

CAPTIVES OF THE FERN QUEEN

Chapter 1

A Bad Morning

“Over there.” Twelve-year-old Janna glowed with anticipation as she herded the last few kids behind the schoolhouse. If they sat between the big laurel bushes, their teacher wouldn’t be able to see them through a window. Janna had looked forward to this too long to have it spoiled by adult interference.

Two runaways darted away from the group. She panted as she ran after them and pulled them back. It didn’t help that her waistband was digging into her stomach. That button needed to be moved over again.

Whew! The kids were finally in place, but she’d have to catch their attention fast or they’d scatter. Fortunately, Janna was an expert at catching people’s attention. She’d just add an interesting detail or two to her history lesson.

“Long gray hairs grew out of the man’s nostrils and drifted to either side when he breathed.”

It was a very good beginning. Everyone was listening, but unfortunately, she wasn’t the only one with an imagination. The boys clutched at their noses and started sneezing. Presumably, their nasal hair was undergoing a growth spurt, and the resulting nasal explosions made the grass tremble in front of them.

Janna shook her head. “Little boys,” she said scornfully, which was possibly a mistake because the sneezing got louder.

Janna was the oldest student left in her school. The other older students had dropped out as soon as lambing season began. Obviously, sheep were more important than learning in the

Kingdom of Mount Pasture. Janna had argued that as one of the largest kingdoms in Montaland, the mountain world, Mount Pasture should have better values, but nobody had paid any attention to her despite the fact that she was twelve-and-a-half now and the only child of the king and queen.

Today was the last day before summer vacation—her last chance to tell the old stories. She glared at the misbehaving boys. It must have been a really good glare. One by one, the sneezers fell silent. Two of the girls were pretending to comb their nostril hair, but that was a quiet activity that could be ignored.

In a low, eerie voice, Janna continued, though this time she stuck to the facts.

“He had a wart on one side of his nose. It had hairs growing out of it too, but they were short and blood red. He prowled at night through the woods, searching for travelers.”

Janna’s voice lowered even more.

“The Stalker did not allow trespassers.”

She had their attention again. All but one of the five-, six-, and seven-year-olds had moved closer together. There was a dramatic pause. Janna knew how to tell a story. Pausing dramatically was a very effective tool in setting a mood, but before she could continue, her pause was interrupted.

“That ol Stalker wasn’t real,” scoffed the one boy who hadn’t moved. “My brother says those ol stories were made up by someone who wanted to scare people.”

“Be quiet, Benk.”

Janna pushed a wayward strand of brown hair behind her ears and continued before he could say anything else.

“The Stalker had spent his life putting together potions and powders that would serve his evil purposes. When he found trespassers, he threw a powder in their faces that subdued them. Then he led them to his cave under a mountain. Deep inside the cave, they passed what was left of their lives, and the Stalker’s face, leering at them over a wavering candle flame, was the last thing they ever saw.”

Two of the five-year-olds’ lips were quivering. Perhaps it was time to change the subject.

“Now I’ll tell you about animals from the high home,” Janna announced, her green eyes shining in anticipation. “They were sent to help the first settlers in Montaland. Our ancestors were from a whole different world, you see, and needed help. So each type of animal was given a special gift that—”

She was interrupted again, this time by a remarkably good imitation of a rude frog.

“Alland says those ol stories about talking animals are make-believe too.”

“Quit croaking, Benk! Alland doesn’t know anything about our mountain world’s history, which isn’t surprising since he left school years ago and forgot in a week what little he’d learned before he left.”

Janna’s voice was rising. She made herself take a deep breath and calm down. She was talking to Benk, after all, a seven-year-old boy whose father had died three years ago. Allowances had to be made. His big brother, however, was fifteen and ought to know better. She would have a thing or two to say to Alland the next time she saw him.

“It was only the cream-colored horses who could talk,” she explained. “The other high-home animals understood what people said but couldn’t talk to them. I’ve always loved blueflame birds the best. Their feathers were as bright as the flames that flicker blue in the heart of a fire. The very sight of a blueflame lifted people’s spirits so much that it changed their lives.

Not many were seen, though. They were heard more often, but that was special too. Their song was piercingly beautiful. The history books said it was so beautiful it broke people's hearts.

"Then there were the lizards," she went on without stopping for breath. "They popped up often in the old tales, guiding people places, but the most interesting thing about them was that they didn't have ordinary eggs; they had beautiful jewel eggs that could revive a person on the brink of starvation. High-home deer could run impossibly fast. That's the only thing I know about them. There's a great story about a long-legged water bird, but it takes too much time to tell now. I saw something about sheep once that I wasn't very interested in, and I know I read a paragraph somewhere about wolves, but—"

The absorbed teacher was interrupted yet again, this time by an extremely rude frog.

"Alland says—" Benk began, but Janna had taken everything she could take from either Alland or Benk.

"Quit croaking, and quit interrupting me when I'm teaching a lesson." Janna frowned at the small boy.

"You're not our teacher and it's not lesson time; it's morning break," argued Benk. The rest of the students nodded. "We're supposed to be playing."

"But these stories are a part of our past and nobody else is teaching them to you," Janna countered.

"That's because they're not real!" an eight-year-old shouted.

"They are real! They're in the Montaland history books!"

"We could tell the teacher what she's doing," a six-year-old said.

“Too much trouble—let’s go play,” yelled Benk, and the rebellious history class scattered. As they went, someone who still sounded a great deal like a frog sang out, “Chirp, chirp, chirp, let me break your chubby heart.”

It was a catchy tune, and the two words, “chirp” and “chubby,” both started with a *ch* sound. Alliteration, their teacher would have called it. In any case, the other kids started singing it too, whether they knew about alliteration or not. Janna was sure they emphasized the word “chubby.”

She sprang to her feet as quickly as she could, given the fact that her skirt had somehow wrapped itself around her knees. It wasn’t her fault that she was overweight, but there was no point in defending herself. She’d learned that the hard way. *If my button pops . . .*

Yanking her skirt free of her knees as she stumble-hopped away was not the exit she would have chosen, but as soon as her legs could move freely again, she ran away through the woods, trying to hold in her stomach.

The path to the road was on the other side of the schoolhouse. On this side, she had to crash through undergrowth and snap past thin branches, but Janna was in precisely the sort of mood to crash and snap, so she didn’t care. She didn’t realize she was crying until she got near the road. Hastily, she wiped the tears away. However, she didn’t quit moving as she wiped her eyes, and the result was that she charged right out of the trees into the side of a large female sheep.

There was a whole flock in the road, she belatedly noticed, as the ewe stared at her.

“Janna, please don’t hurt my sheep,” Alland said as he strolled up, following his herd.

“Sheep are stupid,” Janna said, but the princess of Mount Pasture hadn’t lived twelve-and-a-half years in a shepherding kingdom without learning that if one sheep got scared and bolted, the rest would follow.

She waited silently until the ewe decided that this person who had run into her wasn’t a threat and continued ambling down the road. Then Janna continued her tirade.

“They stink too! I don’t know why Mount Pasture doesn’t raise horses!”

“Not much wool on a horse,” the young shepherd pointed out.

Janna groaned. Shepherds never thought about anything except sheep and wool. They didn’t have brains. She’d realized that long ago. Their heads were tightly stuffed with—

“Is school out already?” Alland asked in a more friendly tone of voice.

He was obviously trying to change the subject, which would have been a good idea if his question hadn’t reminded Janna—

“Why did you tell Benk the old stories are make-believe? They’re in the history books. Alland, you know that!”

“Yes, I believe you might have mentioned it once or twice,” he said in the drawl that never failed to irritate her. “But I don’t think those stories are meant to be taken literally. Montaland history is pretty dull reading. Someone must have wanted to spice things up. Besides, some of the stories frighten children, especially the way you tell them.”

“But you’re saying the high-home animals are make-believe too,” Janna said, ignoring his description of her storytelling skills, which could—at a stretch—be considered a compliment. “They’re not scary, and besides, the old stories are real. I know they are. The people of Mount Pasture refuse to believe in them because they’re blind to anything out of the ordinary.”

“When did you last see anything out of the ordinary?” Alland asked over his shoulder as he followed his flock.

Janna was stumped only for a moment.

“The castle garden wall—it hides a tunnel from the Stalker’s old kingdom. His daughter built the tunnel before we beat her in the old wars, and then one of our kings blocked its entrance with an unusually big wall.”

“You believe that too?” Alland asked in amusement, turning to walk backward a few steps. “That garden wall is certainly big, but I figure someone had an obsession with tall, thick walls. Maybe the builder made a measuring mistake and refused to admit it.”

“It hides the Fern Queen’s tunnel,” Janna insisted hotly.

A lamb suddenly ran off the road into the woods, and the young shepherd had to run after it. By the time he caught the lamb and rejoined his herd, he was too far away to do anything but wave.

Janna didn’t wave back. She stood where she was, wrinkling her nose at a nearby mound of droppings. The sheep had scattered similar stinky deposits along the road, and since Alland’s fields were on the far side of the castle, she knew she’d be dodging sheep poop all the way home.

Her cheeks were wet again. Janna dried them, then made herself take several deep calming breaths until Alland and his flock walked out of sight around a curve in the road.

Far away, above the peak of the highest mountain in Montaland, a blueflame flickered. It was a small flame, and it didn’t really flicker as much as it quivered. The air was thin at that altitude. Wings had to move constantly just to stay in one place. The bright blue bird quivered its wings and waited.

“Show yourself.”

The voice wasn't particularly loud. Still, the air shook, and a huge mound of snow broke away from the icy peak and thundered down the mountainside. The bird wasn't surprised at the power behind the words, but it was surprised at the words themselves. Both wings stilled and the small body dropped three feet before recovering.

No one in the mountain world had seen a bird of its kind in years. At least, they hadn't seen anything more than a blur of blue that was generally blamed on dust in the eye.

“Just once, little one, and only to her. Then you may hide again.”

In answer, the bird sang its song, the piercing one that broke people's hearts. As soon as it finished, it tilted its wings and sped away from the high peak. Slanting downward, the little blueflame darted past several more snowy peaks, then over range after range of midsized tree-covered mountains.

It wasn't until late in the afternoon that the bird reached the grassy slopes of the lowest hills in the mountain world. A wall appeared in the distance, looking like a child's toy, but as the bright wings dashed over the hills, the wall grew until it loomed above the ground, stone upon stone, surrounding a large garden next to a castle.

Swiftly, the blue bird flew past the tower window and into the garden, where it rested at last in the green leaves of a pear tree.