



Chapter 1

Without fanfare or fuss, spring slipped silently into summer. Brogwin Frayney and his best friend, Prince Jocko, lounged on the east lawn on the upwind side of the castle's moat, swatting at the occasional fly or bumble bee. Both boys knew the young prince should be heading for his father's library for his afternoon's lessons but, as the sun shifted slightly westward, they remained reclining on the grass, feeling lazy and almost under the spell of the abundance of sunshine and azure skies. The freshly shorn sheep contentedly nibbled the clover and forbs nearby, oblivious to the prince and royal food taster gazing at them.

With a long, loud yawn and a groan of annoyance, Brogwin rolled onto his back. "I be bored!" he shouted at the clouds. "Nothing ever happens here. Nothing."

"There be many things happening, Broggie," Prince Jocko sounded cheerful. "Do you not hear the hammering of the carpenters building the grandstands for the upcoming jousting tournament? That will be thrilling indeed. And look at that little urchin thither," he said indicating a hedgehog scampering toward a blueberry bush.

Brogwin glanced at the creature. "What of it?"

"Shhh," the prince whispered, not taking his eyes from the wee animal. The hedgehog stood on its hind legs, its front legs shook the blueberry bush, sending down a shower of little round blueberries.

"See? This is what I meant. Nothing happens here. Woe! Are we to find fascination in a lowly hedgehog?"

"Thou art too impatient. The tournament will be exquisitus."

"But it be more than a week hence. You know that summer days drag on forever."

The prince ignored his friend's complaining and watched as the small brown animal lay on its back and rolled across the scattered blueberries, skewering them with its spiny quills.

"Clever bugger," Jocko said softly.

"Bit difficult to eat them like that," Brogwin said dismissively.

"She's a lovely mummy hedgehog who will now return to her babies and let them feed off her back."

Brogwin scrunched his face.

"What offends thee?" Prince Jocko asked.

"I know not which be worse, the baby urchins feeding off their mother's quills, or the giddy tone of thy voice. How old are you?"

Prince Jocko narrowed his eyes at his friend. "Perhaps forging a bond with your more gentler side will stand you well in life, laddie."

Brogwin rolled his eyes, then turned his gaze to the road that led from the bridge to Calais. A flash of movement had caught his attention. Sepia clouds of dust billowed upward on that grassless road. "Do my mistaking eyes see Sir Rackham returning from France?" he wondered aloud, squinting into the early afternoon sunlight.

Prince Jocko caught his companion's gaze but saw nothing. "Broggie, though there be wicked trolls under yon bridge, should the King or Queen command thee to cross it, would you?"

Without hesitation Brogwin laid his right fist over his heart. "By my faith, my allegiance is to my most beloved and honored King and Queen. Bravely would I cross yonder Bridge to Calais."

Prince Jocko rocked back and laughed at his friend's attempt at daring. "With a phalanx of knights to protect thee."

Brogwin's cheeks pinked. "And what of you?" he asked, quick to shift the focus from his failed boast.

"Me? Remember, Broggie, I shall one day be King of Wagetania and as King, I cannot be fearful of a troll, no matter how wicked."

"It would be well that you do not settle your princely bottom prematurely onto that throne, Jocko. For I am privy as well to your fear of witches, gargoyles, gryphons, wyverns and dragons." He enumerated on his fingers for emphasis.

"Only a fool would not fear those things," Prince Jocko replied. "Even with this to protect me," he said and fingered the small black crystal on the leather cord round his neck. "I am smart enough to be fearful of dreadful monsters."

"This be goodly news, Jocko." Brogwin yawned and stretched. "For your future may well depend upon more than a piece of black crystal from your father's magician."

"Do you doubt Crenwell's magic?" Prince Jocko asked.

Brogwin shrugged. "I know not if Crenwell is a true magician or if he has a distracting manner and skillful swift hands."

"Ah, but he has one trick up his bliaut sleeve," Prince Jocko said and looked about, making sure they were far enough from the crenellated castle wall that no guard or sentry could hear him. "He has managed to keep the Duke of Dunstable a believer." Prince Jocko mocked the Duke with an impression of his being surprised and delighted by some sleight of hand performed by Crenwell.

Brogwin cackled.

Prince Jocko covered his ears. "Prithee, do not keak like a dying swan."

"A dying swan wouldst more like make a honking sound than a keak," Brogwin corrected his friend. "Though should you mention Dunstable and Crenwell again, methinks there may be more keaking. And to be clear," he said as he got to his feet, "is Dunstable the magician keeping Crenwell in awe or vice versa?" He shielded his eyes with the flat of his hand and squinted into the distance. "Jocko, look!"

The prince changed direction of his gaze to where Brogwin pointed. Clouds of dry earth rose up around an approaching red caravan pulled by a lone horse. "Who is it, do you suppose? Is it Sir Rackham home from his quest?" The prince's curiosity now piqued, strained to identify the visitor. "Well, if so, it be high time. And you say nothing of interest happens hither."

Brogwin rolled his eyes at Jocko. "Sir Rackham at the reins of a red gypsy wagon? Unlikely, Jocko."

"His horse could have suffered an injury. Perhaps the wagon was necessary to carry home his many treasures from afar."

“He was sent on a mission, you blue-billed booby, not a haggling with merchants expedition.”

Jocko pretended he did not hear his friend’s remark. “Whoever it be, they come a swift pace.”

As it drew closer the boys could see the ornate floral carvings at the forecarriage of the crimson wooden caravan. The yellow wooden wheels bumped over the rutted dirt road causing a clanking of crockery and tin pots to reach the boys’ ears.

“It’s one of the gypsies,” Brogwin said, having seen their colorful wagons on the few occasions he had gone to the market in town to help his mother, the royal cook, stock up on supplies. “He’s driving his horse too hard,” Brogwin said under his breath and chewed his thumbnail. The boys saw the driver whip the horse’s right flank to hurry him onward.

“Irish Traveler,” Prince Jocko said. “Always have I been curious what the interior of their vardos look like. I hear some are quite palatial with gold ceilings and silk cushions.”

“Something tells me thou wouldst not find those things within this wagon,” Brogwin whispered.

“No,” the prince agreed. “Why does he come hence? And in such haste? Is it trouble brewing?” Prince Jocko wondered as the caravan passed them and barreled over the drawbridge.

“Tie not thy chausses in a tangle, Jocko. You be borrowing worry.” Brogwin sucked his teeth. “Did you see? That poor horse is shoeless.” He tsked at the rags tied around the animal’s hooves.

Prince Jocko dusted the seat of his wool chausses and watched as the guards stood before the lowered portcullis, their halberds held firmly across their chests, refusing him entry. The boys inched their way nearer to the drawbridge that spanned the moat.

“I have business with the king,” the driver announced with importance. The man’s *I* said as *Oy* told Brogwin that Prince Jocko was right, the man hailed from Ireland.

“What sort of business?” one of the guards asked, eyeing the driver with suspicion while the other guard peered in the window of the caravan. A third and fourth guard appeared and held the harness of the lone draft horse.

“That’s between me and my king.” The defiance in the man’s tone told the guards he was serious and would not back down.

“*Your* king? You’re not from here with that accent.”

“Born in Ireland I be, ‘tis true. But come to Wagetania as a young lad. This is where I’ve built me home and business and where me four bairns were born.”

The guards mumbled amongst themselves.

“I can’t hear a thing,” Prince Jocko complained and gave Brogwin a gentle shove. “Move closer to uncover the mystery.”

Brogwin scurried up the grassy lawn and across the drawbridge. “Good morrow to you, kind sir,” he said to the caravan driver and gave a slight bow. He took in the state of the man’s worn green leggings and tattered, coarse brown tunic and surmised the man was experiencing hard times. “If you will permit me to introduce myself, I am Brogwin Frayney, royal food taster to the King and Queen. Might I intercede on your behalf?”

“You know the cook?”

“Intimately, sir. The fair lady is my own dear mother. Have you business with her?”

“Ay,” the driver said and indicated the rear of the wagon. “Me eldest daughter, Irmagarde, starts today in the scullery as has been arranged and agreed to by yer own dear mother and meself a week ago Wednesday.”

Brogwin walked to the back of the caravan, climbed up on the rear step and peered in the window. A plump girl of Brogwin's age sat on a chair, her face buried in a book. He saw scattered broken crockery and a few tin pots at her feet. "Hei-ho," he called through the open window in the back door.

Irmagarde looked up and startled, dropped the book and bumped her forehead on the table when she bent to lift it. "Oh, dear," she cried and got to her feet. She curtsied and lost her footing and gripped the chair back to steady herself. "Ouch!" Brogwin gave a silent wince as she lifted a foot and removed a shard of crockery from the soft sole of her worn brown slipper. "Daft clumsy oaf," she muttered. "Drivin' too fast, that's what's done it. Look at this mess. Well, if he t'inks I be the one to clean it..."

"Ho there," Brogwin said, unable to hide the smile from his lips.

Irmagarde gasped and wobbled. A rose glow consumed her cheeks. She worked a stray lock of auburn hair back beneath her magenta kelt with nervous fingers and swiped at her dress made from the same rough material as her father's tunic.

Brogwin smiled. All the females in the castle, except for Queen Cecilie and other nobility, wore headdresses and caps of white or gray. He was struck by the rich hue of Irmagarde's and felt it suited her. "Are you here to work in the kitchens, miss?"

"Miss? Well, I never." Irmagarde let fly a loud laugh, then covered her mouth. "O! Beggin' yer pardon, m'lord." She reprised the curtsy and staggered a bit. "Ay. I mean, yes, sir. Me da arranged it with the lady what does the cookin' for the king and queen."

Brogwin nodded and jumped down to the ground. He walked up front to the driver. "What other business have you with our king?"

The man looked from Brogwin to the guards and back. "And who be you to be askin' a man as meself?"

"Brogwin Frayney."

"I know t'at name," the man said and pursed his lips in thought.

Brogwin nodded. "Yes, you said you spoke with my mother, Mrs. Alvina Frayney."

"Oh, ay, I did do, but I know it from somewhere other, like." He tapped his lips and gazed pensively up at the sky. "Frayney, Frayney... Archer! That be it! The fella what makes the crossbows. He was of the name Frayney." His smile showed how pleased he was he remembered. "Be you related?"

The guards muttered and shuffled their feet.

"What?" the man asked, unaware he'd said something wrong.

"Fordwyn Frayney, artillator to the King, was my father."

The man's features darkened. "Was? O! I be sorry for yer loss, lad. He wert a fine fellow from what I could tell and a master craftsman he was." He slid his brown cap from his head, crossed himself and nodded solemnly. "Illness?"

"Murder," Brogwin said. His hands tightened into fists at his sides.

The man gasped in unison with the guards. "God rest his soul," he said softly.

"It be true and you know it," Brogwin addressed the guards, then returned his gaze to the gypsy.

"Terrible tragic, young lad, terrible." The gypsy shook his head in sympathy.

Brogwin cleared his throat and rested his fist upon his heart. "Your words ring true, good sir. Pray tell how you didst know my father."

"I be a tinker by trade and we come to meet in town as I recall. He said he wert in need of a fletcher and a bowyer and was I interested. 'Tis true I was flattered, but as a Traveler, I can't

abide workin' for anyone but meself. No one to boss me, you see? 'cept my dear departed wife. She's gone to heaven now so I don't hear a t'ing from her no more."

Brogwin understood. "I am sorry for your loss. Now, what business do you desire with the king?"

The man tapped the side of his nose. "From my lips to His Majesty's ears. And I would like to get on with it. A busy man I be with an arduous journey afore me. Sixteen days' travel to Dublin I have and I only pray this old nag returns me home with me new bride in a month's time, I do."

"Your journey's start needs only wait a moment more," Brogwin said and gestured for the guards to keep the man and his caravan at the gate. "O! What be thy name, good sir?"

"O'Hare, Squire Frayney. Cormac O'Hare, tinker extraordinaire." He grinned at the boy.

Brogwin repaid the smile and ran down the lawn to where Prince Jocko stood blowing against the spine of a shiny green leaf, trying to make it whistle.

"That's poison ivy, you canary-brained hogwort," Brogwin said breathlessly when he reached his friend. "You should know that from a mile off."

The prince spit and shot the leaf from his hands. He wiped his lips against his sleeve, his eyes bright with alarm.

Brogwin laughed and pointed at the horrified look on his friend's face.

"We are not amused, Broggie. Now, give us the news."

"As you surmised he's an Irish Traveler. Named Cormac O'Hare – tinker extraordinaire, says he - who hath brought his daughter to work in the kitchen as arranged with my mother. And he also wants a word with your father."

"And the guards are less than eager to admit him within the castle gate?"

"It appears so. Methinks some of the guards believe the tall tales that besides fortune telling, gypsies possess the power of magic spells. Mayhap they think he will turn your father into a toad."

Prince Jocko raised an eyebrow at his friend. "And your sense of him?"

Brogwin shrugged. "Despite his gruff exterior, he seems earnest to me."

"Then you shall signal the guards that he be admitted within and accompany him to the throne room whence my good father gives audience to his subjects. Then report back to me hither. I be curious as to his secret mission. And thou says nothing ever happens here."

Brogwin gave his friend a slight push and ran toward the vardos waiting at the portcullis. On Brogwin's message from Prince Jocko, the guards raised the vertical iron and wood gate and stood aside to allow the creaking caravan to enter the castle grounds. The rattling, brightly colored wagon attracted the notice of a number of other guards and they came near to inspect it. Mr. O'Hare was directed where to leave his horse and wagon.

"Normally I would bid thee come nigh," he told the guards, "to inspect me wares – made by me – tinker extraordinaire – of only the finest materials. But today I have business with our King, I do." He jumped down from the caravan seat and strode behind Brogwin.

Brogwin helped Irmagarde down from the wagon with her one small bundle of belongings. She wiggled her book inside the parcel and carried it at her side as she walked between Brogwin and her father.

"Do ye t'ink me blind to that book, girl?" Irmagarde's father whispered from the side of his mouth as they neared the herb garden outside the scullery. "Didst I not tell thee to forget about thy books and keep ye mind on thy work? They don't want a maid with airs above her station."

Irmagarde lowered her head and silently kept pace with Brogwin and her father.

“Knowledge be muchly regarded hither in the castle, sir,” Brogwin said gently. “The King and Queen encourage all of their subjects to pursue learning.”

“I don’t read,” the man said flatly. “And it hasn’t kept me back.”

Brogwin pressed his lips together to keep from sounding disrespectful. “This is where we grow the herbs for cooking, poultices, and other medicinal purposes.” His gesture took in the many neat green rows of herbs, each marked with its name in French.

“Chardon des champs,” Irmagarde read aloud. “Milk thistle.”

“And this?” Brogwin paused at a row.

“Crème casquette herbe,” she read out. “Skull cap.”

“Exquisitus!” Brogwin cried and beamed at her.

“Be not a hufty-tufty,” Mr. O’Hare warned his daughter.

“It be not bragging, sir,” Brogwin assured the man. “I asked her to read the sign. Thou wilt be of much help in the kitchen, Irmagarde. Many are the recipes in French and not all the folk in the kitchen can read French.” He was pleased when she smiled. “Ah, here we are. Mind the step. The entrance to the scullery and kitchens, and then on to the throne room just through there.”

“Make it quick, girl. I’ve a long road to travel and little time.”

Irmagarde looked up at her father, lips parted to speak, but he gave her his back and, in a few wide strides, disappeared through the doorway and into the corridor.

Brogwin noticed Irmagarde’s chin quiver and hoped she wouldn’t burst into a flood of tears. He had never been in the presence of a crying girl before and feared he wouldn’t know what to do. “Well, he most like be eager to set off.”

Irmagarde nodded. “Ay, he’s goin’ to Dublin to bring back me mammy’s sister to be me new mammy. There’s t’ree younger ones than me at home and they need a mammy.”

“Oh,” was all Brogwin could think to say to that news. “Come! To the kitchen with you.”

“Be yer mammy a kindly woman?” Irmagarde asked quietly.

“Nay, she be a dreadful beast who runs after the kitchen maids with a carving knife and snips at their fingers when they chop the vegetables too large or too small.”

Irmagarde shrieked and backed away.

Brogwin laughed and nudged her shoulder. “My mother be a wondrous soul. Kind and gentle and patient to a fault. Ah, Mrs. Frayney, here be Irmagarde O’Hare, your new kitchen help.”

Alvina Frayney smiled upon her son and then the girl. “Well, now, welcome, Irmagarde O’Hare. And aren’t you as fair as thy father said.”

Irmagarde’s mouth hung open at the compliment she never heard from her father’s own lips. She roused herself to curtsy, lost her balance and stumbled. Brogwin steadied her.

“First things first, Brogwin, take her to the bathman.”

Irmagarde gasped, her crimson cheeks belying her embarrassment. “O! But missus, I vow I washed meself afore I come. Proper like.”

Mrs. Frayney laid a gentle hand on the girl’s arm. “That is as may be, child, but if you are to be handling and preparing food for our King and Queen, thou must be as clean as a whistle. I say *bathman*, but there be women to help you as well. Afterwards, you shall be fitted with new clothes...” She glanced down at Irmagarde’s snug shoes, “and new shoes.”

“O! Missus, I be sore ashamed but I fear I haven’t a silver penny for neither clothes nor shoes.” Irmagarde buried her face in her hands and wept.

“Now, now, Irmagarde, you must not cry. You be not expected to pay a penny, silver or not. Our good and kind King and Queen fit all who work in the castle with clothes.”

“O! They be grand altogether,” Irmagarde said and dried her tears.