





# The Devious Dragon and the Fall of the Emperor

Clark Gillian

Singel Uitgevers B.V.  
Under Brave New Books.

Weteringschans 259,  
1017 XJ Amsterdam

[clarkgillian.com](http://clarkgillian.com)

07-02-2023

First Edition  
PAPERBACK ISBN 9789464801910

© Clark Gillian Van Herrewege

Seven cat envoys .....	7
Shards for good luck .....	13
Heaven on Earth .....	20
An unexpected visitor .....	28
Sealed fate .....	36
The Emperor's Cellar .....	42
The invisible hand .....	52
Watch and learn .....	63
Whispers over blades of grass .....	73
The furious Watchdog.....	84
Better safe than sorry.....	91
The lid on the well .....	104
Heaven and earth splitting.....	109
Mad Meg and John Cook.....	115
The Cat Plague .....	126
Randy-dandy Burgomaster .....	130
New foundations .....	137
The feast and the cloud .....	146
True to their word.....	156
The idle fisherman.....	168
The lackey and the pigeons .....	182
Naming the Nameless.....	195
Keep on working until it doesn't work .....	205
The mirror and the horn .....	222

Silence of the wise.....	237
Regret at the expense of prudence .....	246
Three letters, one message.....	255
Light at the end of the tunnel.....	262
The serpent's smile .....	269
The compass .....	283
The horn's call .....	295
The Night Brigade .....	304
Sometimes doing nothing is the best thing to do.....	317
Tinkles and twinkles .....	324
You showed me the way.....	333
Ring the bell.....	344
The light of the lantern.....	352



# Seven cat envoys

“Capture the Princess and her Knight and return them to me!”

With those words, the Imperial Council sent an entire army of soldiers into the forest to imprison the Fool and the Princess in the same dungeon where they held the Emperor and the Empress captive.

The Cat King walked across the rooftops and balconies in the magnificent City of Stars, the capital of the Empire, and watched as hundreds of soldiers, rattling and clattering in new armor, set off toward the dark forest in the hopes of finding the fairy gate.

Immediately, the cat king knew to do his duty by ancient cat-birthright: *send the cat envoys to the seven cat bell fries to ring the cat bells.*

Back in the underground cat city, the Cat King convened his court. Among the many noble cats, there were seven cats that emerged from the crowd before the throne of the Cat King. All cats bowed down to him.

“For generations, we have kept up with the tradition of the seven cat envoys in each of the seven big cat cities. You, noble cat envoys, came from your hometown with the task of returning only in case of great danger. I am sorry to



announce that now is the time! We must ring the cat bells in the seven cat bell fries as soon as possible," said the Cat King.

The cat people listened with bated breath to the Cat King's state of affairs in the human world: an Imperial Council without an Emperor, the Kings and Queens of the lands locked up in their own castles, a Princess in exile with a Fool as her knight.

"If the soldiers find their way to the elven gate, the Enchanted Deer could close the gate for good and call back the last of the magical creatures hidden throughout the land. A life without magic is like a world without flowers. It's our job to protect this fragile beauty!"

All the cats cheered. The King went on to send out the cat envoys. He spoke to the cat envoy who was wearing red trousers and braces:

"Open this little treasure chest, in it is the key that opens the door to the cat clock at the top of the cat belfry in the City of Bridges - where one cannot bear injustice and falsehood."

And the cat envoy with the red trousers broke the seal of the treasury and took out a chain with a large key attached to it. He bowed and walked away in a hurry.

To the cat envoy with the orange trousers and braces, the Cat King said:

“Open this little treasure chest, in it is the key that opens the door to the cat clock at the top of the cat belfry in the City of Sheets – where one is powerful enough to banish fear and doubt.”

And the cat envoy with the orange trousers also carefully broke the seal of the treasury, took out the necklace with the large key and hung it around his neck. He bowed and quickly set off.

To the cat envoy with the gold-colored trousers and braces, the Cat King said:

“Open this little treasure chest, in it is the key that opens the door to the cat clock at the top of the cat belfry in the Proud City of Flowers – where both their leaven and their words are fed by the power of the invisible.”

And also, the cat envoy with the gold-colored trousers carefully broke the seal of the treasury, took out the chain with the large key and grabbed it tightly. He bowed and walked on quickly.

To the cat envoy with the grass-colored trousers and braces, the Cat King said:

“Open this little treasure chest, in it is the key that opens the door to the cat clock at the top of the cat bell fry in the City of Acorns – where people work hard to be able to share their abundance with each other.”

And the cat envoy with the grass-colored trousers also carefully broke the seal of the treasury, took out the necklace with the large key and tied it to his pants. He bowed and spurred out the door.

To the cat envoy with the light blue trousers and braces, the Cat King said:

“Open this little treasure chest, in it is the key that opens the door to the cat clock at the top of the cat belfry in the City of Pants- where one drinks the clearest water and speaks only clear things.”

And the cat envoy with the light blue trousers broke the seal of the treasury, took out the chain with the big key attached to it, bowed and immediately left for his city.

To the cat envoy with the purple trousers and braces, the Cat King said:

“Open this little treasure chest, in it is the key that opens the door to the cat clock at the top of the cat belfry in the City of Lovers, where one holds fast to the truth and resists temptations.”

And the cat envoy with the purple trousers also broke the seal of the treasury, took out the necklace with the big key and hung it solemnly around his neck. He bowed to the Cat King and left.

To the last cat envoy, the cat envoy with the violet trousers and braces, the Cat King said:

“Open this little treasure chest, in it is the key that opens the door to the cat clock at the top of the cat bell in the City of Hazels – where one is peaceful and rested but must now be awakened.”

And the cat envoy with the violet trousers obediently broke the seal of the treasury, took out the necklace with the large key and wrapped it around his front paw. He bowed and was the last to leave.

The journey of the cat envoys was longer for some more than others, but all of them knew that at midnight - when the moon was highest in the sky – the bells had to be rung. Hastily, they climbed to the top of each of the cat belfries stuck the keys into the keyholes of those old doors that hadn't been opened for hundreds of years. Once there, they pushed them open, making a big creaking sound.

Meanwhile, all the cats in the City of Stars came together from the tunnels of the underground cat city and gathered there on all rooftops, with their ears pricked up in expectation.

So high were the cat envoys above ground that they had to be very careful not to tumble down before accomplishing the most important task of their lives. The cat bells were all

cat-sized and decorated with old cat signs and symbols. Patiently they waited for the precise moment, looking at the moon to feel when midnight had come by its silvery rays. When they finally felt the moment was right, they jumped down, clawing the rope tightly to their paws.

Thus, throughout the empire, the cat bells began to ring with a sound so high and so clear that no human ears could hear it, but nonetheless the sound spread effortlessly all throughout the land.

As the cats on the roofs in the City of Stars heard the cat bells ringing one by one, a most beautiful sound, they spontaneously began to sing along. And the same thing happened in all cities and towns.

And when the seventh cat bell was rung, all living things heard it in such a way that they woke up from their nightly sleep, feeling fervently without a need to speak: I am awake. And from all four directions suddenly a great wind arose that blew over all the forests, all the mountains, all the rivers, all the fields, all the hills, all the villages and all the cities.

A storm is coming.

# Shards for good luck

“Oh, those poor soldiers, just look at them,” the black fox sighed from his tower. He saw army after army march into the forest in search of the Princess and the Fool, but hardly anyone ever returned. And of those who did manage to return, none came away unscathed by the endeavor.

“They have no idea! They have absolutely no idea what they are doing,” said the fox, squeaking with laughter.

Day after day, a batch of new soldiers marched one, two, one, two, left, right, left, right into the forest. One day, the fox wanted to see it up close, he ran down the turnstiles in the direction of the clattering armor, silently so. But he couldn't hold back his laughter for long.

All forest creatures worked together tirelessly to lure the soldiers away from the elven gate! The gnomes jumped at the feet of the soldiers and made crazy faces at them from the bushes to keep them walking in circles until they were too exhausted to continue the search. Weasels and rabbits danced around their feet and lured the soldiers away from each other, such that the soldiers eventually were led down a lone path to nowhere.

Even creatures from the elven realm helped to protect the gate. Forest nymphs whispered from the treetops and sent

out wild boars, wolves and brown bears to take the soldiers by surprise. Whoever tried to fight with such ferocious and strong animals did not stand a chance: even metal is too weak to stop any of those sturdy horns, teeth and claws.

And the nymphs of the water in the ponds all around the forest also put their skills to good use. They sang a song so beautiful that the soldiers were lured to the shore, enchanted by the elegant melodies they were singing. On the shore of the forest lakes, they didn't even take off their heavy armor to swim towards the song of the nymphs and so they all sank to the bottom like a stone to rest down there forever.

All the creatures in the forest worked together in this manner to protect the elven gate from the soldiers sent out by the Imperial Council.

The black fox rolled across the forest floor laughing at this mayhem and continued to do so every day, hidden behind the bushes so as to not reveal the location of his 'unfindable tower'. But he did not remain hidden for long, because his laughter became too boisterous after a while, squeaking like never before.

Now it so happened that one of the soldiers saw how the fox was laughing at him, barely hidden behind a forest bush. Furiously, he drew his sword and stormed towards the fox. Effortlessly, the fox dodged the soldier's heavy and clumsy

movements and so he walked effortlessly past the bumbling soldier, straight back to the tower.

But this soldier was so enraged by the fox's laughter, that he secretly followed the fox, sweating and panting through his heavy armor, not letting him escape from his sight for a single moment.

The fox, with a big lead, spurred into his tower and quickly pushed the crossbar into the door. The soldier fell down in front of the door, puffing and sighing.

*He had found the Enchantress's tower.*

A voice suddenly spoke to him:

"Hello, good Knight," said the voice.

"I.. I am not a knight. I am a soldier," he replied.

"And what makes you a soldier and not a knight?"

"I have no country, nor coat of arms. I only wear my armor as long as I get paid for it."

"A man after my heart, sounds like."

The soldier looked around on his knees in exhaustion, looking for where the voice came from.

"Cuckoo!" said the voice, "Down here."



The soldier looked at the ground and saw below his feet a layer of broken mirror shards sticking out from the ground.

\*\*\*

The few soldiers who were able to return to the City of Stars were rallied and sent to report to the Council in the palace's newly renovated throne room. The one throne of the Emperor had been replaced by rows of thrones. There sat the Imperial Council, each of them fashioned as an Emperor, each of them stern looking and self-indulgent as though untouchable.

When they had listened to all the stories of what was happening in the forest, they immediately began to shake with anger, creaking the gold-painted wood of their brand-new thrones.

Among the soldiers who had found their way back from the forest, there were few who had not developed a deep fear of gnomes; others returned with broken arms and legs. Some soldiers returned soaked to the core, without any memory of ever having been a soldier, except for an ethereal melody they kept singing over and over!

“You are all imbeciles,” the serpent cried from his golden cup, still trembling with frustration.

"If you continue to fail me like this, I will... I mean... *we*, as a council, will not be able to continue to grow. And I want to grow!"

"We want to grow too, your highness!"

The serpent looked at all the counselors with its big red eyes as an icy silence befell them.

"Prove it," said the snake, "How many more times do I have to say it? Change is in the air; we must act quickly! Things have been set in motion. It was not easy to act in quiet times, now it is even going to be much more difficult!"

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. A soldier came in with a big dirty shard in his hands.

He walked solemnly to the golden cup beset with gemstones on a table in the center of the rows of thrones. The serpent looked on as the soldier carefully placed the shard next to him and then knelt down. A counselor gave the soldier a bag of coins and sent him away. Meanwhile, the snake had already slipped out of the cup and had coiled himself around the shard.

"What do we have here?"

From the dark corners of the dirty shard a shadow emerged, and a chilling voice that spoke, "When I heard that

you were sending armies out to lock up the Princess, it was nothing but music to my ears.”

The snake hissed with pleasure.

“Is that so?” the snake asked.

“Yes,” said the voice, “I am locked in these mirror shards by the same person you are looking for. And I am being punished more and more by that same terrible family. Now I'm being dragged back to this cursed place against my will, because I don't even have a body anymore.”

The serpent smiled broadly and said, “What do you want most of all, Sorceress?”

And the Sorceress said, “My own body. I want to be able to eat and drink again. I want to be able to hold jewels again and hold them in the light. I want to wear and feel soft fabrics on my skin. I want to lie on thick pillows and comb my hair, smeared with delicious oils.”

The white snake looked at her, smiling with fiery red eyes.

“What if I could give you a body again without you having to pay even a single coin?”

“For that I would do anything in the whole world,” said the Sorceress, “But, who are you exactly? Do I know you?”

“You do now. I am your best friend,” said the snake, “You just didn’t know it yet. And I’ll remain your friend as long as you give me what I want.”

There was a brief silence as the councilmen watched in suspense from their thrones.

“Well, what is it that you want, snake?” asked the Sorceress finally.

“Certainty. Nothing but delicious... certainty,” said the snake with a reverberating hiss.

# Heaven on Earth

*"You can't see the coffin from inside the coffin."*

*"From 'nothing', that's where we look at everything that is 'something'."*

*"From here we have seen everything, experienced everything, remembered everything, observed everything and witnessed everything."*

*"Now come here where everything is something that is not a thing and therefore all can be each other. And by being each other, everything can become even more of itself."*

*"Continue across the rainbow bridge and step through the Gate. We safely wrap you in a blanket of starlight, knitted by elves and the fairies. We are here, your guides still so strongly connected to the human world to show the way: Master Deer and the Seer."*

The Fool was no longer his lonesome and abandoned self, the Princess was no longer her angry and confined self. Together they were now one. The harshness of what they endured in the human world quietly melted away in the blanket of light so that there was only the softness that felt like sinking into a wonderfully fluffy bed.

"The less there stands in the way, the more you can achieve," the Fairies said to them as they shot through the stars, wrapped in the blanket of light.

But the Princess had a hard time letting go. Her idea of home, her idea of her title, her idea of what she still deserved, her idea of injustice, the fresh pain when she saw her parents being snatched away from her by the soldiers while she was humiliated and accused of the falsehoods that others had committed and wanted to commit even further, still reverberated in the fresh wounds that remained. These pains delayed their journey through the Elven Gate past the stars, for she could not forget who she once was because of what happened.

"Listen, dear Princess," said one of the fairies who continued to wrap them in the blanket of light, "You don't have to forget anything at all. Just realize that you are more than what happened to you. You were already more than that, even before it had happened! Don't cling to the evil that has befallen you. Be more of the sweet thing you are... and could still become!"

"I... can't do it," said the Princess, "I can't let go yet," she said with tears in her eyes for her father the Emperor who was pushed to the ground by his own palace guards and her mother who was put in handcuffs as she still called out to her.

An elven mother now came closer to the Princess and said, "Know that you had to burst open so that the softness could begin to seep in somewhere. How angry you were. How sad. How hard and merciless for what had happened to you and everyone who had to deal with it? You had to burst open of that, because it is softness that makes humankind human. Or at least the human still wanting to pass through the Elven Gate.

Break free from the Princess who only exists because of what happened to you and become the Princess who is everything you have conquered. Let all be what it is and let go of all things.

At that moment, the Princess erupted like a salty sand crust dissolves in a wild sea wave. And so, they continued through the fairy gate, as one.

\*\*\*

The Fool and the Princess looked up. There could be no doubt about it. They had arrived in the Elven world! They feasted their eyes, so beautiful was this paradise and by the time they had absorbed everything around them, they saw that the Enchanted Deer and the Seer had already stepped a little further. They quickly followed them.

A number of fairies, who together watched from afar how the Fool and the Princess were so enchanted and

amazed by their world where nearby could be far and far near, where above could be below and below above, where nymphs swam in heavenly rivers and air spirits danced in the wind between the floating islands, where gnomes lived in whole castles and palaces of mushrooms and the fairies washed themselves in fountains of purple fire in the clouds all around them, giggling and waving at them all the while.

The Fool and the Princess together looked at the fairies and saw how tall they were, how thin they were, how long their hair was, and how beautiful their wings were: big yet light as a summer breeze. They waved again and flew effortlessly between the birds and the shooting stars in broad daylight.

They looked around them again. Where was the Enchanted Deer and the Seer taking them? They passed the many abandoned houses and streets, deserted squares with deserted towers and small destitute temples, all overgrown with wild plants and flowers.

How much more beautiful it would have been here if all the people still lived here, they thought.

“How difficult must the world of people be to deal with,” the Enchanted Deer suddenly said to them, still walking, “If it cost them this paradise?”



So, this was where people lived in the days when humans and animals could still talk to each other, They thought, in the time before the Elven Gate.

"I think..." they said as one voice, "I think it's because people have lost the way back here."

"That's right," said the Seer with a smile that felt like a soft kiss on the cheek.

Here and there a gentle wind blew through the streets.

"Which way did they go?" asked the Enchanted Deer, wondering how they would explain it.

"Well," said the Fool more than the Princess, who had to dig back into his thoughts about the world he had just left behind,

"The way of just going along."

"For many, going along and getting along is the same as living," said the Princess more than the Fool, recalling life as a Witch.

"Then they have to stop thinking that," said the Enchanted Deer.

The Seer laughed for a moment, but the Enchanted Deer didn't understand what was so funny about it.

"Of course, that's easy to say!" said the Seer.

"It is easy!"

"It may be simple," said the Fool more than the Princess who, from her Witch existence, immediately understood what the Enchanted Deer felt about the whole thing of simply going along with things as they are. As a tanner's son, the Fool still knew the daily grind of working along and the small pleasures that came with it.

He said, "But it's not easy at all."

"It's easy and it's simple. To live, you don't have to do anything. You just have to be."

The Seer nodded with a sweet smile.

When the Enchanted Deer spoke of this kind of being, the Fool felt himself sinking back for a moment as if he were looking into the great nothingness of the Elven Gate. That's how heavy and deep that word could be, and back the Princess and the Fool melted together even further.

The Enchanted Deer shook his antlers for a moment. He struggled to understand the whole thing.

"I think..." They continued as one voice, again deep in thought, "I think the problem is that out here a lot of people think they're not allowed to."

"That they can't do what?" asked the Enchanted Deer.

“To be. Just be.”

The Fool went back in his mind to all those times when he just took a moment to rest throughout the workday and his father yelled at him that he was lazy and how his laziness ruined the family. The Princess also thought of the Witches' Tower and the pumpkins.

“Sometimes that's not allowed,” They said, “Just to be.”

“And since when has this become a problem?” asked the Enchanted Deer.

“If you don't go along and get along with who go along and get along, even if getting along might be harder for you to do than it is for others, then... then the whole thing doesn't work anymore,” said the Princess laughing.

“That is the most ununderstandable thing I have ever heard. What thing?” asked the Enchanted Deer.

“You know!”

“I don't know.”

“You know, the thing!” said the Princess, “How everything works.”

The Enchanted Deer continued to look at them as they stepped past the last lanterns onto a fantastically beautiful boardwalk overlooking the splendor of Fairy Paradise.

“And how does everything work, then?”

The Fool added, “You have to get along and go along so as to earn what you can get.”

It felt as if the Fool had finally been able to say what he was trying to explain to the Enchanted Deer.

The Enchanted Deer was not impressed by how things were in the human world. He stared at the Fool motionless.

“But that's not at all true,” sighed the Enchanted Deer, “Being is not something you have to earn. Why should you earn what you already are? You already are!”

# An unexpected visitor

For days the black fox wondered about the whole business of being chased by the soldier up to his front door and disappearing just like that.

*How strange*, he thought to himself basking in the midday sun on the roof of his little tower, *the soldier had found the tower but did not even try to break in*. So just to be safe, the fox decided to remain safely inside for a while with his towermate, the Dwarf. Before long the sun had set, and the moon shone brightly down.

As always, the Dwarf sat bent over a number of books by soft candlelight. He didn't even notice the Fox coming into the room, reading along over his shoulder.

"What is it you are studying from these books?" asked the Fox out of boredom.

"A lot," said the Dwarf without looking up.

"Oh, that's what you always say. You're no fun at all."

"Well, it's true," the Dwarf replied.

"And did you go get us some food?" asked the Fox playfully rolling on the floor, "We need to eat *something!*"

"I gathered some fruit earlier today."

"Fruit? I don't eat fruit! You know that!"

The Dwarf shrugged his shoulders and said, "Maybe you should go get your food yourself!"

"You are merciless, and your behavior is simply unacceptable," the Fox whined, "You know I'm not stepping a foot outside this tower anytime soon. That soldier is probably lurking around the corner as we speak, waiting for me to come out to make his move! And then what?"

"What then?" asked the Dwarf, who did not look up from his book.

"Why, there'll be nothing left of my poor old self after he's done with me, or worse, I'll be made into a scarf. Do you see this beautiful coat of mine? So beautifully shiny black, so warm and soft, such fluffy deliciousness? Irresistible to humans., let me tell you. Once those creatures set eyes on my luscious fur, they can only think one thing and one thing only: I want it."

"The Witch was a human, wasn't she," said the Dwarf, "And she didn't turn you into a scarf."

"Human?" howled the Fox so close to the Dwarf's face that every word sputtered and spattered on him.

"Don't make me laugh. First, she appears to be a Witch, then she turns into some kind of stunning Princess right before our very eyes using nothing but moonlight! Do you remember that?"

"I do."

"Well, then, she's not a human being at all, she's a chameleon!"

"That's just the way witch powers work," said the Dwarf, "Now leave me alone! I'm studying."

The fox stared at him for a moment, silently.

"Then I will ask you about some other matter entirely."

"Which is?"

"Could you please give us another demonstration of what you have learned so far? I'm bored."

The Dwarf finally looked up from his book.

"Well, fine, if it rids me of your complaining!"

The Black Fox jumped up and down with joy and then excitedly took a seat in front of him. He was no longer feeling hungry.

"Good. Now, look here.!"

The Dwarf took a peach and immersed it in a bucket of water. He carefully sat down next to it on his knees and then stretched out his arms to the moon, meanwhile uttering the book's spell out loud - "Simsala Bim!" - and snapped his fingers.

What happened next was that the water in the bucket began to suck up so much moonlight that the room started to get dimmer.

The Fox moved closer to the bucket to see what was going on with this light-imbibing peach. With his snout perched on its edge, he groaned with pleasure. In the meantime, the water had already acquired a silvery sheen. But even more impressive was how a single shoot emerged from the bucket.

The peach shoot kept growing, now rising far above the water and kept growing until it was clearly forming a small tree, as wide as the bucket itself. To the Fox's and the Dwarf's astonishment, roots broke through the bottom of the bucket, lodging themselves into the floorboards.

"Amazing! Fantastic!" cried the Fox as he ran in circles out of sheer delight, "That was great! Do it again!"

The Dwarf himself couldn't quite believe what he had managed to do.

"I..." he stuttered, but he wouldn't finish his sentence.

"That was indeed a most incredible achievement," said a cold voice from the windowsill.

The Fox and the Dwarf looked back. A small white snake with red eyes slid down from the open window. The Black Fox and the Dwarf did not know what to say to an uninvited person who immediately made himself so at home in their tower.

“But what you're going to do with a peach tree in the middle of the room?” the snake asked with a juicy melody in his voice.

Said the Dwarf gently: “I... I didn't think of that.”

But the Fox didn't entertain the snake's questions.

“Who are you and what are you going to do here in my tower?” he asked, ears flattened.

“Your tower?” the snake asked, sliding further into the room.

“Yes, my tower,” replied the Fox angrily, “I got it fair and square, snake.”

“Oh,” said the snake, slithering towards the tree in the bucket, “Is that so?”

“Listen, here, snake. Whether I was gifted the tower, bought it or...”

“Stole it?” the snake threw in.

“I was going to say *built it*,” said the Fox, “It doesn't matter. It is mine. Now who are you and what are you doing here?”

As if the snake hadn't heard what the Fox had just said, he slithered further into the room, undisturbed.

“I'm merely a friend,” said the snake, “With a few questions and... requests.”

“A friend we've never met before,” the Dwarf said, looking at the Fox.



"Don't you know the saying: strangers don't exist, they're all friends you haven't met yet?" the snake hissed with a thin smile.

Thereupon the snake took a bow. The Black Fox and the Dwarf stared in silence, close together, shivering at the cold sight of forced politeness.

"Well, if you don't want to call me a friend just yet, feel free to call me... a *helper* of sorts," said the snake, who now started to wrap himself around the bucket.

Suddenly the leaves of the tree began to discolor and turned yellow, red and then brown until they fell off one by one. More and more the tree began to wither and shrink. All the while, the snake rotated around the trunk, which became more crooked and crooked, smaller and smaller until the snake himself splashed into the water of the bucket along with the tree.

The Black Fox and the Dwarf watched in horror as a moment later, the snake came out of the bucket and slithered towards them with the dry and wrinkled peach in its mouth. Then, as no one dared break the tense silence in the room, with one bite he cracked it between its teeth and loudly swallowed it whole.

"You're welcome," said the snake, taking another bow with its little white head.

"Thank you," said the Dwarf hesitantly. The Black Fox said nothing.

"Now, there was one thing I still wanted to ask you."

"What on earth could you possibly ask of us?" Sneered the Fox.

"Please, allow me to explain. As it so happens, I met someone who once lived in this tower. She asked me to get some things for her."

"Do you know the Witch?" asked the Fox.

The snake remained still for a moment and slid closer over the creaking floorboards to them.

"In a way, yes," said the snake.

"Is it so or is it not?" asked the Fox, but the serpent ignored him and directed all his questions to the Dwarf.

"I'm looking for a fairy tale book," said the snake, "A fairy tale book full of prints. I see you like to read. You probably know best where such a beautiful book could be hiding in this little tower."

"Little?!" gasped the Fox.

The Dwarf noticed he had clung to the book he had been reading close to his chest with both his hands, rather like a shield.

"My friend, do this for me and I will show you many wonderful things, as I have just shown you."

Scared of the snake, the Dwarf couldn't bring himself to say a single word.

"Yes, Dwarf, imagine what I can teach you!"

The Fox looked at the Dwarf, who was still staring into the eyes of the serpent. The snake did not blink for a moment.

"Take your book and leave us alone!" cried the Fox, breaking the long stare between the two.

"When I have my fairy tale book, I will no longer burden you with my presence. I wouldn't want to overstay my welcome," the snake hissed with a smile.

"I think... I think I might have seen one in the next room," stuttered the Dwarf.

"Wonderful," said the serpent, "After you."

The serpent let the Dwarf lead the way as the Fox also followed them from a distance and watched. He saw how the snake, looking at the stacks of books already grabbed two to three of them and placed them in a most peculiar silver box, which he then quickly swallowed again.

The Fox did not even wonder how such a small snake could gobble up a silver box of about three books in size. He only wanted the snake out of his tower.

The belly of the snake became smaller and smaller, until it became as thin and slippery as before.

"Thank you, kind gentlemen," he said, "That's all I need... for the time being."

"*Bon voyage!*" said the Fox quickly.

The Dwarf only looked on timidly.

The snake slid back to the window and said:

"I left a gift for you at the front door. You both look so incredibly hungry that I couldn't resist!"

And the snake disappeared into the night.

The Dwarf and the Black Fox quickly ran downstairs to take a look and just as the snake had said, on the welcoming mat just in front of the door lay three dead rabbits, two dead mice and a frog.

"Is that what you like to eat?" asked the Dwarf.

"Sometimes, yes," replied the Black Fox, "But I've lost my appetite."



# Sealed fate

In the very middle of the Empire stood the great and magnificent City of Stars in the midst of all the land that belongs to it. From there, the four kingdoms were governed: the Kingdom of Spears, the Kingdom of Coins, the Kingdom of Swords, and the Kingdom of Cups. Beyond that were only the wild forests, the free villages and the unknown lands.

“But there is no such thing as a Kingdom of Hearts,” one of the counselors said to a prisoner who was chained with both hands and feet against the cold dungeon walls. His voice sounded as cold as the cell itself.

“At least not that we know of!”

The Emperor proud and smooth face was now emaciated, with a beard as long as his forearms. The clothes he was still wearing from the ball were now nothing more than dirty rags. Five counselors looked down on him. They had all covered their noses with perfumed handkerchiefs because of the stench that hung heavily in the dungeon.

One of them had crouched down to speak face to face with the Emperor. At least, if the Emperor bothered to look back up at him. Motionless and silent he remained, almost as if he were asleep with both eyes open. He didn't even look at the finely dressed counselors, even finer than he remembered them when they were still serving him. He looked only to the corner of his cell where a small ghostchild stood on the tips of his toes to peek outside through the small window.

“We are at this very moment building Counsel Halls in all the free villages at the outskirts of our Empire. All those little towns you didn't deem important enough for your