

The Secret to Atheness

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To my wonderful husband and daughter, you are my inspiration. Without you these pages would be blank.

Chapter One

Little waves crashed on the shore of a private cove. They danced around Princess Simona and Prince Varek's feet before being pulled back to the sea. The siblings giggled in delight as the waves washed over their feet again.

"Simona, Varek darling, brunch is set; come sit with your father and me." Queen Narcia called to her young children from under the shade of a silk tent. A small table was set in front of the King and Queen. The table was filled with decadent pastries, tea and sandwiches. The children obediently took their seats as two servants began to serve the group.

A conversation grew about the children's future as rulers. Prince Varek told wild stories of how he would protect every woman from the dragons and evil pixies. Princess Simona sat up tall and talked about how all the people needed to be protected, not just the women. "That's why you'll make such a great Queen someday, my sweet." King Damek said lovingly. The young Princess ran around the table and threw her arms around her father. "I love you, Daddy!" The King smiled sweetly and then laughed. "I love you, too." He looked over at Prince Varek. "I love both of you."

Varek jumped up and began running out of the tent towards the sea. "Bet you can't catch us, Daddy" Varek yelled, motioning for Simona to follow him. Simona wiggled out of the King's arms and ran after her brother. The King looked over at his wife and smiled sheepishly. The Queen smiled back and nodded her approval.

He stood up and began chasing his children through the crashing waves. He almost caught up with them, but slipped on some seaweed and fell, crown first, into the muddy shore. Varek and Simona paused a moment then laughed excitedly as he began to pull himself up.

Simona's eyes squinted at the setting sun, dropping into the sea. She snapped back to reality. She was no longer a ten year old child, playing on the beach. She was now an eighteen year old woman, sitting by the window of her castle.

She looked out at the mermaids in the lagoon below. She thought about how her great, great grandfather, King Alroy, built the castle many years ago just to overlook the mermaid lagoon. The mermaids seemed so happy and carefree in the lagoon; no worries to keep them down. She remembered the times her father would take her down to the lagoon, bringing a picnic lunch with them. They would spend hours talking about little things that were going on in their lives and about her future as Queen. The castle seemed quiet these days, since it was just her and her brother Varek, living in the castle, along with the many servants.

Her parents were killed two months prior and the causes were never known. Some say it was a wild animal, others say it might have been murder. Simona was now the next in line for the throne. Her brother, whom she seldom saw, was a couple years younger than she was. He had no interest in becoming King. In the land of Atheness, age was more important than being a man or a woman. Princess Simona, being the oldest, was now the next in line to be Queen.

She sighed sadly to herself; she was not ready to become Queen and to rule so many people. A knock at her door disturbed her thoughts.

"Enter if you wish", she said in a tone harsher than she intended. A young man dressed in servant attire entered the room and bowed as if on cue.

"Your majesty, I am sorry to disturb you, but it is time for your riding lesson. If it is convenient, can you please change and meet the instructor in ten minutes?"

He waited patiently for her response, standing as straight as he could without falling over. He had been a member of the court's

staff only a few days before the King and Queen's deaths. He knew that the Princess had left the staff on pins and needles ever since. Sometimes the servants would draw straws when it came to giving the Princess bad news. They all knew that she hated her riding lessons, so to his dismay, he got the short straw today.

She frowned, still looking out the window. "Very well, I'll be down soon."

The young man gave a sigh of relief; he then bowed and closed the door behind him, leaving Simona back to her unhappy thoughts.

She kept reliving the day her parents left, over and over again, trying to find some clue as to how they died, or better yet, who did it and why.

She brushed her long golden hair and looked blankly into the mirror, wishing none of this had ever happened. She had not planned on becoming Queen until she was well into her thirties. Being barely eighteen, she wasn't ready. Her parents had just begun to teach her how to rule when they left. Now her coronation was only two weeks away.

Varek hardly came around the castle anymore. Reports said he had now been missing for an entire week. He was very adventurous for a sixteen year old, and knew how to take care of himself. Nevertheless, Simona sent out a search party for him a few days before and still waited word. She couldn't lose anyone else. Varek was all she had left.

She opened her closet and pulled out a plain blue riding dress. After taking off her depressing black dress, she slipped the blue one over her head. She returned to the mirror and picked up a black ribbon as she carefully pulled her hair back. After adjusting the blue gem necklace she wore around her neck, she left her room as it was. She quietly walked down the large stair cases that lead to the main entryway of the castle. The same young man waited at the end of the stairs, to take her hand and escort her to her horse. Simona groaned to herself as she spotted her instructor.

“Is learning to ride really necessary?” Simona asked the young man.

“It is in your best interest, Princess, to learn this. You won’t always be entering from a carriage, you know.” He said, trying to sound as positive as he could. Simona said nothing.

“Princess Simona, I’m glad you made it today!” Her instructor said, a little too eagerly.

Simona just gave a fake smile as the young servant helped her up onto her horse. She held on tight to the reins when she got up and settled. She hated her lessons; her instructor was always difficult to please. Also, Simona couldn’t stand horses, they smelled and were not gentle, like cats were. *Why couldn’t I just get around in a carriage?* She thought to herself.

“Ok, Simona, today we are going to learn how to do jumps. It is really easier than it looks.”

The instructor slapped the back of the horse to get it to run. The horse got very scared and took off running. It ran as fast as it could until they could no longer be seen by Simona’s instructor and the young servant. All Simona heard was the instructor yelling something about turning the horse around, but she didn’t remember how. She held tightly to the reigns and closed her eyes.

The horse finally stopped several miles away from the castle, when it saw a nice patch of grass. Simona carefully got down and looked at her new surroundings. She was standing at the edge of a very dark forest. The trees were as dark as ebony with leafless branches that reached up and out in the strangest places, as if a child put them there. They were very crooked and some even intertwined with each other. On a thick branch sat a large black raven. The raven tilted its head forward and stared down at Simona with its small black eyes. Simona looked up at the raven and forced a smile. The raven let out a loud “caw”, and then flew off its branch and began to circle Simona. Simona screamed and tried to bat the bird away. The raven then began to glow and in a flash, turned into a very beautiful pixie, standing the same size as Simona.

Her long crimson hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail and flowed down, past her shoulders. She stood and stared at Simona before she spoke. "I didn't mean to scare you, Princess. I wanted to take the opportunity to express my regrets about your mother and father. It came as quite a shock to all of my people. Let me introduce myself; my name is Zendra, Queen of the pixies and ruler of the land of Rugonden". She bowed slightly to Simona and smiled. Her smile wasn't a comforting one as most smiles aim to be. Her smile was full of distrust and plotting.

Simona bowed to the Pixie Queen. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Queen Zendra." She paused for a few seconds before speaking again. "Yes, I've heard of you. My parents spoke of you once before. They said you can't be trusted. They told me you were banished by the fairies and soon became the ruler of Rugonden, followed by creatures of evil." Simona now realized what she had said and took a few steps back.

The Pixie laughed. "Oh, is that what they told you? Well, you mustn't believe everything you are told. Do I really look evil to you?"

"Well...no, you don't," Simona said, her voice still shaky. Despite the Queen's smile, she really didn't look evil at all. She looked almost friendly.

"Well Princess, you look a little shaken up. Horseback riding can do that to you. A horrible activity, I would say. It is not a thing you would see me doing. Come to my city and have a bite to eat. You look half starved," Queen Zendra said, holding out her hand to the Princess.

"Thank you, but I really must be getting back. They must be wondering where I am. I also need to see if my scouts found my brother yet." Simona said, apologetically.

"Well, maybe another time. My court will be most displeased to hear that they missed out on meeting the future Queen of Atheness. But I see you have more important things to do than visit with us.

I'm sure they will understand," The Queen said, starting to walk a few steps away. Then stopped and looked back at the Princess.

"Well, maybe I can stay for a few minutes, you know, just to make an appearance." Simona said, walking towards the pixie Queen.

Queen Zendra smiled that same smile Simona was unsure about, and then motioned for her to follow. They walked through the dead trees until a path made of black rocks, appeared on the ground. They followed the rocky trail up a hill where it stopped in front of a large dark fortress. The look of it made Simona shiver with fright. The fortress was made of the same black rocks as the path they followed. It stood over sixty feet high and was as wide as it was tall. There wasn't any visible towers, or pillars from the outside of the fortress, only heavy walls. The top of the fortress was surrounded by thick spikes. Dark stone gargoyles seemed to be glaring down at Simona. A loud horn was heard from the inside the fortress. The large gate then opened with a loud creak, as it let in their Queen and a visiting Princess. Two heavily armored guards stood on either side of the gate. Simona couldn't see who or what they were, but could see their long snout and sharp fangs sticking out from under their thick helmets.

"They are harmless, Princess. Now follow me to the dining room, while I get you something to eat." Queen Zendra said walking through the crowd of pixies and creatures that Simona had never seen before. They entered a room that was surprisingly bright and filled with color. A large table was set to the side, surrounded by high-back chairs.

"Sit here, Princess, while I talk to my cook about getting you a proper meal." A young pixie walked in, holding a golden plate with a single goblet placed upon it. Queen Zendra took the goblet and placed it in front of Simona. The goblet was filled with a thick, red liquid. "Drink this while your meal is prepared. It will calm you."

The pixie Queen left the room, leaving Simona alone with her drink. She sniffed the red liquid. It smelled of sweet wine. She placed the cup in front of her again. Something didn't seem right.

He parents wouldn't lie to her about Queen Zendra being bad. She stood up and quietly walked out of the room. She walked down the hall and then peered into a room that was filled with capes and armor. She quickly grabbed a long dark cape with a hood and placed it over her head and shoulders. She slipped out onto the streets, being careful to stay in the shadows. She knew that she couldn't just walk through the front gate to leave the fortress. As much as she didn't want to, she knew she needed a horse. She walked through the allies and around shops that sold types of magic drinks. She then came to what she was looking for; the stables.

She entered the stables unnoticed, and began looking for a horse that was the most calm of the bunch. A white horse in the farthest stable caught her eye. Its' stable had bars almost like a cage. As she neared it, she realized it wasn't a horse at all, but a Unicus, a unicorn with wings. The creature was very beautiful, but looked very sad. It turned and saw Simona staring at it. Its' ears perked up and put its' face as close as it could to Simona's. She looked into his big blue eyes and gasped.

“Varek, is that you?” Simona asked, shocked. It moved its head up and down, as if to nod a yes. “We have to get you out of here. Can you break down the door or is there a key someplace?” Simona asked her brother. Varek neighed and motioned his head to the entrance. Above the door was an iron ring with five iron keys. Simona ran over and grabbed the key ring, being careful not to make much noise. She went back to the cage that held her brother, and began to try the many keys. She tried the first key, but it was too big. She was about to place the second key into the lock, when the stable doors slowly begun to open. A large creature walked into the stables, holding a spear in his left hand. He looked almost like a man, except for two fangs that hung out of his mouth, like a bull dog. His dark hair was matted like a mop upon his head. He slowly looked around the stables. Simona quietly crawled to the other side of Varek's stable, and crouched down. The creature grunted and walked over to Varek's stall. He looked around for a second, with his flat black eyes and then turned and walked out of the stables, closing the door behind him. Simona gave a sigh of relief and picked up the keys again. She quickly placed the second key into the

lock and turned it to the right. It made a loud click, as it opened. She opened the door to the cage and Varek walked out.

“Do you know how to get out of here? Can you fly with those wings you have?” Simona asked climbing on to her brother’s back. He nodded once more and walked out of the stables. Varek stretched out his massive wings and jumped into the sky, just as the Queen and some of her servants walked out of the dining hall.

“Wait! You can’t leave yet!” The Queen yelled after them.

“I’m so glad I found you, Varek. Now we need to find out how to break this spell that’s on you.” Simona said, once they were out of site of the fortress. “I wish you could talk to me. How could something like this happen?”

They landed just outside of Queen Zendra’s realm. Simona got off and stretched her legs, as Varek began to pace back and forth, nervously. Simona began to think of where they could go to be safe and how to get there. Then she remembered it; Amos, the realm of the Butterfly Fairies. Her parents told them to go there, if they were ever in danger. The only problem was she didn’t know how to get there. “Maybe...” Simona started as she was cut off by a voice from behind.

“Maybe you shouldn’t leave without a proper goodbye, Princess. Didn’t your parents teach you any manners at all?” Queen Zendra said, leaning on a tree behind them. Simona gasped in astonishment. Simona tried to climb back on Varek’s back, but was pulled off by the Pixie Queen. The Princess fell to the ground with a thud. “Varek, fly away. Try to find Amos. I will find you there!” Simona yelled. Varek stood there, shocked. “Varek, go!” Simona yelled from the ground. Varek opened his wings and jumped into the air. Simona could see the pain in his eyes as he left his sister behind. Knowing her brother was safe; Simona jumped up and tried to run again. The Pixie Queen laughed.

“You foolish child, there is no where you can go, that I won’t find you.” Despite this, Simona ran. She ran as fast as her legs would

carry her. She looked over her shoulder and she couldn't see the Pixie Queen anymore. When she looked forward again, the Queen stood before her. She skidded to a stop, inches from the Queen.

“You just don't get it, do you Princess? You can't leave me. I can be anywhere within seconds. You can't defeat me. Now, you have something I want of yours.”

She pulled the necklace off Simona's neck, and put it on herself. Magically, Zendra began to change. Simona screamed as Zendra transformed, to look just like the Princess. It was like looking into the mirror. Two more pixies appeared next to Zendra. “Find Prince Varek, and bring him to me. I'm not threatened by the Princess; this was too easy.” The two pixies flew off in the direction that Prince Varek took.

“Now, I have a coronation to prepare for. My kingdom is waiting to crown me Queen of all Atheness. Oh, don't be sad. You never wanted to be Queen, anyway. I'm doing you a favor, really.” The Pixie Queen laughed and then disappeared into the woods.

Simona tried to speak, but her own voice didn't come out. She understood it, but she knew that no one else could. She had to think quickly. She knew she needed to find Varek before the Pixies did, and then get help. She realized that all her senses seemed heightened, somehow. She looked down at her feet, which were not feet at all but hoofs. Well, so much for the sense of touch, she thought. She was taught to remain calm in any situation, though she was never prepared for a situation like this. She tried to walk, but with four legs, she didn't know how to get them to move the way she wanted. She felt like a new born fawn who was taking its first steps in the world. She moved her front leg forward and then the opposite back leg. It worked and she moved up a step. She tried again, with the other side, but got her legs too close and she fell, face first, onto the dirt below. If only she had been interested in her riding lessons, she wouldn't be in this mess. Slowly, she managed to pull herself up and after what seemed like hours, learned how to walk and then progressed to running.

She was surprised at how fast she could run in this form. She was aware of her wings, just like Varek had, but she was too afraid to use them just yet. Varek would have to show her how to use them, if they didn't find a healer to fix the spell first. She had never been so far from home before and wasn't sure where Amos was. She stopped and looked up in the sky. The sky was as clear and as calm as she had ever seen it. She then heard a commotion of birds in a clearing up ahead. She followed the sound and saw the same pixies Queen Zendra sent out after her brother. They were stopped in the middle of a clearing and somehow had upset the birds that nested there.

"He stopped this way, I know he did!" One of the pixies yelled to the other.

"Sure, he did. I say we keep going straight. We can't go past the clearing or we'll be in the butterfly fairy territory. I don't want to be caught by them. They don't know of Queen Zendra's plan and we need to keep it that way. The boy is foolish; he'll never find Amos, let's keep going." The second fairy said, starting to fly back into the air again.

"Fine, fine, but if we find out that he did go to Amos, you are taking the blame for it. I don't want Zendra to find out we let him go."

"She never will. She is busy at the moment, posing as Princess Simona. Right now, they are rejoicing at her return and preparing for her coronation. She will forget about Varek as long as he doesn't show up at the palace. Besides, he will be a Unicus forever, anyway." Both the fairies laughed and flew through the forest.

Simona walked into the clearing, after the pixies were out of site. Amos is near, she thought. She turned to the sound of the bushes rustling. *Did they come back? Would they know it's her?* She thought in a slight panic. As she was about to run back to the shelter of the forest, another Unicus walked into the clearing. It was Varek.

“It’s about time you showed up. I have been hiding in a nearby cave for hours. I thought you knew how to get to Amos.” Prince Varek said, walking forward.

“How did you know how to get to Amos?” Princess Simona said, rather irritated that he never told her before.

“I’ve been there a few times, but that doesn’t matter now. We have to find Queen Adrianna and tell her what has happened. There’s going to be a battle in the near future. Maybe they know how to turn us back to humans again.”

Princess Simona nodded and followed her brother deep into the woods where beautiful purple flowers grew. Prince Varek then stopped in the middle and stomped his hoof four times. A door that seemed to appear out of thin air, opened. A tall male fairy stood at the doorway. His green wings glistened in the afternoon sunlight.

“My name is Chadwick. How may I be of service?”

“I am Prince Varek, and this is my sister, Princess Simona. We are very short of time. May we speak with your Queen at once?” Prince Varek asked pleased that they could understand him.

Chadwick bowed and led them into the castle. He led them through a beautifully decorated hallway and into the Queen’s chambers. As soon as the Queen saw the two Unicus’, she welcomed them in. Prince Varek wasted no time to tell their story and what Queen Zendra had done.

“This is very upsetting news. Chadwick, please go and send for the elders. We must have a meeting at once.”

“As you wish, my lady,” Chadwick bowed again and left the Queen, to prepare.

A grand council was called at the center of Amos. Princess Simona and Prince Varek stood on the side, to watch. Being magical beings,

the fairies understood their new language. The fairies sat in chairs that looked like giant leaves. The council was held in a small arena that was filled with all the high fairies of Amos. All was quiet when the Queen of the butterfly fairies stood up. They called her Queen Adrianna, which was the name she was given 600 years ago. Since fairies are immortal and can only die from magic, they age very slowly. Even though Adrianna was over 600 years old, she looked no more than 30. She was called the most grand and beautiful fairy in not only Amos, but all of Atheness. Her dark brown hair flowed from the top of her head to her mid-thigh. Her eye lashes were longer than most, which drew attention to her most exquisite eyes. Her body was slender and shapely and covered by a sleeveless red dress that stopped just above her knees. Her wings were almost the length of her body and full of color. They resembled those of butterfly wings.

She walked into the middle of the council, for all to see. She looked around the arena for a moment and saw other fairies watching from the trees. “Queen Zendra has stolen the key to Atheness from the royal court of Princess Simona.” She started, as the crowd gasped in amazed horror. She raised her hand to quiet the crowd and then continued, “We need to find a person that is pure of heart, is not afraid to believe in the unbelievable, and with a true spirit for adventure of the unknown.” A member of the council stood up. He was much older than Adrianna, but respected her very much. He pushed back his shoulder length white hair. “Where would we find such a person? There are none in all Atheness. Let me take a few of my men. We will fight her and get the key back! We have fought her before; I don’t see how this will be any different.” The crowd roared in agreement, but fell silent when Adrianna raised her hand again. The older fairy sat down.

“I appreciate your concern, Keanu, but we’re not just dealing with Queen Zendra. With the key in her hand, we don’t know what she is capable of. She has an army to protect her and a force of evil I have never imagined was possible. There isn’t much time. I found someone beyond our realm that will help us. She just doesn’t know it yet. I need your help to get her here...”

Chapter Two

(World of Man)

Katie awoke to the obnoxious beeping of her alarm. She fumbled around with her eyes half opened and turned it off. She looked over at her husband James, still fast asleep. She got out of bed and opened her closet. She pulled out a pink tee-shirt and some blue jeans. Then slowly put them on in the half lit room. Grabbing her sneakers, she walked out of her bedroom leaving James to continue sleeping soundly. She looked at herself in the mirror.

She wasn't very old, still in her early twenties. Her dark brown hair flowed down to her waist. She had bright green eyes, and was told that her eyes would light up a room when she smiled.

Katie then began applying light makeup to her eyes, lips and cheeks. She smiled at her reflection. Finishing it all off with a blue gem necklace that James gave her the day before, for their anniversary. He had surprised her with it after work. He never said where he had gotten it, but that didn't matter, she loved it all the same. It was the prettiest thing she had ever owned.

She grabbed two granola bars and threw them into her backpack. In her pack, she kept a flashlight, a change of clothes, snacks, a toothbrush, and a hair tie. Working for a daycare, it was necessary to have a backpack instead of a purse.

She grabbed her house key and took one last look around to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. She blew a kiss to her husband who was still asleep and closed the door behind her. She then began her short walk to work. She lived in a high-rise apartment in Chicago, just around the corner from where she worked.

Katie worked at a daycare called "Care for you", for preschoolers. It was a rewarding job, but could also be very stressful at times.

"Katie! Thank God you're here. Rebecca called in sick, so you will be alone in the room today." Her boss said, holding a stack of papers to file.

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