



*Ivy scanned the contents page of Master Torbolt's book. The titles were interesting enough: The Ridiculous Venture of Myster Han, The Four High Hopes of Finckle Major, A Pompous Wind. She pulled the blankets well over her legs and leaned back against her high pile of pillows. Master Borinvere had said that The Grand Voyage of Alida was his favourite so she would start with that. She had never read fiction before - other than the bedtime stories her mother had told her when she was not even old enough to tie her shoelaces - so she was curious about why Master Borinvere was so excited about this particular story.*

*Outside the night wind was blowing against her window, coming in through the gap. She should go to bed but there was something delicious about sneaking in a good read when you should be sleeping. She opened up to the first page of The Voyage of Alida and snuggled down to read...*

High in the King's most beautiful tower was a prison where he kept the most beautiful prisoner - his daughter, the Princess Alida. Hers was an ample cell but bare as buzzard picked bones. Her bed was a pile of straw, her food little and bland. And yet, in one corner of this disappointing room was a pile of lavish fabric fit for a queen.

It was in fact for the Queen. An extravagant woman with a King tied round her finger. It suited her well to have a step-child who had some talent with a needle and thread and a fair amount of good taste. And it was no co-incidence that Alida had been banished to the tower for the small indiscretion of choosing not to marry the man

she was promised to. Banished and forced to make dresses all day long. No, not a coincidence, a delightful happenstance for the Queen.

Alida leaned on the window sill of her cell. There were no bars, for there was nowhere to go if she climbed out. Below the window was the smooth wall of the high tower and the cliffs on which the palace was built. Beyond that stretched the sea, whose swishing tides lulled her to sleep every night and gave her a rhythm for singing in the day. She had long ago decided she would enjoy that sea view every single day: the sea, the colours of the sky, the wheeling gulls. The bar-less window was a gift in the midst of the strange turn her life had taken.

Outside her cell boots sounded through the hall to signal the changing of the guards. They would come to fetch the Queen's dresses soon. When she had first received news that she would be designing the Queen's dresses, Alida had tried *not* to sew them but that only resulted in missed dinners and endless hours with nothing to do. In the end, Alida could not resist the sumptuous fabrics. Besides, it was while designing and sewing the dresses that she came up with her escape plan.

She shivered. It was almost night, almost time to go back to a sewing project of her own. It would soon be completed. How glad she would be to wake up on something other than straw and icy flagstones.

She reached her hand deep into her straw bed and ran her fingers over the material that lay hidden there. She had been saving material scraps for almost two years now, sewing them together in an ingenious way. This would be, by far, the most daring thing Alida had ever done. To get it wrong would mean death but to get it right...

There was a double knock on the door and Alida withdrew her hand, sitting nice and docile on the straw. "Enter," she said.

The door opened and the night guard stepped in. He was a slight man with day old stubble on his chin. His eyes were kind enough but they didn't rest on her long. "Dinner," he said, giving her a pitying look. He handed her the tin plate with its usual grey gruel.

"Thank you, kind sir," said Alida. It won her another pitying look. The guard, Franke, if Alida remembered correctly, glanced at the pile of dresses.

"Are you done? The Queen's been asking..."

"Almost," said Alida.

"We'll come for them tomorrow. Don't want the Queen to get impatient. She said she might come to thank you herself..." Franke stopped, as though ashamed he'd let himself talk for so long. Conversing with prisoners was not good protocol.

Alida smiled. "That would be nice. I haven't seen the Queen for years. Is she well?"

"No idea. Never seen her myself," said Franke. He rocked back and forth on his heels, as if deciding whether he should stay or leave and then finally decided to go. He locked the cell with a resounding clang and bolts were drawn across the door.

Alida went to the pile of dresses and took out the bottom most dress in which her pins and needles were hidden. She had lied to Franke, for she had been done with the dresses for days now. She knew if they took them to the Queen, they would also take her needles and thread, and she couldn't have that. She needed them just a little while longer.

She forced herself to eat the gruel. There would be nothing else. And if her plan went as she hoped, she did not know when next she would eat. She wished that for once, the gruel had been warm. The cold of the coming night dipped in through the window and settled at her bare feet. Warm gruel might have been heavenly on a night like tonight. But no, cold gruel was all there was to be had. Once done she slid the tin plate up against the wall and dug out her precious fabric from beneath the straw. There was so much of it now. She had picked the lighter silks and linings - not the heavy brocade that the Queen wore in the winter - and began to sew them in an enormous circle. She would work deep into the night, her feeble candle the only light to work by. And there, serenaded by the crashing waves below, she would hum and sing and sew until she could no longer.

Now she had only one night left. Her hands trembled at the thought.

"Steady now, hands," she said to herself, taking a deep breath. She stood and spread the fabric around the floor of the cell. As it was now, it took up the whole cell, a vast canvas of patchwork silks and linings. Each piece had been sewed multiple times in the tightest stitch she knew. She would test them by yanking on the fabric as if to rip it but her governess had taught her well over the years and not a single thread tore free. She only hoped it would be strong enough for her purposes.

So close to the end, Alida thought she heard guards all night long. Every scuffle or clang seemed to be someone coming to discover her. The canvas was too big to stuff quickly away underneath her straw - there would be no hiding this ample secret if someone threw open the door. So she worked quickly, her fingers nimble - in and out, in and out - until she had finally sewn the last thread. She tied it off and studied her handiwork, looking at the joins for any wayward threads. She ran her blistered hands over the fine silk material, grateful that her step mother had such expensive taste, and closed her eyes to hope that his mad plan would work.

It was not just her freedom she wanted, after all. For being locked away in the tower was not only due to her step mother, who was only selfish and not evil. No, her imprisonment had more to do with her utter disrespect for her father and his desire to see her married to a man she did not love. Mage Wreagan was nice enough but too old, too sombre and too proud. His brother Reve on the other hand was none of those things. Alida's heart sped up at the thought of him. He was not excessively handsome but he radiated kindness. He was humble - humble despite his great talent - and in a crowded room, never sought attention or admiration. She had never met a man so content with himself that he did not need the praise of others. And yet, in a room full of people, it was her that he noticed and fixed his affections upon.

Tears sprang to Alida's eyes as she thought of the years she had been away from Reve. What had become of him? Was he still waiting for her, as he had promised? She squeezed at fistfuls of the silk on her lap - this material, this mad plan, was the only way she would ever see him again. She would rather die trying to see him than remain in the tower for the rest of her days.

The sun was rising again. How quick the night had been as she worked. Before long the guards would bring her breakfast - more gruel - and take away the dresses. She had to move quickly.

She went to the window and leaned out as far as she could. The sky was streaked with the occasional windswept cloud and the sea thrashed below her. It was not the calmest day for her plan but as she noted the direction of the wind, she hoped it would be the best one.

"Today, or never," she whispered to herself.

She pulled the high pile of the Queen's dresses to a spot below the window. Carefully she smoothed the span of her own fabric creation out from the window toward the cell door. Then pulling it up by the straps she had made, she hooked it over her shoulders and tied it tight as she could bare. She was shaking now - from cold and terror. Could she really do this? She wondered. She climbed to the top of the dress pile, her knees shaking. If only she had some of Reve's magic, for now came the tricky part.

She crept backwards, holding the fabric in her lap so that it would not be caught by a draft of air, and shimmied until she came to the edge. Then, legs trembling, she stood in the window, holding onto the frame with one arm, and clinging to the fabric with the other. She paused, taking a deep breath. As she had told herself many times, she would not die in a cage. Even if she were free for a few moments, it would be well worth her years of labour.

She threw the fabric out behind her and to her relief it was caught by the wind, ballooning out above her. Still she clung to the stone, unable to muster the courage to jump. In the cell, she heard the double knock for breakfast and her breath caught in her throat.

"Lady?" came the guard's voice.

Another gust of wind pulled at her balloon of fabric, yanking her backwards ever so slightly. She did not answer. She did not move.

"Lady, are you well?" came the guard's voice.

Suddenly Alida remembered the days and nights of gruel, the endless sameness of her stone room, the ache of her back from her little straw bed, the blistered hands that sewed endless frocks for a selfish queen. She would remain here for the rest of her days if her father had his way and she could bear it no longer. She heard the door bolts being pushed aside and the sound gave her courage.

Alida jumped.

She fell some way before the balloon her caught on the wind and pulled her west, towards the coast. Her dress fluttered around her bare feet, her hair whipping about her face in the icy wind - she was soaring like her wheeling gulls. Behind her she could hear the shouts of the guard as he leaned out her window but they faded as she flew. She wondered if her father would bother to look for her. But she no longer cared about her father's pride, she was free.

And then, a little way off, a beam of light shot into the sky, so brilliant that Alida had to close her eyes. Reve. He had waited after all.

*Ivy turned the page and found nothing more. She pulled the book to her chest and hugged it tight. Why had no one ever read her stories like this before? Why had no one ever told her about how lost a person could become in a story? She went to the window and pulled aside the curtain, looking out to the shadows of the Tower balloons. So this was where Master Borinvere's idea had come from - a balloon made by the princess Alida herself. The woman who started the Mage's feud. Ivy climbed back under her covers, snuggling down against the cold night air. She just wanted to read it one more time before she went to sleep. She hoped that she would dream of Mage Reve and his princess.*

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