke up. We need to get started if we're going to make the Eastern Waste by nightfall."

Ivan got out of bed, vaguely embarrassed to be seen in his nightshirt, then reminded himself that she was just a cat. He put on the clothes he had been given last night, then found his satchel on a dresser. All of his old clothes were gone, replaced by new ones. In the satchel he also found a loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese, a flask of wine, and a shiny new knife with a horn handle.

"I should thank the Lady for all these things," he said.

"That's the first sensible thing you've said since you got here," said Blanchefleur. "But she's gone to see my father, and won't be back for three days. And we have to get going. So hurry up already!"



The Lady's castle was located in a forest called the Wolfwald. To the north, it stretched for miles, and parts of it were so thick that almost no sunlight reached the forest floor. At the foot of the northern mountains, wolves still roamed. But around the castle it was less dense. Ivan and Blanchefleur walked along a path strewn with oak leaves, through filtered sunlight. Ivan was silent, in part because he was accustomed to silence, in part because he did not know what to say to the white cat. Blanchefleur seemed much more interested in chasing insects, and even dead leaves, than in talking to him.

They stopped to rest when the sun was directly overhead. The forest had changed: the trees were shorter and spaced more widely apart, mostly pines rather than the oaks and beeches around the Lady's castle. Ahead of him, Ivan could see a different sort of landscape: bare, except for the occasional twisted trees and clumps of grass. It was dry, rocky, strewn with boulders.

"That's the Eastern Waste," said Blanchefleur.

"The ground will be too hard for your paws," said Ivan. "I can carry you."

"I'll do just fine, thank you," she said with a sniff. But after an hour of walking over the rocky ground, Ivan saw that she was limping. "Come on," he said. "If you hate the thought of me carrying you so much, pretend I'm a horse."

"A jackass is more like it," she said. But she let him pick her up and carry her, with her paws on his shoulder so she could look around. Occasionally, her whiskers tickled his ear.

The sun traveled across the sky, and hours passed, and still he walked though that rocky landscape, until his feet hurt. But he would not admit that he was in pain, not with Blanchefleur perched on his shoulder. At last, after a region of low cliffs and defiles, they came to a broad plain that was nothing but stones. In the middle of the plain rose a stone tower.

"That's it," said Blanchefleur. "That's Professor Owl's home."

"Finally," said Ivan under his breath. He had been feeling as though he would fall over from sheer tiredness. He took a deep breath and started for the tower. But before he reached it, he asked the question he had been wanting to ask all day, but had not dared to. "Blanchefleur, who is your father?"

"The man who lives in the moon," she said. "Can you hurry up? I haven't had a meal since that mouse at lunch, and I'm getting hungry."



"He's an owl," said Ivan.

"Of course he's an owl," said Blanchefleur. "What did you think he would be?"

Professor Owl was in fact an owl, the largest Ivan has ever seen, with brown and white feathers. When they entered the tower, which was round and had one room on each level, with stairs curling around the outer wall, he said, "Welcome, welcome. Blanchefleur, I haven't seen you since you were a kitten. And this must be the assistant the Lady has so graciously sent me. Welcome, boy. I hope you know how to write a good, clear hand."

"His name is Idiot," said Blanchefleur.

"My name is Ivan," said Ivan.

"Yes, yes," said Professor Owl, paying no attention to them whatsoever. "Here, then, is my life's work. The Encyclopedia."

It was an enormous book, taller than Ivan himself, resting on a large stand at the far end of the room. In the middle of the room was a wooden table, and around the circular walls were file cabinets, all the way up to the ceiling.

"It's much too heavy to open by hand – or foot," said Professor Owl. "But if you tell the Encyclopedia what you're looking for, it will open to that entry."

"Mouse," said Blanchefleur. And sure enough, as she spoke, the pages of the Encyclopedia turned as though by magic (*although it probably is magic*, thought Ivan) to a page with an entry titled *Mouse*.

"Let's see, let's see," said Professor Owl, peering at the page. "The bright and active, although mischievous, little animal known to us by the name of Mouse and its close relative the Rat are the most familiar and also the most typical members of the Murinae, a sub-family containing about two hundred and fifty species assignable to no less than eighteen distinct genera, all of which, however, are so superficially alike that the English

names rat or mouse would be fairly appropriate to any of them. Well, that seems accurate, doesn't it?"

"Does it say how they taste?" asked Blanchefleur.

"The Encyclopedia is connected to five others," said Professor Owl, turning to Ivan. "One is in the Library of Alexandria, one in the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, one in the Sorbonne, one in the British Museum, and one in the New York Public Library. It is the only Encyclopedia of All Knowledge, and as you can imagine, it takes all my time to keep it up to date. I've devoted my life to it. But since I've developed arthritis in my legs (and Ivan could see that indeed, the owl's legs looked more knobby than they ought to), it's been difficult for me to write my updates. So I'm grateful to the Lady for sending you. Here is where you will work." He pointed to the table with his clawed foot. On it was a large pile of paper, each page filled with scribbled notes.

"These are the notes I've made indicating what should be updated and how. If you'll look at the page on top of the pile, for instance, you'll see that the entry on Justice needs to be updated. There have been, in the last month alone, five important examples of injustice, from the imprisonment of a priest who criticized the Generalissimo to a boy who was deprived of his supper when his mother wrongly accused him of stealing a mince pie. You must add each example to the entry under Justice -- Injustice -- Examples. The entry itself can be found in one of the cabinets along the wall -- I believe it's the twenty-sixth row from the door, eight cabinets up. Of course I can't possibly include every example of injustice -- there are hundreds every hour. I only include the ones that most clearly illustrated the concept. And here are my notes on a species of wild rose newly discovered in the mountains of Cathay. That will go under Rose -- Wild -- Species. Do you understand, boy? You are to look at my notes and add whatever information is necessary to update the entry, writing directly on the file. The Encyclopedia itself will incorporate your update, turning it into typescript, but you must make your letters clearly. And no spelling errors! Now, it's almost nightfall, and I understand that humans have defective vision, so I suggest you sleep until dawn, when you can get up and start working on these notes as well as the ones I'll be writing overnight."

"Professor," said Blanchefleur, "we haven't had dinner."

"Dinner?" said Professor Owl. "Of course, of course. I wouldn't want you to go hungry. There are some mice and birds in the cupboard. I caught them just last night. You're certainly welcome to them."

"Human beings can't eat mice and birds," said Blanchefleur. "They have to cook their food."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Professor Owl. "An inefficient system, I must say. I believe I had -- but where did I put it?" He turned around, looking perplexed, then opened the door of a closet under the stairs. He poked his head in, and then tossed out several things, so both Ivan and Blanchefleur had to dodge them. A pith helmet, a butterfly net, and a pair of red flannel underwear for what must have been a very tall man. "Yes, here is it. But you'll have to help me with it."

"It" was a large iron kettle. Ivan helped the owl pull it out of the closet and place it

on the long wooden table. He looked into it, not knowing what to expect, but it was empty.

"It's a magic kettle, of course," said Professor Owl. "I seem to remember that it makes soup. You can sleep on the second floor. The third is my study, and I hope you will refrain from disturbing me during daylight hours, when I will be very busy indeed. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going out for a bit of a hunt. I do hope you will be useful to me. My last apprentice was a disappointment." He waddled comically across the floor and up the stairs.

"These scholarly types aren't much for small talk," said Blanchefleur.

"I thought he was going out?" said Ivan.

"He is," said Blanchefleur. "You don't think he's just going to walk out the door, do you? He's an owl. He's going to launch himself from one of the tower windows."

Ivan looked into the kettle again. Still empty. "Do you really think it's magic?" he asked. He had eaten the bread and cheese a long time ago, and his stomach was starting to growl.

"Try some magic words," said Blanchefleur.

"Abracadabra," he said. "Open Sesame." What other magic words had he learned in school? If he remembered correctly, magic had not been a regular part of the curriculum.

"You really are an idiot," said Blanchefleur. She sprang onto the table, then sat next to the kettle. "Dear Kettle," she said. "We've been told of your magical powers in soup-making, and are eager to taste your culinary delights. Will you please make us some soup? Any flavor, your choice, but not onion because his breath is pungent enough already."

From the bottom, the kettle filled with something that bubbled and had a delicious aroma. "There you go," said Blanchefleur. "Magical items have feelings, you know. They need to be asked nicely. Abracadabra indeed!"

"I still need a spoon," said Ivan.

"With all you require for nourishment, I wonder that you're still alive!" said Blanchefleur. "Look in the closet."

In the closet, Ivan did indeed find several wooden spoons, as well as a croquet set, several pairs of boots, and a stuffed alligator.

"Beef stew," he said, tasting what was in the kettle. "Would you like some?"

"I'm quite capable of hunting for myself, thank you," said Blanchefleur. "Don't wait up. I have a feeling that when the Professor said you should be up by dawn, he meant it."

That night, Ivan slept on the second floor of the tower, where he found a bed, a desk, and a large traveling trunk with Oswald carved on it. He wondered if Oswald had been the professor's last apprentice, the one who had been such a disappointment. In the middle of the night, he thought he felt Blanchefleur jump on the bed and curl up next to his back. But when he woke up in the morning, she was gone.



Ivan was used to waking up at dawn, so wake up at dawn he did. He found a small bathroom under the stairs, splashed water on his face, got dressed, and went downstairs.

Blanchefleur was sitting on the table, staring at the kettle still set on it, with a look of disdain on her face.

"What is that mess?" she asked.

"I think it's pea soup," he said, after looking into the kettle. It smelled inviting, but then anything would have at that hour. Next to the kettle were a wooden bowl and spoon, as well as a napkin. "Did you put these here?" he asked Blanchefleur.

"Why would I do such a stupid thing?" she asked, and turned her back to him. She began licking her fur, as though washing herself were the most important thing in the world.

Ivan shrugged, spooned some of the pea soup into the bowl, and had a plain but filling breakfast. Afterward, he washed the bowl and spoon. As soon as he had finished eating, the kettle had emptied again -- evidently, it did not need washing. Then he sat down at the table and pulled the first of Professor Owl's notes toward him.

It was tedious work. First, he would read through the notes, which were written in a cramped, slanting hand. Then, he would try to add a paragraph to the file, as neatly and succinctly as he could. He had never paid much attention in school, and writing did not come easily to him. After the first botched attempt, he learned to compose his paragraphs on the backs of Professor Owl's notes, so when he went to update the entries, he was not fumbling for words. By noon, he had finished additions to the entries on Justice, Rose, Darwin, Theosophy, Venus, Armadillo, Badminton, and Indochina. His lunch was chicken soup with noodles. He thought about having nothing but soup, every morning, noon, and night for an entire year, and longed for a sandwich.

He sat down at the table and picked up the pen, but his back and hand hurt. He put the pen down. The sunlight out the window looked so inviting. Perhaps he should go out and wander around the tower, just for a little while? Where had Blanchefleur gone, anyway? He had not seen her since breakfast. He got up, stretched, and walked out.

It had been his habit, as long as he remembered, to wander around as he wished. That was what he did now, walking around the tower and then away from it, looking idly for Blanchefleur and finding only lizards. He wandered without thinking about where he was going or how long he had been gone. The sun began to sink in the west.

That was when he realized that he had been gone for hours. Well, it would not matter, would it? He could always catch up with any work he did not finish tomorrow. He walked back in the direction of the tower, only becoming lost once. It was dark when he reached it again. He opened the door and walked in.

There were Professor Owl and Blanchefleur. The Professor was perched on the table where Ivan had been sitting earlier that day, scribbling furiously. Blanchefleur was saying, "What did you expect of someone named Idiot? I told you he would be useless."

"Oh, hello, boy," said Professor Owl, looking up. "I noticed that you went out for a walk, so I finished all of the notes for today, except Orion. I'll have that done in just a moment, and then you can sit down for dinner. I don't think I told you that each day's updates need to be filed by the end of the day, or the Encyclopedia will be incomplete. And it has never been incomplete since I started working on it, five hundred years ago."

"I'll do it," said Ivan.

"Do what?" said Blanchefleur. "Go wandering around again?"

"I'll do the update on Orion."

"That's very kind of you," said Professor Owl. "I'm sure you must be tired." But he handed Ivan the pen and hopped a bit away on the table. It was a lopsided hop: Ivan could tell that the owl's right foot was hurting. He sat and finished the update, conscious of Blanchefleur's eyes on him. When he was finished, Professor Owl read it over. "Yes, very nice," he said. "You have a clear and logical mind. Well done, boy."

Ivan looked up, startled. It was the first compliment he ever remembered receiving.

"Well, go on then, have some dinner," said Professor Owl. "And you'll be up at dawn tomorrow?"

"I'll be up at dawn," said Ivan. He knew that the next day, he would not go wandering around, at least until after the entries were finished. He did not want Blanchefleur calling him an idiot again in that tone of voice.



Summer turned into winter. Each day, Ivan sat at the table in the tower, updating the entries for the Encyclopedia of All Knowledge. One day, he realized that he no longer needed to compose the updates on the backs of Professor Owl's notes. He could simply compose them in his head, and then write each update directly onto the file. He had not learned much in school, but he was learning now, about things that seemed useless, such as Sponge Cake, and things that seemed useful, such as Steam Engines, Epic Poetry, and Love. One morning he realized that Professor Owl had left him not only a series of updates, but also the notes for an entry on a star that had been discovered by astronomers the week before. Proudly and carefully, he took a blank file card out of the cabinet, composed a new entry for the Encyclopedia of All Knowledge, and filed the card in its place.

He came to write so well and so quickly that he would finish all of the updates, and any new entries the Professor left him, by early afternoon. After a lunch of soup, for he had never managed to get the kettle to make him anything else, however politely he asked, he would roam around the rocky countryside. Sometimes Blanchefleur would accompany him, and eventually she allowed him to carry her on his shoulder without complaining, although she was never enthusiastic. And she still called him Idiot.

One day, in February although he had lost track of the months, he updated an entry on the Trojan War. He had no idea what it was, since he had not been paying attention that day in school. So after he finished his updates, he asked the Encyclopedia. It opened to the entry on the Trojan War, which began, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that judging a beauty contest between three goddesses causes nothing but trouble." He read on, fascinated. After that day, he would spend several hours reading through whichever entries took his fancy. Each entry he read left him with more questions, and he began to wish that he could stay with Professor Owl, simply reading the entries in the Encyclopedia,

forever.

But winter turned into summer, and one day the professor said, "Ivan, it has been a year since you arrived, and the term of your apprenticeship with me is at an end. Thank you for all of the care and attention you have put into your task. As a reward, I will give you one of my feathers -- that one right there. Pluck it out gently. *Gently!*"

Ivan held up the feather. It was long and straight, with brown and white stripes.

"Cut the end of it with a penknife and make it into a pen," said Professor Owl. "If you ever want to access the Encyclopedia, just tell the pen what you would like to know, and it will write the entry for you."

"Thank you," said Ivan. "But couldn't I stay --"

"Of course not," said Blanchefleur. "My mother is expecting us. So come on already." And indeed, since it was dawn, Professor Owl was already heading up the stairs, for he had very important things to do during the day. Owls do, you know.



The Castle in the Forest looked just as Ivan remembered. There were cats tending the gardens, where the roses were once again blooming, as though they had never stopped. Marmalade greeted them at the door and led them to the Lady's solar, where she was sitting at a desk, writing. Her cats-in-waiting were embroidering a tapestry, and one was strumming a lute with her claws, playing a melody that Ivan remembered from when he was a child.

"Well?" she said when she looked up. "How did Ivan do, my dear?"

"Well enough," said Blanchefleur. "Are there any mouse pies? We've been walking all day, and I'm hungry."

Really it had been Ivan who had been walking all day. He had carried Blanchefleur most of the way, except when she wanted to drink from a puddle or play with a leaf.

"Wait until the banquet," said the Lady. "It starts in an hour, which will give you enough time to prepare. It's in honor of your return and departure."

"Departure?" said Ivan.

"Yes," said the Lady. "Tomorrow, you will go to the Southern Marshes, to spend a year with my friend, Dame Lizard. She has a large family, and needs help taking care of it. Blanchefleur, you will accompany your cousin."

"But that's not fair!" said Blanchefleur. "I've already spent a year with Ivan Idiot. Why do I have to spend another year with him?"

"Because he is your cousin, and he needs your help," said the Lady. "Now go, the both of you. I don't think you realize quite how dirty you both are." And she was right. From the long journey, even Blanchefleur's white paws were covered with dirt.

As they walked upstairs, Ivan said, "I'm sorry you have to come with me, Blanchefleur. I know you dislike being with me."

"You're not so bad," she said grudgingly. "At least you're warm." So it had been her, sleeping against his back all those nights. Ivan was surprised and pleased at the thought.

That night, the banquet proceeded as it had the year before, except this time Ivan knew what to expect. Several of the female cats asked him to dance, and this time he danced with more skill, never once stepping on a cat paw or tail. He danced several times with Blanchefleur, and she did not seem to dislike it as much as she had last year. Tailcatcher, the striped cat, was there as well. Once, as they were dancing close to one another, Ivan heard a hiss, but when he turned to look at Tailcatcher, the cat was bowing to his partner.

At the end of the evening, as he was wearily climbed the stone stairs up to his bed, he passed a hallway and heard a murmur of voices. At the end of the hallway stood Tailcatcher and Blanchefleur. He spoke to her and she replied, too low for Ivan to hear what they were saying. Then she turned and walked on down the hallway, her tail held high, exactly the way she walked when she was displeased with him. Ivan was rather glad that Tailcatcher had been rebuffed, whatever he had wanted from her.

As he sank into sleep that night, in the curtained bed, he wondered if she would come to curl up against his back. But he fell asleep too quickly to find out.



The next morning, they started for the Southern Marshes. As they traveled south, the forest grew less dense: the trees were sparser, more sunlight fell on the path, and soon Ivan was hot and sweating. At midafternoon, they came to a river, and he was able to swim and cool himself off. Blanchefleur refused to go anywhere near the water.

"I'm not a fish," she said. "Are you quite done? We still have a long way to go."

Ivan splashed around a bit more, then got out and dried himself as best he could. They followed the river south until it was no longer a river but a series of creeks running through low hills covered with willows, alders, and sycamores. Around the creeks grew cattails, and where the water formed into pools, he could see waterlilies starting to bloom. They were constantly crossing water, so Ivan carried Blanchefleur, who did not like to get her feet wet.

"There," she said finally. "That's where we're going." She was pointing at one of the low hills. At first, Ivan did not see the stone house among the trees: it blended in so well with the gray trunks. Ivan walked through a narrow creek (he had long ago given up on keeping his shoes dry) and up the hill to the house. He knocked at the door.

From inside, he heard a crash, then a "Just a moment!" Then another crash and the voice yelling, "Get out of there at once, Number Seven!"

There were more crashes and bangs, and then the door opened, so abruptly that he stepped back, startled. He might have been startled anyway, because who should be standing in front of him but a lizard, who came almost up to his shoulders, in a long brown duster and a feathered hat askew over one ear.

"I'm so glad you're here!" she said. "They've been impossible today. But they are dears, really they are, and the Lady told me that you were a competent nursemaid. You are competent, aren't you?" Without waiting for a reply, she continued, "Oh, it's good to

see you again, Blanchefleur. Did you like the shrunken head I sent you from Peru?"

"Not particularly," said the white cat.

"Splendid!" said the lizard. "Now I'll just be off, shall I? My train leaves in half an hour and I don't want to miss it. I'm going to Timbuktu, you know. Train and then boat and train again, then camel caravan. Doesn't that sound fun? Do help me get my suitcases on the bicycle."

The bicycle was in a sort of shed. Ivan helped her tie two suitcases onto a rack with some frayed rope that he hoped would hold all the way to the station.

"Such a handy one, your young man, my dear," said the lizard to Blanchefleur.

"He's not --" said Blanchefleur.

"Kisses to you both! Ta, and I'll see you in a year! If I survive the sands of the Sahara, of course." And then she was off on her bicycle, down a road that ran across the hills, with her hat still askew. As she rode out of sight, Ivan heard a faint cry: "Plenty of spiders, that's what they like! And don't let them stay up too late!"

"Don't let who stay up too late?" asked Ivan.

"Us!" Ivan turned around. There in the doorway stood five -- no, six -- no, seven lizards that came up to his knees.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"These are her children," said Blanchefleur. "You're supposed to take care of them while she's gone. Don't you know who she is? She's Emilia Lizard, the travel writer. And you're her nursemaid." Blanchefleur seemed amused at the prospect.

"But the Lady said I was supposed to help," said Ivan. "How can I help someone who's on her way to Timbuktu? I don't know anything about taking care of children -- or lizards!"

"It's easy," said one of the lizards. "You just let us do anything we want!"

"Eat sweets," said another.

"Stay up late," said yet another.

"Play as long as we like," said either one who had already spoken or another one, it was difficult to tell because they kept weaving in and out of the group, and they all looked alike.

"Please stand still," he said. "You're giving me a headache. And tell me your names."

"We don't have names," said one. "Mother just calls us by numbers, but she always gets us mixed up."

"I'll have to give you names," said Ivan, although he was afraid that he would get them mixed up as well. "Let's at least go in. Blanchefleur and I are tired, and we need to rest."

But once they stepped inside, Ivan found there was no place to rest. All of the furniture in the parlor had been piled in a corner to make a fort.

"If I'm going to take care of you, I need to learn about you," said Ivan. "Let's sit down --" But there was nowhere to sit down. And the lizards, all seven of them, were no longer there. Some were already inside the fort, and the others were about to besiege it.

"Come out!" he said. "Come out, all of you!" But his voice was drowned by the din

they were already making. "What in the world am I supposed to do?" he asked Blanchefleur.

She twitched her tail, then said in a low voice, "I think it's the Siege of Jerusalem." Loudly and theatrically, she said, as though to Ivan, "Yes, you're right. The French are so much better at cleaning than the Saracens. I bet the French would clean up this mess lickety split."

Ivan stared at her in astonishment. Then he smiled. "You're wrong, Blanchefleur. The Saracens have a long tradition of cleanliness. In a cleaning contest, the Saracens would certainly win."

"Would not!" said one of the besiegers. "Would too!" came a cry from the fort. And then, in what seemed like a whirlwind of lizards, the fort was disassembled, the sofa and armchairs were put back in their places, and even the cushions were fluffed. In front of Ivan stood a line of seven lizards, asking "Who won, who won?"

"The Saracens, this time," said Blanchefleur. "But really, you know, it's two out of three that counts."

Life in the Lizard household was completely different than it had been in Professor Owl's tower. There were days when Ivan missed the silence and solitude, the opportunity to read and study all day long. But he did not have much time to remember or regret. His days were spent catching insects and spiders for the lizards' breakfast, lunch, snack, and dinner, making sure that they bathed and sunned themselves, that they napped in the afternoon and went to bed on time.

At first, it was difficult to make them pay attention. They were as quick as seven winks, and on their outings they had a tendency to vanish as soon as he turned his back. Ivan was always afraid that he was going to lose one. Once, indeed, he had to rescue Number Two from an eagle, and Number Five had to be pulled out of a fox hole. But he found that the hours spent working on the Encyclopedia of All Knowledge stood him in good stead: if he began telling a story, in an instant they would all be seated around him, listening intently. And if he forgot anything, he would ask the pen he had made from Professor Owl's tail feather to write it out for him. Luckily, Dame Lizard had left plenty of paper and ink.

He gave them all names: Ajax, Achilles, Hercules, Perseus, Helen, Medea, Andromache. They were fascinated by the stories of their names, and Medea insisted that she was putting spells on the others, while Hercules would try to lift the heaviest objects he could find. Ivan learned to tell them apart. One had an ear that was slightly crooked, one had a stubby tail, one swayed as she walked. Each night, when he tucked them in and counted the lizard heads -- yes, seven heads lay on the pillows -- he breathed a sigh of relief that they were still alive.

"How many more days?" he would ask Blanchefleur.

"You don't want to know," she would reply. And then she would go out hunting, while he made himself dinner. Of course he could not eat insects and spiders, or mice like Blanchefleur. On the first night, he looked in the pantry and found a bag of flour, a bag of sugar, some tea, and a tinned ham. He made himself tea and ate part of the tinned ham.

"What in the world shall I do for food?" he asked Blanchefleur.

"What everyone else does. Work for it," she replied. So the next day, he left the lizards in her care for a couple of hours and went into the town that lay along the road Dame Lizard had taken. It was a small town, not much larger than the village he had grown up in. There, he asked if anyone needed firewood chopped, or a field cleared, or any such work. That day, he cleaned out a pigsty. The farmer who hired him found him strong and steady, so he hired him again, to pick vegetables, paint a fence, any odd work that comes up around a farm. He recommended Ivan to others, so there was soon a steady trickle of odd jobs that brought in enough money for him to buy bread and meat. The farmer who had originally hired him gave him vegetables that were too ripe for market.

He could never be gone long, because Blanchefleur would remind him in no uncertain terms that taking care of the lizards was his task, not hers. Whenever he came back, they were clean and fed and doing something orderly, like playing board games.

"Why do they obey you, and not me?" he asked, tired and cross. He had just washed an entire family's laundry.

"Because," she answered.

After dinner, once the lizards had been put to bed, really and finally put to bed, he would sit in the parlor and read the books on the shelves, which were all about travel in distant lands. Among them were the books of Dame Emilia Lizard. They had titles like *Up the Amazon in a Steamboat* and *Across the Himalayas on a Yak*. He found them interesting -- Dame Lizard was an acute observer, and he learned about countries and customs that he had not even known existed -- but often he could scarcely keep his eyes open because he was so tired. Once Blanchefleur returned from her evening hunt, he would go to sleep in Dame Lizard's room. He could tell it was hers because the walls were covered with photographs of her in front of temples and pyramids, perched on yaks or camels or water buffalos, dressed in native garb. Blanchefleur would curl up against him, no longer pretending not to, and he would fall asleep to her soft rumble.

In winter, all the lizards caught bronchitis. First Andromache started coughing, and then Ajax, until there was an entire household of sick lizards. Since Ivan did not want to leave them, Blanchefleur went into town to find the doctor.

"You're lucky to have caught me," said the doctor when he arrived. "My train leaves in an hour. There's been a dragon attack, and the King has asked all the medical personnel who can be spared to help the victims. He burned an entire village, can you imagine? But I'm sure you've seen the photographs in the *Herald*."

Ivan had not -- they did not get the *Herald*, or any other newspaper, at Dame Lizard's house. He asked where the attack had occurred, and sighed with relief when told it was a fishing village on the coast. His father was not in danger.

"Nothing much I can do here anyway," said the doctor. "Bronchitis has to run its course. Give them tea with honey for the coughs, and tepid baths for the fever. And try to avoid catching it yourself!"

"A dragon attack," said Blanchefleur after the doctor had left. "We haven't had one of those in century."

But there was little time to think of what might be happening far away. For weeks, Ivan barely slept. He told the lizards stories, took their temperature, made them tea. Once their appetites returned, he found them the juiciest worms under the snow. Slowly, one by one, they began to get better. Medea, the smallest of them and his secret favorite, was sick for longer than the rest, and one night when she was coughing badly, he held her through the night, not knowing what else to do. Sometimes, when he looked as though he might fall asleep standing up, Blanchefleur would say, "Go sleep, Ivan. I'll stay up and watch them. I am nocturnal, you know."

By the time all the lizards were well, the marsh marigolds were blooming, and irises were pushing their sword-like leaves out of the ground. The marshes were filled with the sounds of birds returning from the south: the raucous cacophony of ducks, the songs of thrushes.

Ivan had forgotten how long he had been in the marsh, so he was startled when one morning he heard the front door open and a voice call, "Hello, my dears! I'm home!" And there stood Dame Lizard, with her suitcases strapped to her bicycle, looking just as she had left a year ago, but with a fuschia scarf around her throat.

The lizards rushed around her, calling "Mother, Mother, look how we've grown! We all have names now! And we know about the Trojan War!" She had brought them a set of papier mâché puppets and necklaces of lapis lazuli. For Blanchefleur, she had brought a hat of crimson felt that she had seen on a dancing monkey in Marakesh.

Blanchefleur said, "Thank you. You shouldn't have."

Once the presents were distributed and the lizards were eating an enormous box of Turkish Delight, she said to Ivan, "Come outside." When they were standing by the house, under the alders, she said, "Ivan, I can see that you've taken good care of my children. They are happy and healthy, and that is due to your dedication. Hercules told me how you took care of Medea when she was ill. I want to give you a present too. I brought back a camel whip for you, but I want to give you something that will be of more use, since you don't have a camel. You must raise your arms, then close your eyes and stand as still as possible, no matter how startled you may be."

Ivan closed his eyes, not knowing what to expect.

And then he felt a terrible constriction around his chest, as though his ribcage were being crushed. He opened his eyes, looked down, and gasped.

There, wrapped around his chest, was what looked like a thick green rope. It was Dame Lizard's tail, which had been hidden under her skirt. For a moment, the tail tightened, and then it was no longer attached to her body. She had shed it, as lizards do. Ivan almost fell forward from the relief of being able to breathe.

"I learned that from a Swami in India," she said. "From now on, when you give pain to another, you will feel my tail tightening around you so whatever pain you give, you will also receive. That's called empathy, and the Swami said it was the most important thing anyone can have."

Ivan looked down. He could no longer see the tail, but he could feel it around him, like a band under his shirt. He did not know whether to thank her. The gift, if gift it was,

had been so painful that he felt sore and bruised.

After he had said a protracted farewell to all the lizards, hugging them tightly, he and Blanchefleur walked north, along the river. He told her what Dame Lizard had done, lifting his shirt and showing her the mark he had found there, like a tattoo of a green tail around his ribcage.

"Is it truly a gift, or a curse?" he asked Blanchefleur.

"One never knows about gifts until later," said the white cat.



Marmalade met them at the front door. "I'm so sorry, Miss Blanchefleur," he said, "but your mother is not home. The King has asked her to the castle, to consult about the dragon attack. But she left you a note in the solar."

Blanchefleur read the note to Ivan.

*My dear, Ivan's third apprenticeship is with Captain Wolf in the Northern Mountains. Could you please accompany him and try to keep him from getting killed? Love, Mother*

This time, there was no banquet. With the Lady gone, the castle was quiet, as though it were asleep and waiting for her return to wake back up. They ate dinner in the kitchen with Mrs. Pebbles and the ladies in waiting, and then went directly to bed. Blanchefleur curled up next to Ivan on the pillow, as usual. It had become their custom.

The next morning, Mrs. Pebbles gave them Ivan's satchel, with clean clothes, including some warmer ones for the mountains, and his horn-handled knife. "Take care of each other," she told them. "Those mountains aren't safe, and I don't know what the Lady is thinking, sending you to the Wolf Guard."

"What is the Wolf Guard?" Ivan asked as they walked down the garden path.

"It's part of the King's army," said Blanchefleur. "It guards the northern borders from trolls. They come down from the mountains and raid the towns. In winter, especially . . ."

"Blanchefleur!" Tailcatcher was standing in front of them. He had stepped out from behind one of the topiaries. "May I have a word with you?" He did not, however, sound as though he were asking permission. Ivan gritted his teeth. He had never spoken to Blanchefleur like that -- even if he had wanted to, he would not have dared.

"Yes, and the word is no," said Blanchefleur. She walked right around him, holding her tail high, and Ivan followed her, making a wide circle around the striped cat, who looked as though he might take a swipe at Ivan's shins. He looked back, to see Tailcatcher glaring at them.

"What was that about?" asked Ivan.

"For years now, he's been assuming I would marry him, because he's the best hunter in the castle. He asked me the first time on the night before we left for Professor Owl's

house, and then again before we left for Dame Lizard's. This would have been the third time."

"And you keep refusing?" asked Ivan.

"Of course," she said. "He may be the best hunter, but I'm the daughter of the Lady of the Forest and the Man in the Moon. I'm not going to marry a common cat!"

Ivan could not decide how he felt about her response. On the one hand, he was glad that she had no intention of marrying Tailcatcher. On the other, wasn't he a common man?



This journey was longer and harder than the two before. Once they reached the foothills of the Northern Mountains, they were constantly going up. The air was colder. In late afternoon, Ivan put on a coat that Mrs. Pebbles had insisted on packing for him, and that he had been certain he would not need until winter.

Eventually, there were no more roads or paths, and they simply walked through the forest. Ivan started wondering whether Blanche fleur knew the way, then scolded himself. Of course she did: she was Blanche fleur.

Finally, as the sun was setting, Blanche fleur said, "We're here."

"Where?" asked Ivan. They were standing in a clearing. Around them were tall pines. Ahead of them was what looked like a sheer cliff face, rising higher than the treetops. Above it, he could see the peaks of the mountains, glowing in the light of the setting sun.

Blanche fleur jumped down from his shoulder, walked over to a boulder in the middle of the clearing, and climbed to the top. She said, "Captain, we have arrived."

Out of the shadows of the forest appeared wolves, as silently as though they were shadows themselves -- Ivan could not count how many. They were all round, and he suddenly realized that he could die, here in the forest. He imagined their teeth at his throat and turned to run, then realized that he was being an idiot, giving in to an ancient instinct although he could see that Blanche fleur was not frightened at all. She sat on the dark rock, amid the dark wolves, like a ghost.

"Greetings, Blanche fleur," said one of the wolves, distinguishable from the others because he had only one eye, and a scar running across it from his ear to his muzzle. "I hear that your mother has sent us a new recruit."

"For a year," said Blanche fleur. "Try not to get him killed."

"I make no promises," said the wolf. "What is his name?"

"Ivan," said Blanche fleur.

"Come here, recruit." Ivan walked to the boulder and stood in front of the wolf, as still as he could. He did not want Blanche fleur to see that he was afraid. "You shall call me Captain, and I shall call you Private, and as long as you do exactly as you are told, all shall be well between us. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Ivan.

The wolf bared his teeth and growled.

"Yes, Captain," said Ivan.

"Good. This is your Company, although we like to think of ourselves as a pack. You are a member of the Wolf Guard, and should be prepared to die for your brothers and sisters of the pack, as they are prepared to die for you. Now come inside."

Ivan wondered where inside might be, but the Captain loped toward the cliff face and vanished behind an outcropping. One by one, the wolves followed him, some stopping to give Ivan a brief sniff. Ivan followed them and realized that the cliff was not sheer after all. Behind a protruding rock was a narrow opening, just large enough for a wolf. He crawled through it and emerged in a large cave. Scattered around the cave, wolves were sitting or lying in groups, speaking together in low voices. They looked up when he entered, but were too polite or uninterested to stare and went back to their conversations, which seemed to be about troll raiding parties they had encountered, wounds they had sustained, and the weather.

"Have you ever fought?" the Captain asked him.

"No, sir," said Ivan.

"That is bad," said the Captain. "Can you move through the forest silently? Can you tell your direction from the sun in the day and the stars at night? Can you sound like an owl to give warning without divulging your presence?"

"Yes, Captain," said Ivan, fairly certain that he could still do those things. And to prove it to himself, he hooted, first like a Eagle Owl, then like a Barn Owl, and finally like one of the Little Owls that used to nest in his father's mill.

"Well, that's something, at least. You can be one of our scouts. Have you eaten?"

"No, sir," said Ivan.

"At the back of the cave are the rabbits we caught this morning," said the Captain. "You may have one of those."

"He is human," said Blanchefleur. "He must cook his food."

"A nuisance, but you may build a small fire, although you will have to collect wood. These caverns extend into the mountain for several miles. Make certain the smoke goes back into the mountain, and not through the entrance."

Skinning a rabbit was messy work, but Ivan butchered it, giving a leg to Blanchefleur and roasting the rest for himself on a stick he sharpened with his knife. It was better than he had expected. That night, he slept beneath his coat on the floor of the cave, surrounded by wolves. He was grateful to have Blanchefleur curled up next to his chest.

The next morning, he began his life in the Wolf Guard.

As a scout, his duty was not to engage the trolls, but to look for signs of them. He would go out with a wolf partner, moving through the forest silently, looking for signs of troll activity: their camps, their tracks, their spoor. The Wolf Guard kept detailed information on the trolls who lived in the mountains. In summer, they seldom came down far enough to threaten the villages on the slopes. But in winter, they would send raiding parties for all the things they could not produce themselves: bread and cheese and beer, fabrics and jewels, sometimes even children that they could raise as their own, for troll women do not bear many children. Ivan learned the forest quickly, just as he had at home,

and the wolves in his Company, who had initially been politely contemptuous of a human in their midst, came to think of him as a useful member of the pack. He could not smell as well as they could, nor see as well at night, but he could climb trees, and pull splinters out of their paws, and soon he was as good at tracking the trolls as they were. They were always respectful to Blanchefleur. One day, he asked her what she did while he was out with the wolves. "Mind my own business," she said. So he did not ask again.

As for Ivan, being a scout in the Wolf Guard was like finding a home. He had learned so much in Professor Owl's tower, and he had come to love the lizards in his charge, but with the wolves he was back in the forest, where he had spent his childhood. And the wolves themselves were like a family. When Graypaw or Mist, with whom he was most often paired, praised his ability to spot troll tracks, or when the Captain said "Well done, Private," he felt a pride that he had never felt before.

"You know, I don't think I've ever seen you so happy," said Blanchefleur, one winter morning. The snows had come, and he was grateful for the hat and gloves that Mrs. Pebbles had included in his satchel.

"I don't think I ever have been, before," he said. "Not since --" Since his mother had died. Since then, he had always been alone. But now he had a pack. "I think I could stay here for the rest of my life."

"We seldom get what we want," said Blanchefleur. "The world has a use for us, tasks we must fulfill. And we must fulfill them as best we can, finding happiness along the way. But we usually get what we need."

"I've never heard you so solemn before," said Ivan. "You're starting to sound like your mother. But I don't think the world has any tasks for me. I'm no one special, after all."

"Don't be so sure, Ivan Miller," said Blanchefleur.

Suddenly, all the wolves in the cave pricked up their ears.

"The signal!" said the Captain.

And then Ivan heard it too, the long howl that signaled a troll raid, the short howls that indicated which village was being attacked.

"To the village!" shouted the Captain.

"Be careful!" said Blanchefleur, as Ivan sprang up, made sure his knife was in his belt, and ran out of the cave with the wolves. Then they were coursing through the forest, silent shadows against the snow.

They saw the flames and heard the screams before they saw any trolls. The village was a small one, just a group of herding families on the upper slopes. Their houses were simple, made of stone, with turf roofs. But the sheds were of wood, filled with fodder for the sturdy mountain sheep. The trolls had set fire to the fodder, and some of the sheds were burning. The sheep were bleating terribly, and as wolves rushed into the village, the Captain shouted to Ivan, "Open the pens! Let the sheep out -- we can herd them back later."

Ivan ran from pen to pen, opening all the gates. Mist ran beside him and if any sheep were reluctant to leave their pens, she herded them out, nipping at their heels.

When they reached the last of the pens, Ivan saw his first troll. She was taller than the tallest man, and twice as large around. She looked like a piece of the mountain that had grown arms and legs. Her mottled skin was gray and green and brown, and she was covered in animal pelts. In her hand, she carried a large club. In front of her, crouched and growling, was Graypaw.

"Come on, cub!" she sneered "I'll teach you how to sit and lie down!"

She lunged at Graypaw, swinging the club clumsily but effectively. The club hit a panicked ram that had been standing behind her, and the next moment, the ram lay dead on the snow.

Mist yipped to let Graypaw know she was behind him. He barked back, and the wolves circled the troll in opposite directions, one attacking from the left and the other from the right.

What could Ivan do? He drew his knife, but that would be no more effective against a troll than a sewing needle. To his right, one of the sheds was on fire, pieces of it falling to the ground as it burned. As Graypaw and Mist circled, keeping away from the club, trying to get under it and bite the troll's ankles, Ivan ran into the burning shed. He wrenched a piece of wood from what had been a gate, but was now in flames, then thrust its end into the fire. The flames licked it, and it caught. A long stick, its end on fire. This was a weapon of sorts, but how was he to use it?

Graypaw and Mist were still circling, and one of them had succeeded in wounding the troll -- there was green ichor running down her leg. The troll was paying no attention to Ivan -- she was wholly absorbed in fending off the wolves. But the wolves knew he was behind them. They were watching him out of the corners of their eyes, waiting. For what?

Then Ivan gave a short bark, the signal for attack. Both Graypaw and Mist flew at the troll simultaneously. The troll swung about wildly, not certain which to dispatch first. *Now*, thought Ivan, and he lunged forward, not caring that he could be hit by the club, only knowing that this was the moment, that he had put his packmates in danger for this opportunity. He thrust the flaming stick toward the troll's face. The troll shrieked -- it had gone straight into her left eye. She clutched the eye and fell backward. Without thinking, Ivan drew his knife and plunged it into the troll's heart, or where he thought her heart might be.

A searing pain ran through his chest. It was Dame Lizard's tail, tightening until he could no longer breathe. It loosened again, but he reeled with the shock and pain of it.

"Ivan, are you well?" asked Mist.

"I'm -- all right," he said, still breathless. "I'm going to be all right." But he felt sick.

The troll lay on the ground, green ichor spreading across her chest. She was dead. Behind her was a large sack.

"That must be what she was stealing," said Graypaw.

The sack started to wriggle.

"A sheep, perhaps," said Mist.

But when Ivan untied it, he saw a dirty, frightened face, with large gray eyes. A girl.

"You've found my daughter!" A woman was running toward them. With her was

the Captain.

"Nadia, my Nadia," she cried.

"Mama!" cried the girl, and scrambling out of the bag, she ran into her mother's arms.

"This the Mayor of the village," said the Captain. "Most of the trolls have fled, and we were afraid they had taken the girl with them."

"I can't thank you enough," said the woman. "You've done more than rescue my daughter, although that has earned you my gratitude. I recognize this troll -- she has been here before. We call her Old Mossy. She is the leader of this tribe, and without her, the tribe will need to choose a new leader by combat. It will not come again this winter. Our village has sustained great damage, but not one of us has died or disappeared, and we can rebuild. How can we reward you for coming to our rescue, Captain?"

"Madame Mayor, we are the Wolf Guard. Your gratitude is our reward," said the Captain.



On the way back to the cave, Graypaw and Mist walked ahead of Ivan, talking to the Captain in low voices. He wondered if he had done something wrong. Perhaps he should not have told them to attack? After all, they both outranked him. They were both Corporals, while he was only a Private. Perhaps they were telling the Captain about how he had reeled and clutched his chest after the attack. Would he be declared unfit for combat?

When they got back to the cave, Blanchefleur was waiting for him.

"Ivan, I need to speak with you," she said.

"Blanchefleur, I killed a troll! I mean, I helped kill her. I want to tell you about it .

.."

"That's wonderful, Ivan. I'm very proud of you. I am, you know, and not just because of the troll. But it's time for us to leave."

"What do you mean? It's still winter. I haven't been here for a year yet."

"My mother has summoned us. Here is her messenger."

It was Tailcatcher. In his excitement, Ivan had not noticed the striped cat.

"The Lady wishes you to travel to the capital. Immediately," said Tailcatcher.

"But why?" asked Ivan.

"You are summoned," said Tailcatcher, contemptuously. "Is that not enough?"

"If you are summoned, you must go," said the Captain, who had been standing behind him. "But come back to us when you can, Ivan."

Ivan had never felt so miserable in his life. "Can I say goodbye to Mist and Graypaw?"

"Yes, quickly," said the Captain. "And thank them, because on their recommendation, I am promoting you to Corporal. There is also something I wish to give you. Hold out your right hand, Corporal Miller."

Ivan held out his hand.

The Captain lunged at him, seized Ivan's hand in his great mouth, and bit down. Ivan cried out.

The Captain released him. The wolf's teeth had not broken his skin, but one of his fangs had pierced Ivan's hand between the thumb and forefinger. It was still lodged in his flesh. There was no blood, and as Ivan watched, the fang vanished, leaving only a white fang-shaped scar.

"Why --" he asked.

"That is my gift to you, Corporal. When I was a young corporal like yourself, I saved the life of a witch. In return, she charmed that fang for me. She told me that as long as I had it, whenever I fought, I would defeat my enemy. She also told me that one day, I could pass the charm to another. I asked her how, and she told me I would know when the time came. I am old, Ivan, and this is my last winter with the Wolf Guard. I believe I know why you have been summoned by the Lady. With that charm, whatever battles you have to fight, you should win. Now go. There is a storm coming, and you should be off the mountain before it arrives."

Ivan packed his belongings and made his farewells. Then, he left the cave, following Tailcatcher and Blanchefleur. He looked back once, with tears in his eyes, and felt as though his heart were breaking.



The journey to the capital would have taken several days, but in the first town they came to, Ivan traded his knife and coat for a horse. It was an old farm horse, but it went faster than he could have on foot with two cats. The cats sat in panniers that had once held potatoes, and Tailcatcher looked very cross indeed. When Ivan asked again why he had been summoned, the cat replied, "That's for the Lady to say," and would say nothing more.

They spent the night in a barn and arrived at the capitol the next day.

Ivan had never seen a city so large. The houses had as many as three stories, and there were shops for everything, from ladies' hats and fancy meats to bicycles. On one street he even saw a shiny new motorcar. But where were the people? The shops were closed, the houses shuttered, and the streets empty. Once, he saw a frightened face peering at him out of an alley, before it disappeared into the shadows.

"What happened here?" he asked.

"You'll know soon enough," said Tailcatcher. "That's where we're going."

*That* was the palace.

Ivan had never seen a building so large. His father's mill could have fit into one of its towers. With a sense of unease, he rode up to the gates.

"State your business!" said a guard who had been crouching in the gatehouse and stood up only long enough to challenge them.

Ivan was about to reply when Blanchefleur poked her head out of the pannier. "I am Blanchefleur. My mother is the Lady of the Forest, and our business is our own."

"You may pass, my Lady," said the guard, hurriedly opening the gates and then hiding again.

They rode up the long avenue, through the palace gardens, which were magnificent, although Ivan thought they were not as interesting as the Lady's gardens with their cat gardeners. They left the horse with an ostler who met them at the palace steps, then hurried off toward the stables. At the top of the steps, they were met by a majordomo who said, "This way, this way." He reminded Ivan of Marmalade.

They followed the majordomo down long hallways with crimson carpets and paintings on the walls in gilded frames. At last, they came to a pair of gilded doors, which opened into the throne room. There was the King, seated on his throne. Ivan could tell he was the King because he wore a crown. To one side of him sat the Lady. To the other sat a girl about Ivan's age, also wearing a crown, and with a scowl on her face. Before the dais stood two men.

"Ivan," said the Lady, "I'm so pleased to see you. I'm afraid we have a problem on our hands. About a year ago, a dragon arrived on the coast. At first, he only attacked the ports and coastal villages, and then only occasionally. I believe he is a young dragon, and lacked confidence in his abilities. But several months ago, he started flying inland, attacking market towns. Last week, he was spotted in the skies over the capital, and several days ago, he landed on the central bank. That's where he is now, holed up in the vault. Dragons like gold, as you know. The King has asked for a dragon slayer, and I'm hoping you'll volunteer."

"What?" said Ivan. "The King has asked for a what?"

"Yes, young man," said the King, looking annoyed that the Lady had spoken first. "We've already tried to send the municipal police after him, only to have the municipal police eaten. The militias were not able to stop him in the towns, but I thought that a trained police force -- well, that's neither here nor there. The Lady tells me that a dragon must be slain in the old-fashioned way. I'm a progressive man myself -- this entire city should be wired for electricity by next year, assuming it's not destroyed by the dragon. But with a dragon sitting on the monetary supply, I'm willing to try anything. So we've made the usual offer: the hand of my daughter in marriage and the kingdom after I retire, which should be in about a decade, barring ill health. We already have two brave volunteers, Sir Albert Anglethorpe and Oswald the -- what did you say it was? the Omnipotent."

Sir Albert, a stocky man with a shock of blonde hair, bowed. He was wearing chain mail and looked as though he exercised regularly with kettlebells. Oswald the Omnipotent, a tall, thin, pimply man in a ratty robe, said "How de do."

"And you are?" said the King.

"Corporal Miller," said Ivan. "And I have no idea how to slay a dragon."

"Honesty! I like honesty," said the King. "None of us do either. But you'll figure it out, won't you, Corporal Miller? Because the dragon really must be slain, and I'm at my wits' end. The city evacuated, no money to pay the military -- we won't be a proper kingdom if this keeps up."

"I have every confidence in you, Ivan," said the Lady.

"Me too," said Blanche fleur.

Startled, Ivan looked down at the white cat. "May I have something to eat before I go, um, dragon-slaying?" he asked. "We've been traveling all morning."

"Of course," said the King. "Anything you want, my boy. Ask and it will be yours."

"Well then," said Ivan, "I'd like some paper and ink."



Sir Albert had insisted on being fully armed, so he wore a suit of armor and carried a sword and shield. Oswald was still in his ratty robe and carried what he said was a magic wand.

"A witch sold it to me," he told Ivan. "It can transform anything it touches into anything else. She told me it had two transformations left in. I used the first one to turn a rock into a sack of gold, but I lost the gold in a card game. So when I heard about this dragon, I figured I would use the second transformation to turn him into -- I don't know, maybe a frog? And then, I'll be king. They give you all the gold you want, when you're king."

"What about the princess?" asked Ivan.

"Oh, she's pretty enough. Although she looks bad-tempered."

"And do you want to be king too?" Ivan asked Sir Albert.

"What? I don't care about that," he said through the visor of his helmet. "It's the dragon I'm after. I've been the King's champion three years running. I can out-joust and out-fight any man in the kingdom. But can I slay a dragon, eh? That's what I want to know." He bent his arms as though he were flexing his biceps, although they were hidden in his armor.

Ivan had not put on armor, but he had asked for a bow and a quiver of arrows. They seemed inadequate, compared with a sword and a magic wand.

The dragon may have been young, but he was not small. Ivan, Oswald, and Sir Alfred stood in front of the bank building, looking at the damage he had caused. There was a large hole in the side of the building where he had smashed through the stone wall, directly into the vault.

"As the King's champion, I insist that I be allowed to fight the dragon first," said Sir Albert. "Also, I outrank both of you."

"Fine by me," said Oswald.

"All right," said Ivan.

Sir Albert clanked up the front steps and through the main entrance. They heard a roar, and then a crash, as though a file cabinet had fallen over, and then nothing.

After fifteen minutes, Oswald asked, "So how big do you think this dragon is, anyway?"

"About as big as the hole in the side of the building," said Ivan.

"See, the reason I'm asking," said Oswald, "is that the wand has to actually touch whatever I want to transform. Am I going to be able to touch the dragon without being

eaten?"

"Probably not," said Ivan. "They breathe fire, you know."

"What about when they're sleeping?" asked Oswald.

"Dragons are very light sleepers," said Ivan. "He would smell you before you got close enough."

"How do you know?"

"It's in the Encyclopedia of All Knowledge."

"Oh, that thing," said Oswald. "You know, I worked on that for a while. Worst job I ever had. The pay was terrible, and I had to eat soup for every meal."

Another half hour passed.

"I don't think Sir Albert is coming out," said Ivan. "You volunteered before me. Would you like to go next?"

"You know, I'm not so sure about going in after all," said Oswald. "I can't very well rule a kingdom if I'm eaten, can I?"

"That might be difficult," said Ivan.

"You go ahead," said Oswald, starting to back away. "I think I'm going to turn another rock into gold coins. That seems like a better idea."

He turned and ran up the street, leaving Ivan alone in front of the bank. Ivan sighed. Well, there was no reason to wait any longer. He might as well go in now.

Instead of going in by the front door, he went in through the hole that the dragon had made in the side of the bank. He walked noiselessly, as he had done in the forest. It was easy to find the dragon: he was lying on a pile of gold coins in the great stone room that had once been the vault. Near the door of the vault, which had been smashed open, Ivan could see a suit of armor and a sword, blackened by flames. He did not want to think about what had happened to Sir Albert.

An arrow would not penetrate the dragon's hide. He knew that, because while he had been eating at the palace, he had asked Professor Owl's tail feather to write out the entire Encyclopedia entry on dragons. He had a plan, and would get only one chance to carry it out. It would depend as much on luck as skill.

But even if it worked, he knew how it would feel, slaying a dragon. He remembered how it had felt, killing the troll. Could he survive the pain? Was there any way to avoid it? He had to try.

He stood in a narrow hallway off the vault. Keeping back in the shadows, he called, "Dragon!"

The dragon lifted his head. "Another dragon slayer? How considerate of the King to sent me dessert! Dragon slayer is my favorite delicacy, although the policemen were delicious. I much preferred them to farmers, who taste like dirt and leave grit between your teeth, or fishermen, who are too salty."

"Dragon, you could fly north to the mountains. There are plenty of sheep to eat there."

"Sheep!" said the dragon. "Sheep are dull and stringy compared to the delicious men I've eaten here. Just the other day, I ate a fat baker. He tasted of sugar and cinnamon."

There are plenty of teachers and accountants to eat in this city. Why, I might eat the Princess herself! I hear princess is even better than dragon slayer."

The dragon swung his head around, as though trying to locate Ivan. "But you don't smell like a man, dragon slayer," said the dragon. "What are you, and are you good to eat?"

*I must still smell like the wolves,* thought Ivan.

He stepped out from the hallway and into the vault. "I'm an Enigma, and I'm delicious."

The dragon swung toward the sound of his voice. As his great head came around, Ivan raised his bow and shot an arrow straight up into the dragon's eye.

The dragon screamed in pain and let out a long, fiery breath. He swung his head to and fro. Ivan aimed again, but the dragon was swinging his head too wildly: a second arrow would never hit its mark. Well, now he would find out if the Captain's charm worked. He ran across the floor of the vault, ignoring the dragon's flames, and picked up Sir Albert's sword. It was still warm, but had cooled down enough for him to raise it.

The pain had begun the moment the arrow entered the dragon's eye, but he tried not to pay attention. He did not want to think about how bad it would get. Where was the dragon's neck? It was still swinging wildly, but he brought the sword down just as it swung back toward him. The sword severed the dragon's neck cleanly in two, and his head rolled over the floor.

Ivan screamed from the pain and collapsed. He lay next to the dragon's head, with his eyes closed, unable to rise. Then, he felt something rough and wet on his cheek. He opened his eyes. Blanchefleur was licking him.

"Blanchefleur," he said weakly. "What are you doing here?"

"I followed you, of course," she said.

"But I never saw you."

"Of course not." She sat on the floor next to him as he slowly sat up. "Excellent shot, by the way. They'll call you Ivan Dragonslayer now, you know."

"Oh, I hope not," he said.

"It's inevitable."



The King met him with an embrace that made Ivan uncomfortable. "Welcome home, Ivan Dragonslayer! I shall have my attorney drawn up the papers to make you my heir, and here of course is my lovely Alethea, who will become your bride. A royal wedding will attract tourists to the city, which will help with the rebuilding effort."

Princess Alethea crossed her arms and looked out the window. Even from the back, she seemed angry.

"Forgive me, your Majesty," said Ivan, "but I have no wish to marry the Princess, and I don't think she wants to marry me either. We don't even know each other."

Princess Alethea turned and looked at him in astonishment. "Thank you!" she said. "You're the first person who's made any sense all day. I'm glad you slayed the dragon, but

I don't see what that has to do with getting my hand in marriage. I'm not some sort of prize at a village fair."

"And I would not deprive you of a kingdom," said Ivan. "I have no wish to be king."

"Oh, goodness," said Alethea, "neither do I! Ruling is deadly dull. You can have the kingdom and do what you like with it. I'm going to university, to become an astronomer. I've wanted to be an astronomer since I was twelve."

"But . . ." said the King.

"Well then, it's decided, " said the Lady. "Ivan, you'll spend the rest of your apprenticeship here, in the palace, learning matters of state."

"But I want to go back to the wolves," said Ivan. He saw the look on the Lady's face: she was about to say no. He added, hurriedly, "If I can go back, just for the rest of my apprenticeship, I'll come back here and stay as long as you like, learning to be king. I promise."

"All right," said the Lady.

He nodded, gratefully. At least he would have spring in the mountains, with his pack.



Ivan and Blanchefleur rode north, not on a farm horse this time, but on a mare from the King's stables. As night fell, they stopped by a stream. The mountains were ahead of them, glowing in the evening light.

"You know, before we left, Tailcatcher asked me again, " said Blanchefleur. "He thought that my time with you was done, that I would go back to the Castle in the Forest with my mother. I could have."

"Why didn't you?" asked Ivan.

"Why did you refuse the hand of the Princess Alethea? She was attractive enough."

"Because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life with her," said Ivan. "I want to spend it with you, Blanchefleur."

"Even though I'm a cat?"

"Even though."

She looked at him for a moment, then said, "I'm not always a cat, you know." Suddenly, sitting beside him was a girl with short white hair, wearing a white fur jacket and trousers. She had Blanchefleur's eyes.

"Are you -- are you Blanchefleur?" he asked. He stared at her. She was and she was not the white cat.

"Of course I am, idiot," she said. "I think you're going to make a good king. You'll have all the knowledge in the world to guide you, and any pain you cause, you'll have to feel yourself, so you'll be fair and kind. But you'll win all your battles. You'll hate it most of the time and wish you were back with the wolves or in Professor Owl's tower, or even taking care of the lizards. That's why you'll be good."

"And you'll stay with me?" he asked, tentatively reaching over and taking her hand.

"Of course," she said. "Who else is going to take care of you, Ivan?"

Together, they sat and watched the brightness fade from the mountain peaks and night fall over the Wolfwald. When Ivan lay down to sleep, he felt the white cat curl up next to his chest. He smiled into the darkness before slipping away into dreams.



Copyright 2012 by Theodora Goss. Originally published in *Once Upon a Time: New Fairy Tales*, edited by Paula Guran.