

The Unenchanted Princess

Alex McGilvery



For Alexandra

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Christina Castro Santiago

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BOOK 1

The Unenchanted Princess

Chapter 1

Prologue

The christening party was a disaster. Her parents had done everything right, and yet...

The Princess was delightful; she smiled and burred at all the visitors. Everybody who was anybody crowded into the ballroom. The Amfibs of Poond were there, as was the Princess Sopo. Even Charmant and his Queen were dancing a glittering path through the guests.

A tiny fountain flowed with wine, and tables groaned under the weight of the food. The gifts were many and diverse, quite suitable for the honor of a first born princess. There were the usual gems and gold, as well as some more unusual gifts. A ring that was clearly magical, though, no one knew quite what it did, and a pouch which could hold all the new princess's needs and yet only need one nurse to carry it.

The problem was in the small stack of pleasantly worded cards from the fairy community. They all extended best wishes etc. and some even granted gifts like grace and beauty, but none of the fairies came. Not even the one the proud parents had carefully not invited. Her parents looked at each other with dismay. The poor princess! She was not going to be enchanted. How could they possibly make a proper match for her if she had no enchantment to be broken by prospective suitors?

The King put his arm around the Queen, and tried to comfort her.

"We will think of something. After all, she is only a baby," the King said, but the Queen was inconsolable.

"My poor baby, what's going to happen to her? She is a princess without an enchantment. We will be the laughing stock of the kingdoms." The Queen peeked out over her King's shoulder. "Look at that Princess Sopo, she looks so smug. I'll never be able to go out in public again." Yet, she was a Queen, so she pulled herself together and was gracious and confident as she said her farewells, even to the Princess Sopo.

When the castle was empty again, the princess was taken up to her nursery, where her nurses had their own little celebration, and made a huge fuss over the bright little girl. They didn't care about enchantments or spells; all they knew was that the Princess Alexandra was a beautiful baby. She smiled and laughed at them, then went quietly to sleep. The King and Queen called an emergency meeting of their Council. They discussed options until the early hours of the morning, yet in the end they could only wait and see what developed.

As the weeks passed everybody could see that the princess was a perfectly normal baby; which of course was the whole problem. Finally the royal couple decreed that nobody was to raise the princess's lack with the little girl herself on pain of exile, then set themselves to come up with some way of solving the dilemma. After all, they had sixteen years.

Alexandra learned to crawl and then to walk, she got into mischief, and had all her nurses wrapped around her tiny finger. She began talking and never stopped. She asked questions which had the royal scholars scurrying for answers, and by the time they had their answer she had moved on to new questions. As she grew no one even hinted that there was something as terribly wrong with her as lacking an enchantment.

Chapter 2

Alexandra

When Alexandra was five she was sent to school. They pulled up in front of the Governor's Mansion, which was the biggest brick building she had ever seen. Her mom had told her that this school was a very special one.

"All royal children go to this school. It will make you into a proper princess."

Alexandra thought she was a princess because her mom and dad were King and Queen, but she knew better than to ask questions.

She loved school. She was at the top of the class in reading and writing. The stories that they read were about brave princes and beautiful princesses. What made it better was that these stories were the history of their lands.

The princess didn't like the classes on hunting and survival as much. But if they were going to survive their adventures as enchanted royalty the children would need these skills.

Alexandra was very happy, except for one thing – her lack of an enchantment. She learned that from the other children.

While Alexandra loved the learning, not all her classmates shared her enthusiasm. She soon discovered that royal blood did not automatically confer the ability to rule upon them. Indeed some with the most unimpeachable noble lines had the least ability. The daughter of the Queen of Sopo was the prime example.

Her name was Anaeth; she was beautiful and the center of all the princes' attention. Yet her idea of majestic command was to throw a tantrum. It was only the absolute rule forbidding the beheading of peasants or other destruction of school property that kept the population safe from her rages.

It was Anaeth who told that Alexandra was unenchanted. Alexandra had just turned nine, and there had been a party at the school for the children and their parents. Once all the adults had gone home the children gathered secretly in their common room, up past their bedtime discussing their enchantments. An-

aeth, of course, began by telling about how she had been enchanted to prick her finger and sleep until wakened by her true love's kiss. She had the utter assurance of knowing her place in the world. So she was infuriated when Alexandra asked if having the whole kingdom sleep for a hundred years, just so she could find a husband, wasn't an inconvenience for everybody else.

"Nonsense!" whispered Anaeth fiercely. "It is supposed to be inconvenient. Besides, they are just commoners, what do they know?" She fixed Alexandra with her enraged gaze. "I suppose your enchantment is convenient for everybody. You will probably end up married to some stable boy." The others laughed, but Alexandra was saved from answering because the Prince of Poond made a face at Anaeth.

"Yech, you won't catch me kissing any girl."

"No, you are going to be turned into a toad, and some ugly princess will get warts from having to kiss you."

"A frog, a frog," squeaked the prince, turning remarkably bug eyed, "and she will not be ugly!"

"She will be if she has to kiss you to get a husband," Princess Anaeth snickered. "Perhaps Princess Alexandra will kiss you. That would certainly be convenient. Go ahead, kiss him." The others picked up the chant, "Kiss him! Kiss him! Kiss him!" The little prince jumped and ran away, but Alexandra clutched her fists and stood over the Princess Anaeth, ignoring the others.

"I won't kiss the little twit, not because you say so, or anybody else. I don't care a fig for what you say. I think you are a little monster, and when your prince comes he won't kiss you, he'll chop off your head." The Princess Anaeth gave a very un-princesslike squawk and turned red, then purple, then blue. The room was absolutely silent as the princes and princesses confidently waited the explosion to come. It didn't. Instead the beautiful little girl smiled, and looked positively angelic. She beckoned the others closer.

"I heard," said Princess Anaeth pleasantly, "that there is an impostor at the school. My mother told me one of the so called princesses has no enchantment. I wonder who it would be. I, of

course, am enchanted to sleep on my sixteenth birthday. Princess Avi is turning into a swan. Neje has a mother who will send her into the woods. Ariel will be carried away to a glass mountain.” And so she went around the room naming each girl’s fated curse or enchantment. As she spoke each of the girls shivered uncomfortably, as if they were the first to ever have their enchantment, and didn’t know the end of their story. They felt, just for an instant, the malice behind the comfortable enchantments they had grown up with. Until Anaeth reached Alexandra, then her voice took on an edge. “It is a funny thing I have never heard Alexandra’s enchantment. Tell me, what enchantment will bring your husband to your side?”

Alexandra felt a great gap open inside her. She didn’t know anything about her enchantment; no one had ever told her or even talked to her about enchantments. She turned red with shame, and hid her face. Anaeth crowed with triumph.

“Maybe it’s something really horrible, something really gross, or maybe you don’t have one. Maybe you’re a fraud without an enchantment, and you will never be married, never.” Anaeth smiled sweetly, “Well, we’re waiting.” Alexandra felt the silence grow cold and hard. She could feel the stares boring into her soul, her unenchanted soul, and she burst into tears.

Later she would write home and get back a distant letter from her mother saying it was nothing to worry about, and anyhow she and the King were working on a solution. Alexandra wept again when she got the letter from her mother, then she very carefully burned the letter and dried her eyes. If she was never to be married she would need to rule the kingdom herself. The little girl determined to be the best ruler in the world. She never again wept in front of the other children, no matter how Princess Anaeth taunted her. But she did make a calendar and start counting the 2554 days until the very beautiful and very cruel Princess Anaeth would prick herself on a golden spindle and fall into an enchanted sleep and out of Alexandra’s life.

* * * * *

Alexandra looked at the two families before her again, carefully keeping her face empty of feeling. They, in turn, looked at her with almost equal parts of hope and despair, and at each other with loathing. The princess had to make judgment on their case since it was her week to be “Duke” of these people’s province of the School kingdom. The case was hopelessly complicated. Both families had been squabbling over the same tiny piece of land for generations. It was high in the hills above their village, and was useless for farming, yet it had a spring which not only gave the best water in the area, but on certain nights of a full moon had magical properties of healing. This magic spring had made first one and then the other of the families before her rich. One family or the other had brought the case to Student Court for a ruling, but no ruling had satisfied either the plaintive or the markers. Just last week, in fact, the Princess Anaeth had ruled that both the families should be exiled and the plot of land be turned over to the Duchy for exploitation. The markers had overruled the judgment, but Alexandra could understand both the hope and despair in the petitioners’ faces. The whole process was an exercise to teach the students effective governance, yet the student courts were notoriously ineffective. Judgments were overturned as often as they were upheld, and too often, even when the student’s judgments were upheld, they were overly simple or hideously complex. As the people before her explained yet again why the land should be the exclusive property of their family, she went over in her mind what other students had ruled on the case. Some had tried splitting the income from the spring, some had awarded it to one family or another, some had tried like Princess Anaeth to take possession of the spring for the government; others had even tried to have the spring blocked up. Alexandra was disgusted with the whole thing. The arguments died out as the petitioners saw the look on her face. Hope was replaced by despair and fear.

“You people disgust me. For how many years have you been coming before this court asking us to decide whose greed should prevail!? For decades this spring and its magic has split your town. Your feud has poisoned the whole province. Why should you continue to profit from some chance of fate?” She

could hear the pens of the markers scratching and the restlessness of the crowd. Students were supposed to make rulings, not commentary. She was going to lose marks, and that was the problem: every student had ruled on the basis of marks rather than the needs of the committee. "Hear my ruling." She waited until the rustling of the crowd stopped. "Hear my ruling. It is my opinion that both your families have profited long enough from the healing magic of the spring. From this day it is not lawful in this kingdom to charge for magic which is the result of chance ownership of land or water, or any magic which does not arise from a person's own strength or knowledge. The costs of bringing this case are to be split equally between both parties. In addition, both families will bear the cost equally of making the spring available to those who need its healing. You will not charge for access or accommodation during the period in which the spring is a healing spring. This is my judgment." Alexandra stood up signaling the session was ended, yet both families pushed forward to try to argue further. The markers were scratching away, and the crowd buzzed. No student had ever ruled so generally from a specific case; especially not on such an important issue. The school soldiers cleared the people from the square and Alexandra sat down again and waited for the comments from the markers. They didn't take long.

"An unusual ruling, Princess. What do you think the implications of your ruling will be?"

"Well, Princess, this judgment would cost a lot of people a lot of money, including the school government from loss of taxes. How do you propose that we make up the lost revenue?" The questions and challenges went on for a long time. Longer than any other time after Alexandra had sat in judgment. She answered the questions carefully, giving her ruling more thought now than she had when she was filled with anger at the waste of time and money feeding both families' greed. As time passed she became certain that her solution was indeed just. She defended it with passion and conviction. The sun had gone down and the discussion had moved into the town hall. Alexandra had defended her ruling and gone into the various arenas of taxes, hospitality, the reason for the existence of magic and

rights of ownership. In the end the markers gave the princess her ruling, not just in the specific case, but the general ruling. It was unprecedented in the history of the school, that a student ruling of such magnitude would be upheld. The discussion went right up to the Board of Governors. It confirmed Alexandra as the best student in the history of the school, and it confirmed her status as the outcast of her class.

After every turn at being judge the children would sneak into the common room after lights out and reenact the day's events to gales of muffled laughter. The evening after Alexandra's turn the children met as usual, but because she was still defending her ruling to the markers she wasn't part of the group. Princess Anaeth took the part of Princess Alexandra and both parties; she portrayed all of them with brutal sarcasm. She had just got to Alexandra's condemnation of the greed of the petitioners and was throwing herself into the part with great abandon.

"You pitiful peasants, you are sooo disgusting. Don't you ever take a bath? But that's right this is a court of law...well sort of anyway. You people shouldn't be so greedy; after all just because you own the spring doesn't mean you have any right to the water. You should drink out of the town well just like everyone else. You should poison the spring so no one else can use it. While we're at it, why don't we just poison all the magic springs? After all we can't have any of you poor slobs making any money, you might start taking baths..." Anaeth trailed off as she realized that her audience had been distracted. Alexandra stood in the doorway looking exhausted. "Hail to our exalted judge. The markers must have really run you over the coals. After that ruling you will be lucky not to be sent back to Page. Didn't you learn anything in all those boring classes? You don't mess with the tax base. Royalty needs greedy people so they will make money and give it to us. You are a little idiot."

"They gave me my ruling, even the general part of it, pending approval of the School Board of Governors. It took so long because I had to defend the changes in tax structure needed to make up the income lost because of incidental magic being freely available." Alexandra turned as if to leave, ignoring the

gasps and even subdued cheering of the other children, but Anaeth stood with her hands clenched and shaking with her rage.

“You’re lying. They would never let a little snit like you set that kind of precedent. You must be lying.” The beautiful girl was blotchy with rage.

“Why would I lie?” Alexandra said quietly. “You will find out the truth in the morning anyway.”

“You fraud, you aren’t even a real princess. You have no enchantment to bring a prince to marry you. You will be an old maid, and your kingdom will die.”

“Someone else made you a princess, Anaeth. You could be completely brainless. A potato could be a princess in your kingdom if it could fall asleep, and had lips to kiss. Someone else will rule your kingdom; someone else will choose your husband. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you are like. You are irrelevant.” The Unenchanted Princess turned again and left the room with, though she didn’t know it, a grace that left Anaeth speechless with fury.

The following morning Anaeth saw the posting of Alexandra’s ruling, and worse, that Alexandra had been made a “Duchess” and was now Anaeth’s superior. The tantrum she threw was legendary, but its only effect was to send her to bed with a raging headache. For the foreseeable future, Anaeth would have to obey the Unenchanted Princess.

As soon as she regained control of herself, Anaeth wrote her mother.

The next week the school had a visit from the Queen of Sopo. The princess was closeted with the school council for the better part of the afternoon. No one ever knew what had been spoken of in that meeting. One student swore that she had happened to be at the door as the visitor left.

“I have considerable influence in these areas,” said the Queen in her inimitable haughty tone. “I could do you great good...or harm.”

“We have no particular need for your influence.” The Chair of the Board of Governors was politely dismissive. “We have our own reputation as a school. This student will do nothing but enhance that reputation.” That piece of conversation she heard

was soon common knowledge amongst the students. It fueled Anaeth's anger at Alexandra, and it won Alexandra no friends.

They were in class while Mr. Smith talked about law and how they needed to be consistent in the way they interpreted and enforced the law.

"The law is the thing that holds your kingdoms together over time," he said. "Magic is all very well and good, but it is not consistent. Much of the time it causes more problems than it solves."

Princess Anaeth yawned.

"Am I boring you, Anaeth?"

"Why should I learn about law and all this boring stuff? It isn't like I am going to actually run the kingdom. Whoever I marry will rule." She batted her eyes at the teacher. "As Alexandra pointed out to me, my only job is to look beautiful. I'm good at that, aren't I?"

Mr. Smith sighed and went on with the class. Anaeth wouldn't graduate anyway. She would return home before her sixteenth birthday to fall into her enchanted sleep.

"Mr. Smith," Alexandra said. "Isn't it necessary to have good laws before we can enforce it fairly?"

"Well, yes and no," answered her teacher. "Good law certainly makes it easier to rule well, but even a poor law is better than none if it covers everyone equally. Let's look at an example..."

"You think you are so smart," whispered Neje as she brushed past Alexandra on the way out of class. "Because of you we have extra work to do."

"I could help you with it," Alexandra said.

"And have them think I'm like you? No thanks."

"You could do what Anaeth does. Nothing," Alexandra said. The other princess was already gone.

"I wouldn't mind some help," Herbert said behind her.

"Aren't you afraid they will make fun of you?"

"They already do."

Alexandra sighed, "It will be worse if you hang out with me. Sorry, Herbert."

She went to the library and sat down by the pile of books on

her desk. Somehow the books she needed were always waiting for her. She noticed similar piles on the desks of the other students, but none of theirs were as tall as hers. Soon she was lost in the world of books; here at least no one hated her.

After supper, Alexandra went back to her books. Herbert came and interrupted her.

“Why do you think Smith talks about law all the time?” he said. “It’s magic that is really important, isn’t it?”

“The magic is only for royalty and the rich. The average person will never see any magic their entire lives.”

“Does it scare you?” Herbert leaned over and whispered to her. “It scares me. I don’t want to be a frog. What happens if I get lost, or the princess doesn’t want to kiss me?”

“It doesn’t scare me. It makes me angry. Magic doesn’t seem to be very fair. There must be a better way.”

Herbert shook his head and wandered off. Alexandra pulled the letters from her mother out of the bottom book. They were meant to encourage her, telling her how the royal advisors were still researching her problem and would definitely have a solution to her lack of enchantment before it was necessary for her to meet her prince.

Later that night Alexandra heard the others as they slipped out to their nightly gathering. She stood outside the door with her stomach aching as she listened to Anaeth mock everything she believed in. Alexandra put her hand on the latch, but let it drop. There was no use.

She went back to her room and took out her calendar and counted the days until Anaeth went to sleep, and Alexandra was free of the snooty princess. Though now the calendar also represented freedom from her mother, and the demands of enchantment, somehow, somehow...

Chapter 3

Alexandra

Duchess Alexandra was having trouble with her councilors. Two years of trying desperately to rule over an ever growing portion of the School Kingdom, as well as an increasingly uncontrollable council had made her use everything that she had ever read. For the last few months she left the books behind and was making it up as she went along.

Prince Herbert was red faced and shaking. He stood over Princess Anaeth still trying to come up with a suitable retort for her last outrageous insult. The princess sat smugly surveying the havoc she had wreaked on yet another meeting. Only Herbert had the nerve to cross the princess and he continually paid dearly for his courage. The others just sat and endured, occasionally applauding an especially telling insult. They blamed Alexandra for their situation, and Alexandra knew they replayed the council meetings after curfew. She didn't stand a chance.

"The peasants are increasingly angry," Prince Michael said. "We need to do something or there will be open rebellion." He kept a somber face until he caught Princess Avi's eye. They were a destined match, but they were also madly in love. No matter the subject, Alexandra knew that Avi would distract him.

"We all know who gave the peasants the idea that they have rights," Anaeth said.

"Peasant rights were enshrined in law more than a hundred years ago," said Alexandra.

"Oh, sure, in law," said Anaeth, "but no one ever paid attention until you started giving them ideas."

"It wouldn't be so, so bad if we ruled with some consistency," Herbert said, and Alexandra had to smile. He was the only one who actively supported Alexandra.

"And your rulings are consistent?" asked Anaeth. "I don't think you've made a judgment yet that anyone could understand."

"Well, that is consistency," Neje said, "of a sort."

Alexandra stifled a sigh. Herbert always paid for his loyalty.

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