



Ella and the Panther's Quest

by Lisa Anne Nisula

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Chapter 1

It never would have happened if Alice hadn't been sitting on the top shelf. To be completely accurate, it never would have happened if Rachel Simmons hadn't decided she hated my sweater. Then she wouldn't have been passing notes about it all during my third period computer science lecture on Boolean searches, I wouldn't have had to give her detention, her mother wouldn't have called to yell at Mr. Brown for letting a sub punish her little angel, Mr. Brown wouldn't have said, "Now Ella, I'm not sure a few notes really warrants a detention," right in front of Rachel, Rachel wouldn't have left with that smug look on her face, I wouldn't have left two hours late in a bad mood, and I

wouldn't have decided to stop at the library for a book to distract me. But I'm not about to give either of them credit for even the smallest bit of what happened. In any case, if the library had kept the works of Lewis Carroll on a lower shelf, I would never have gone into the biographies in search of one of the metal stools with self-locking wheels which the library provided for patron's use, and I would never have seen the footstool.

My first thought was that the footstool was infinitely more interesting than anything else the library offered, with its claw feet, blue and silver tapestry cover and heavy silver fringe, but my second was to wonder if it was for general use. It was in the reading corner, between the armchair and the new wall mirror, both of which were clearly intended to be used by anyone. I leaned forward and examined the footstool. The fabric did not look old, but it was dusty and worn. It had been used before.

That decided me. I picked up the footstool. No one tried to stop me, so I carried it to the stacks and put it down under my book. I tested it with my right foot first, but it seemed steady, so I shifted my weight onto it, and it held me. It still seemed safe enough, so I stepped up and reached for my book, and almost fell off. I rested my fingers on the nearest shelf for balance and adjusted my stance, trying to figure out what had made the footstool move.

It didn't seem to have uneven legs. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, but I couldn't make the footstool wobble again. It had felt more like the stool had raised up a bit, but that made no sense; locking wheels would have gone down, not up, and anyway I hadn't seen any wheels. I pushed those problems to the back of my mind and reached for my book again. This time the footstool did more than wobble. It ran.

I couldn't turn to see where I was going, or even get my arms out for balance. I tried to press my feet deep enough into the cushioned seat to make contact with the steady wooden base, but the material was slippery and the stuffing in the cushion slid around under my shoes. I was afraid to jump off, even when I could see we were running toward the wall. I managed to keep my balance by bending my knees and trying to sway with the motion of the stool. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the mirror directly in front of us. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to see what was coming next, but that made it even harder to balance and I opened them just in time to see the edge of the gilt frame brush past me as the footstool ran through the mirror and into — somewhere.

The footstool stopped. We were in a large room made of rough, dark gray basalt rock, with iron bars on windows too small to let in much light, a wooden door at one end, and a hard wooden bench near the mirror.

I dismounted, glad to have a solid stone floor under my feet. The footstool ran to the door, then turned like it was waiting for me to follow. Deciding things couldn't get any curioser, I went to the door. It swung open by itself when I pushed it.

The door led to another stone room, with even smaller windows and light provided by one oil lantern on the floor. The footstool went in. I followed cautiously. As soon as I was through the door, it slammed behind me.

On the far wall, there was an iron cage. In the cage, there was a panther. I took it as a sign that the day was very strange indeed when I did not find that out of place. I edged closer, still cautious even though the animal seemed to be completely imprisoned. This was not one of the sleek black panthers I was used to seeing on television or at the zoo.

His coat was dull and matted, his ribs visible beneath his ragged fur. His great green eyes opened. His head rose. He opened his mouth and spoke,

“You’re not what I was expecting.”

“Neither are you.” As a reply it wasn’t bad, but it was so unlike myself, it shocked me into silence.

“What were you expecting?”

“What were you?” At that, I snapped my mouth shut, resolving to say nothing else.

The edges of the panther’s mouth curled up, showing his teeth. It might have been a smile. “Fair enough.” He rose and I would have staggered back only my feet didn’t seem to be working. The panther was enormous, much larger than any cat I had ever seen at the zoo. His shoulder reached at least to my elbow. If he had stood on his hind legs, he would have towered over me by more than a foot. Even emaciated as he was, the panther was impressive.

His voice startled me out of my stupor. “I am waiting for a hero who can free me, then accompany me to the castle over there.” He nodded toward one of the windows.

I turned to the window. I couldn’t see anything but a bit of sky.

“You won’t be able to see it from there.” The panther looked down at the stone floor. “It has been arranged so the castle will be the last thing I see before I close my eyes and the first upon waking.”

I went to the panther’s side and knelt, leaning back against the bars. When I was at the panther’s eye level, I could see the tops of the castle’s towers and turrets stretching up, like stubby fingers trying to reach the light. It was a lost cause. The lawn outside the window was bathed in sunlight, but the castle was in deep, moonless darkness,

with just enough light to make out shapes. "I can see it now."

The panther did not look up. "As you can see, it is cursed. I can end it, if I can get there."

I thought I heard a hint of melancholy in his voice, but when I looked over at him, the panther was sitting up straight, all business, and I thought I must have misheard. The panther turned to me and went on, "The mirror gives us access to other worlds to seek a champion. You'll be able to go back in . . ."

The footstool banged its foot on the ground three times.

"In three hours your world will come back and the footstool will take you through. In the meantime, make yourself as comfortable as you can."

I sat on the floor and crossed my legs. The panther lay back down and rested his head on his paw. After a moment, he sighed deeply and went back to staring out the window. He seemed so quietly wretched, it seemed too private to interfere, to even look at him, unless I could find a way to help. I let my eyes wander around the room. "Did you know there's a ring of keys on the wall up there?"

The panther didn't bother to look up. "Yes, they've been tried. A giant from Upper Zancar got them down."

So that had been done; I should have known. I needed to think like a hero. The keys had been too obvious.

The panther closed his eyes. "You can try them if it will amuse you."

I stared down at my feet. Amuse me, like a child. I knew I didn't look like anyone who could help on a quest, with my long coffee brown hair and large lapis blue eyes, and a build that was decidedly not athletic, but that was no reason to think I was useless. I could think; that had to

count for something, even in a world where a knight was the obvious answer to a quest. I rested my cheek against my knees and caught the panther staring at me with his sad sunken eyes. I had already noticed their unusual color, emerald green with little flecks of gold, but I hadn't realized until now why they affected me so deeply. They weren't like any cat's eyes I'd seen before, not just their unusual color, but the shape, larger and rounder than I expected, and set deep beneath an expressive brow. I couldn't just sit there knowing those eyes were watching either me or the cursed castle.

I got to my feet and looked at the keys. They were hanging from a thick iron hook far above my head, too far for me to reach from the ground. I looked around the room for inspiration, but the prison held nothing useful. I didn't think I could bear sitting beside the panther doing nothing while he lay in his cage, waiting for a hero and watching a cursed castle that he could save but not get to, so I kept looking. Maybe there was something in the other room. At least it would put a wall between me and those eyes for a little while.

The room with the mirror had a jumble of bits and pieces that I guessed the footstool had dragged in with him from other worlds. Among the leaves and dust and feathers and what seemed to be an abandoned shoe, I found a possibly useful stick. It wasn't long enough, but if I moved the wooden bench that was against the wall into the prison room and under the keys, it might work.

The bench looked like it was made of solid oak. When I tried to move it, I decided it must be petrified oak; it was certainly heavy enough. I couldn't pick it up, but I managed to drag it across the stone floor, screeching like nails on a chalkboard all the way. The legs kept catching on

uneven bits of the stones and forcing me to tug, or in one case, put my end down and pick up the other to push it across the floor. The door posed a bit of a problem, as it had now decided to swing shut by itself. I had to wedge it open with my back and pull the bench across the threshold. The panther looked up as I banged into the room and screeched across the floor.

I didn't look in his direction, but I could feel the green eyes following me as I crossed the room, struggling to get the clumsy legs over the cracked floor. He was probably thinking I was insane. I realized I probably was insane. Even assuming the panther was real and the footstool was real and the magic mirror was real, why did I think I could find a way to fix this when a giant and who knew who else had failed?

I gave the bench a sharp tug and managed to get it stuck in a rut in the floor. I heard a little sniff from the panther's direction, but I couldn't tell if it was scornful or irritated or some emotion I wasn't thinking of. Disdainful maybe? Incredulous? I focused on getting the bench unstuck, which took a good bit of strength as I had to lift it enough to get the leg back onto a level bit of stone so I could keep dragging it across the room.

Once I had shoved the bench into place, more or less under the keys, I had to go back for the stick. As I crossed the prison room for what felt like the hundredth time, I risked a look at the panther. He was still watching me, but his features were too alien for me to read. He could have been bemused or annoyed or bored. It was much easier to think about getting the keys down.

As I stood in front of the bench with the stick in my hand, I wondered if there was anything else I could do to make myself feel more idiotic under the panther's gaze. I

considered taking my shoes off, to prevent slipping on the worn wood surface, banging my head, and ending up unconscious on the floor, but the keys were still far above me and I needed all the height I could get. I climbed up on the bench, shoes and all, and held the stick over my head. I saw at once it wasn't long enough. I braced my left hand against the wall, ignoring the uneven bits that cut into my palm, and stood on my toes, but the stick still scraped against the wall below the keys.

After all the trouble I'd had getting the bench in place, I wasn't going to give up yet. That, and I had a silly need to show the panther I wasn't an idiot for having dragged the bench across the room. I lowered my heels to the bench and scanned the room for something else I could stand on. My eyes landed on the footstool. That could work, but what was the proper way to ask if I could climb on it? As I considered the question, the footstool came over to me, stood up on its hind legs and rested its front legs on the bench, right in front of me.

"May I?"

The footstool stayed put. I knelt down and lifted the footstool onto the bench, careful to arrange it so all four legs were squarely on the seat.

I kept my left hand on the wall for balance and climbed from the bench to the footstool. The stick almost reached the keys. Shifting my left hand from the wall to the window ledge, I pulled myself up to my toes and, with a final stretch, the stick brushed the keys.

It took me a few tries to get the stick under the keys. Once I did, I was able to flip the stick to the side and knock the keys off the hook. I heard them hit a wall and clatter to the ground.

I climbed down very carefully so I wouldn't fall and spoil my small success, then lifted the footstool safely down before I ran across the room and gathered up the keys from the corner where they had landed.

The panther was sitting up in his cage, watching me. When I took the padlock in my hand, he put his head down and went back to staring out the window. I was rather glad he did; at this close range, the green eyes boring into me made it hard to think clearly.

I tried each key in the lock, but had no more success than the giant had. Not ready to give up after all that trouble, I went back and retried each key upside down. I turned the lock over, but there was no place to fit a key on the back, just a maker's mark, a cart over a name that ended with "dian," the rest worn away with age and use. I was still looking for other ideas when the footstool nudged me.

The panther looked up. "It's time to go. Thank you for trying." His mouth curled up at the corners again, another smile perhaps, this one sad; then he put his head down again, and his eyes went back to the small window.

I followed the footstool into the main room. It stood in front of the mirror. When I didn't do anything, it dipped its side a little. I took the hint and climbed on it. The footstool jumped through the mirror and brought me back to the reading corner.

"Thank you," I whispered as the footstool hopped back through the mirror.

The library lights were still on, so I knew I couldn't have been gone too long — or had been gone so long it was another day. I didn't bother with Alice's adventures in Wonderland. I went to the computer catalog.

I had just gotten to the search screen when an arm reached over my shoulder and across the desk to push the

off switch on the monitor with one short, peach-colored nail. "Sorry dear, fifteen minutes until closing. I have to shut all of these down."

"I just need to look up one thing . . ."

"It's the rules. Tell me what it is and I'll tell you where it is."

I did not want to ask her for help. Especially since I was going to look up lock picking. She was the type who'd want to know what kind of lock and why I wasn't calling a locksmith. I wasn't in the mood to lie; I didn't have the energy after everything that happened on the other side of the mirror. "That's all right." I left the computer and went back to the stacks. Maybe fifteen minutes was enough time for me to figure out where they kept the lock picking books on my own. Maybe in with technology books, or home improvement, if they were assuming it would be used for a locked door with no key. Home improvement was closer, in the front of the library by the main entrance. I would start there.

There were plenty of books on fixing up your house. I grabbed a couple that dealt with replacing doors. It seemed a promising way to start. I flipped to the index of the first book. Plenty on replacing locks and choosing locks, but nothing on picking locks. Same with the next book. I tried one on restoring old houses, but the book was probably older than most of the houses in the area. I flipped through it anyway, looking for any reference to locks.

It was dry reading and small print. My eyes started to blur and my mind didn't catch all the words. I remembered that I hadn't been home since six-thirty that morning and hadn't eaten since noon. No wonder I was having trouble concentrating. I let my mind rest for a moment, and my

eyes drift to relax them. Outside the window I could see students hanging out by the bike rack, chatting. I saw one of them was Rachel Simmons, who appeared to be dating the head of the smoking group that hid outside the gym door and thought we didn't know it. Watching their gestures, I decided they were either making their Friday night plans or planning to steal the bikes. They'd probably know how to pick locks; I should ask them.

No, I decided as I turned back to the books and grabbed a copy of Old Homeowner's Guide from the shelf, they'd probably just cut the locks off, like custodians did when they needed to search the lockers at the high school.

That was it. I put the book back on the shelf absently, my mind working furiously. I hurried out to my car with no books, looking for any holes in my new idea.



Chapter 2

The next morning I was back at the library, this time with a heavy knitting bag slung over my shoulder. As I passed a display of new books, I grabbed a mystery novel with a good cover and a random knitting book I didn't think I'd read before. Then I went back to the reading corner and made myself comfortable in the armchair nearest the mirror, with my knitting bag tucked between my leg and the side of the chair and the books left conveniently beside me. Once I had a good view of the mirror, I settled in to wait.

I had spent most of the evening planning what to bring and wear. Some things had been obvious: a large, waterproof box of matches; peanut butter sandwiches; string; a notebook and pen; bandages. Clothes had been harder. I wanted to be certain I would be taken seriously. The panther seemed like the sort who would be used to women in skirts, so I'd chosen a black tiered skirt that was

loose enough to allow for plenty of movement, with silk leggings underneath for warmth, a green t-shirt, a black sweater, and a sturdy pair of comfortable boots. I thought I looked ready for adventuring, even though every minute of waiting was making me wonder if I had been right to come back and right to think that the mirror showed this world on a regular basis.

After half an hour of waiting, I started to get edgy. I abandoned the knitting book quickly; the designs were too rustic to be my style and too easy for me to pick up any hints. The novel had a good cover, but the story wasn't keeping me interested. I couldn't tell if that was because the story wasn't very good or if I was too distracted to get into it. I kept glancing at the mirror for some sign that it was changing, but the only reflections were of the perfectly normal teenagers coming to the quiet corner to answer their singing cell phones.

One student sat across from me and actually looked ready to do her homework. I hoped I wasn't disturbing her; she had been carrying some serious looking books and probably wanted to study in peace. As she sat down, I made certain to focus on my book even when I wasn't reading it, arranging myself in the chair so I was twisted toward the mirror and could look at it without really looking away from my book. I thought it might make her more comfortable, so she wouldn't feel like I was watching her, but she still left quickly with her stack of books.

I finally abandoned any attempt to read the mystery novel and took out my knitting. I had brought along a knee sock to work on, knit on fine needles since it would take little space and a lot of time. Once I'd untangled it from the random knitting supplies that had hidden in the bottom of my bag when I was emptying it the night before, it gave me

something to keep my hands busy. I opened the knitting book to a sock pattern that would pass for what I was knitting at a quick glance and propped it in front of me as a cover. The actual pattern of my sock was repetitive enough that I didn't need a written pattern, but that also meant it didn't use too much of my mind, leaving plenty free to be used for worrying. My thoughts drifted from worrying about the mirror to worrying about the panther in his prison, then finally landed on how ridiculous I felt. I had dressed properly for questing, I hoped, but what seemed practical for whatever was coming on the other side of the mirror looked decidedly odd in the real world. I was convinced that the librarians who wandered by every so often thought I was some kind of an eccentric nut. That was probably why the student had left; she was worried about my sanity. I decided I was going to give away this pair of socks; I'd never wear them. Too much worrying had gone into their knitting.

I had knit two inches when I saw the surface of the mirror shimmer like water being stirred by a breeze. Then there was a mist seeping up from the depths. It only lasted a moment. When the mist cleared, the stone room was visible again and the footstool leapt over the edge of the frame and into the library. I reached out and touched its top. The footstool jumped and turned toward me.

When I knew I had the footstool's attention, I said, "I want to go back."

The footstool tilted toward me. It seemed to be considering my request. Then it settled down against my knitting bag. I took that to mean it would take me.

I picked up my knitting again. I had gotten almost to the heel flap when I saw the mirror's surface shimmer once more. I stood and swung my bag back over my shoulder. The footstool pushed against the back of my legs. This time

I sat down on it and tucked my feet up under my skirt. The footstool took a couple of steps back. I felt much more secure in this position.

In a few seconds, the mirror had cleared and the stone room was visible again. The footstool ran at the mirror and jumped through. It stopped as soon as we were on the other side and waited for me to dismount. When I had unfolded myself and my feet were on solid ground, it ran to the prison room door. It pushed the door with one leg and the door swung open easily, much more easily than it had for me. Magic, I reminded myself. There was a walking footstool and a talking panther; this place had to be thick with magic. I had accepted a magic mirror; I shouldn't be surprised at a magic door. Besides, it was too late to change my mind now. I adjusted my knitting bag on my shoulder and followed the footstool into the prison room.

The panther was still there, this time stretched out in his cage, looking like he was trying to sleep and failing. The instant the door scraped open, he sat up so fast I knew he had been waiting for it. His eyes went right to the spot where his latest hero candidate would be. I hoped he wouldn't be too disappointed. He saw me at once. His eyes widened a bit, but I couldn't tell if it was disappointment or surprise.

"You are definitely not what I was expecting."

Surprise, then. Hopefully disappointment wouldn't follow. I didn't know how to answer, so I just smiled at him as I crossed the room and dropped my knitting bag on the stones near the cage with a satisfying thunk.

The panther watched me with a raised eyebrow and a twitching ear as I knelt on the floor and rooted to the bottom of the bag, under the sandwiches, stray knitting needles I hadn't cleared out, matches, and bandages, and

came up with a set of bolt cutters. The panther sat up a little straighter as I took the lock shank between the blades and smashed the handles together.

The lock broke, cut cleanly though. It worked. I almost didn't believe it. I dropped the bolt cutters by the wall and worked the lock out of the rusted holes, then pulled the door open to be sure there was nothing else holding it closed.

It wasn't until the door swung open that the panther stood. He took a slow step forward, then another, then he bounded out, stopping just under the window, his back arched, his fur on end. The panther stretched his legs and started walking around the room. His eyes darted toward me every few steps. I let myself be distracted by the antics of the footstool, which was hopping about on two legs and even managed a back flip, while the panther composed himself. I heard the panther's claws skitter across the floor. I had the feeling he had run or leapt across the room. I waited until I couldn't hear him moving, then waited a few breaths more. When I turned back, the panther was standing in the middle of the room, calm and composed again. He bowed to me. "You have my gratitude."

I didn't know how I was supposed to respond, so I curtsied as best I could.

"The footstool will take you back to your world before we begin our quest." As he spoke, the panther walked to the door. His paw reached up to turn the knob, and slid off the doorknob, down along the door, making him lose his balance and forcing him to stumble to keep from falling. He reached again with his paw, then swatted at the door, scraping at it with his claws, but that didn't help. He had no way to turn the knob. He made a few more swipes at the door, batting at it like some kind of exotic toy. The footstool

stood on its hind legs, but it was too short to be of any assistance. The panther stepped back and stared at the offending bit of metal as if he couldn't believe he had been defeated by something so mundane.

I left the bolt cutters on the floor; they were heavy and I didn't want to cart them around. I swung the rest of the much lighter bag over my shoulder and joined the panther at the door. I was careful to turn the knob as if I had not noticed that he couldn't do it himself.

As the door swung out, I said, "I'd like to come with you."

The panther looked up at me. "It seems I will need assistance." It wasn't quite a growl. The panther brushed past me. The footstool and I followed him into the mirror room. I looked around, expecting to see a door I'd missed, but the panther went to the mirror. It was showing an Empire style sitting room, all blue and marble.

The panther ignored the room's reflection. He touched the frame with his enormous paw and the image shivered. When it cleared, I could see a bit of grass and sky that looked the same as what I'd seen from the window.

The panther did not turn to look at me as he said, "You will have to keep a hand on my shoulder to pass through. You are not part of the magic."

I placed my hand between the panther's shoulder blades, which were clearly visible in his thin form. I felt him shrink away, then make an effort to keep his back under my hand. I wished I could ride on the footstool again. It had never seemed to find carrying me as much of a burden as the panther found the tips of my fingers resting on his shoulder. I felt the panther's tense muscles moving under the soft fur as his front legs stepped over the rim of the frame. I had to turn sideways and edge through, my back pressed to the

panther's side, so I wouldn't lose the connection with him. I grabbed the side of the frame for balance as I stood with one leg on either side. The panther hopped his back legs over the edge of the frame. I managed to swing my other leg over before he got himself all the way through and keep my balance, hopping a few steps on the other side until I was steady. The footstool leapt over the frame and trotted over to us.

We found ourselves on a wide, flat lawn. I couldn't see anything but grass as far as the horizon. There were no paths or landmarks, nothing that would give us a clue which way to choose. The only things visible were the prison building itself, a small, squat shed with dull gray stucco walls and a pointed tile roof, and a few trees scattered around the area just outside the building. Otherwise there was nothing but green lawn.

"I will return shortly," the panther murmured and slunk around the side of the building. I was glad he'd left the footstool with me; the open plane left me feeling exposed and alone.

I paced a few steps from the building, but there was nothing to see. It looked like we could walk for days and see nothing but grass and sky.

"Come along." The voice seemed to come from nowhere. I jerked to attention before I recognized it as the panther's. I tried to cover my reaction by moving my bag around on my shoulder, but I knew my fright had been too obvious to cover. There was nothing to do but follow the panther toward the horizon.



Chapter 3

The panther seemed to know where he wanted to go. The lawn remained flat, but after a few minutes of walking, I was able to see a dim shape ahead of us. As we approached, I realized it was a hedge. When we stood beside it, I saw that it looked like the sort of box hedge used for mazes. The panther started to walk around, counterclockwise, studying the hedge. I followed.

The panther did not speak as he padded along. I assumed he was looking for an entrance. I kept an eye on the branches. The long line of identical green leaves blurred before my eyes, with no opening bigger than a broken twig. After several minutes' walk, my eyes drifted to the panther. His gaze was intent, unwavering, his eyes never moving from the tangle of leaves and branches. Nothing would get past him, so I didn't feel bad when my mind and my eyes started to wander.

Over the next twenty minutes, the hedge remained exactly as it had been and I noticed many things of very little interest along the side of the path: a tree stump, a discarded shield with a lion painted on it, a flat rock, an old boot, a pile of craggy stones, a tree stump.

I stopped and looked again. I was completely certain I had seen that tree stump before, the bark was broken away in a very regular pattern.

“Keep up!” the panther called over his shoulder.

I hesitated. I knew I should probably tell him we were walking in circles, but I remembered his reaction to me, how he hadn’t thought I could help. I didn’t want to anger him, and I didn’t want to see the helplessness I’d seen in his eyes at the doorknob.

The panther doubled back and stood in front of me. “Are you coming?”

I didn’t want him to think I was a burden either, someone who couldn’t keep up and should have been left behind. “Yes, yes, I’m sorry. It’s just . . . I think I’ve seen that tree stump before.”

The panther turned to it. “How can you tell? They all look alike. Come along.” The panther started off.

I followed, keeping my eyes on the edges of the path, looking for anything else I might recognize. Maybe the panther was right and it was a coincidence.

But the lion shield was not. It couldn’t be, unless it was part of a spell.

“Are you able to keep up?” The panther had turned on the path and was scowling at me.

Circles or spells, the panther needed to know about this. “I recognize this too.” I pointed to the shield.

The panther looked at the shield, then cocked his head to the side and looked at me. He snorted. “You’re

tired. You're seeing connections where there are none." He paced a few steps away and back. "My fault, I'm sure. I forgot you are not used to questing." He looked around. "There's a nice flat rock. Why don't you rest there for a bit. I'll go ahead and send the footstool back when I find the entrance."

I didn't want to sit. I didn't want him to go ahead and leave me here alone. And I was quite certain I had seen that rock before. But I could tell the panther was making an effort to be understanding and not lose his temper. I sat on the rock.

"Wait there until the footstool comes for you," the panther cautioned; then the two went on, leaving me alone.

I tucked my legs up under my skirt and waited, watching the panther and the footstool follow the curve of the hedge until they disappeared from sight. I pulled my knitting bag into my lap and took out my sock. As I untwisted my yarn and started knitting, I considered the problem.

The panther was right, of course. The way to solve a maze was to keep your hand on a wall and follow it through until you found an opening. I stopped knitting to pick up a dropped stitch before it formed a ladder.

Maybe there was no opening. Maybe the panther had been right before. Maybe he did need a hero with a sword, someone who could hack his way through the hedge and make his own opening. I put down my knitting, slid off the rock, and went to examine the hedge.

The branches were dense and twined around each other, the leaves making a thick curtain, stopping me from seeing anything within. I tugged on one of the branches and the whole area swayed. I went back to my rock and my knitting.

It was possible someone could hack their way through, but I doubted it could have been done with a sword, or an ax for that matter. Not quickly anyway. Maybe a chainsaw — a cordless chainsaw, obviously.

So either find a heroic lumberjack, or it was back to the panther's plan of following a wall until he found the opening. Unless we were supposed to do something odd, like turn around and retrace our steps. I heard a twig snap and looked up, but there was nothing there.

Would the panther just keep going, or would he eventually send the footstool back to me even if he didn't find an opening? I imagined being left on the rock for days on end, waiting to be summoned. At least I had sandwiches. I'd have to be careful with them.

I started knitting again, and then I heard it again, the rustling of leaves, the crunching of gravel. They were coming back, at least I hoped it was the panther or the footstool and not some unknown danger. I looked down the path the panther and the footstool had taken, expecting to see the footstool returning and trying to ignore the fact that there were two sets of footfalls when there should only have been one, but no one was there. And I could still hear the footsteps approaching. As they came closer, I realized they were not coming from the direction the panther and the footstool had gone after all, but were following the path that had brought us here.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I wasn't used to hearing sounds outdoors. That was quite possible. I slid off the rock and looked around the bend of the hedge in the direction the panther had gone. Nothing. But the sound was definitely closer, and now there were definitely two sets of feet. I thought back, but I was certain the panther had said he would send the footstool to guide me; there'd been no

mention of returning himself. For an instant I wished for the flat plane. Even though I had felt exposed and vulnerable there, it would have let me see the danger. The hedges that hid me from the danger hid the danger too.

Well, I would just have to hide better. There had been a rocky mound a little ways on. I walked a few minutes down the path and found it right where I remembered it. I crouched behind the rocks, adjusting my skirt and bag so no part of me was visible.

There was a small fissure between two of the stones, just large enough for me to watch the path. And then I saw them, the panther and the footstool, coming from the wrong direction.

The panther was staring so intently at the hedge he didn't notice me until I called out to them, "Hello!"

The panther heard my voice and spun around, hackles raised. His paw went up, like he was going to swat at something. He tried to hide the movement by scratching his ear, but I was an old hand at such covers and knew better. I ignored his look of confusion as best I could, but part of me was glad to see he could be startled as badly as I had been.

I came out from behind the rock, tucking a bit of sock that had escaped my bag into place. "I think you've gone all the way around."

The panther growled a little, but nodded.

"No opening?"

"No."

I fought the urge to say, "I told you so." Instead I asked, "Do you have any other ideas?"

The panther was quiet for a few minutes. "Hack through?"

"I don't know. It seems pretty dense and twisted."

The panther glared at me again, but said nothing. Instead he examined the hedge himself. He must have agreed with my analysis since he stepped back and stared at the path.

I studied my nails. I didn't want to stare at the panther as he thought; after all, the only idea I had was to walk in the opposite direction. I tried to think like a hero. What could be done besides hacking? Burning? Shooting?

I heard the leaves rustle and looked up as the panther stood. "We'll try it again, another circuit."

I didn't see how that would help us. It must have shown on my face.

"You have a better idea?"

"No, although, well, maybe we could try going in the other direction, you know, for a change. See it from a different angle."

The panther stared at me, his ear twitching. I felt confusion and scorn radiating off of him and felt stupid, which must be why I said, "You don't have any other ideas, do you?" I tried not to snap as I said it, but I could hear the edge in my voice.

The panther kept staring. I closed my eyes and dropped my gaze, but he didn't growl, not really. Not until he said, "Come along then."

I looked up. The panther had already started to walk, clockwise this time, around the hedge. I followed quietly, feeling I was being tolerated.

At least Footstool still liked me. I couldn't think of him as an "it" any more; he seemed too real, too much like a person. At that moment, he was brushing against my skirt and dancing in front of me, and kept at it until I smiled. My smile made Footstool look very pleased with himself. He twisted, looking toward the panther, then straightened

himself up and marched over to him. "Good luck," I murmured. I could see Footstool cavorting, trying to get something from the panther that wasn't a growl. I could tell he had a difficult task ahead of him.

Since Footstool was occupied, I turned my attention back to the hedge, and I saw it. I wasn't sure what it was, but it had been something. I heard short, gruff growls and looked in the panther's direction. The panther was moving slowly, the corners of his mouth turned up slightly, with Footstool dancing in front of him. Footstool must have succeeded in making him laugh. I fell back and re-traced my steps, keeping a close eye on the hedge, with an occasional glance over my shoulder to make certain I hadn't strayed too far, but I didn't see anything different. When I could barely see the panther's shadow behind me, I turned around and walked briskly toward the others.

There it was again. I turned again and took four steps. It wasn't there.

I turned yet again, and there it was. A small opening in the hedge. The way in. Narrow and overgrown, a wall of ivy and branches meant it couldn't be seen by someone traveling counter-clockwise.

"Hey! I've found it!"

I watched the panther bound around the hedge and stop a few feet in front of me. "Where?" He was looking right at it, then at me, with a look suspiciously like the one he'd been giving Footstool a few minutes ago.

"You have to be on this side to see it. The ivy hides it from there."

The panther glared at me, but he turned to the hedge and kept an eye on it as he walked to me. As he turned to go back, he stopped and I knew he'd seen it too. I didn't say anything, letting him decide what to do. Footstool nudged

my skirt. I smiled down at him. At least someone was on my side.

The panther stepped forward and batted at the hedge with his paw, then used his head to push through. I stepped forward and helped clear a way in, trying not to draw attention to the fact that my hands were much more effective than the panther's snout. The hedge seemed much thicker than it had appeared from the outside. The panther stepped into the branches. Footstool was too small to climb over the roots, so I tucked him under my arm and followed the panther. It was a tight squeeze to fit through the hedge, but we were able to get to the other side after much pushing and many scratches.



Chapter 4

If I had expected anything of the other side of the hedge, it would have been a maze, something you'd see in the grounds of an English castle. That was not what we found. Once through the hedge, we were crunching through leaves and tripping over roots. The hedge branches became tree branches and we were in a forest every bit as enchanted as the hedge had been. The trees were clearly taller than the surrounding hedges, but I had seen no sign of them outside. I didn't think they were neatly contained inside the hedges either.

As I broke through the last of the branches, one eye on the panther, one on the trees, I didn't notice the root of the oak tree until my left foot was caught on it. I tried to twist around, to get my right foot down and my balance back, but I wasn't used to trekking around in a skirt and got

myself tangled up. I probably could have recovered if I'd acted quickly, but the shock of getting my foot stuck in my hem made me hesitate just long enough to make it too late to save myself, and I fell forward, thrusting out my hands to break my fall, completely forgetting about Footstool tucked under my arm. As my arms flew out, I dropped him and he landed in a shrub. The panther was there in an instant, just in front of me, all his attention on Footstool. He didn't notice me until I crashed into him. Then he staggered back a few steps.

"Watch it," he growled, shrugging me off and going back to Footstool, leaving me to drag myself to my feet. I edged around the panther and gently lifted Footstool out of the bush. Everything seemed to be intact, no cracks or breaks in his wood, no tears in his upholstery. I turned back to the clearer area, almost bumping into the panther hovering behind me, and put Footstool down. He shook himself and started to walk. I was relieved to see he wasn't hurt. The panther growled again and slunk away. I had no choice but to follow.

The panther was stiff-backed and silent, his ears twitching, annoyed with me no doubt. I followed the panther quietly as he led us through the trees. He seemed to know where the roots would be and avoid the branches that slapped out at us. Footstool was small enough to slip under or between anything that blocked our path. I did my best, but the panther didn't seem to remember that I was on two legs, taller than him, and less agile. Or he was ignoring it. I was not going to complain. The panther had not wanted me, he'd wanted a hero. A hero would not complain. A hero would not have dropped Footstool. A hero would probably be cutting a path for us. The least I could do was try to avoid being a burden to him.

The panther startled me out of my thoughts by jumping over a particularly dense bush. Footstool slipped under it. I managed to half climb over, half push through with minimal loss of skin.

On the other side was a path. Not much of one, with rocks and branches sticking out, but relatively level ground that seemed to be going the way the panther wanted to. It was easier going since I didn't have to climb or creep, but the panther found it easier too and sped up. I was soon struggling to keep up again.

The forest around the path was the same as the forest we'd been climbing through, trees on both sides with a tangle of brush and fallen branches around our feet. I wondered who had made the path we were on, since I hadn't heard any animals nearby. It must have started somewhere inside the hedge wall, but where, and what sort of place was it, and more importantly, did it end somewhere?

The panther moved quickly, his eyes on the path. He did not speak to me and hadn't said a word since I dropped Footstool. I looked at the panther's rippling back and couldn't tell if he even knew I was there. We had been silent for so long, I wanted to know at least that we were going the right way. I squared my shoulders and tried to sound unconcerned as I asked, "Will this take us to the castle?"

"It goes in the direction I wish to."

The response had been curt, but not unkind. I risked asking the question I really wanted the answer to. "What will you do when we get there?"

The panther did not break his stride. "I was told the way to finish it."

"Oh." I waited, hoping he'd tell me what it was, or how he'd learned it. When he didn't go on, I spent several steps wondering if I should ask, then several more

wondering how to ask. I finally took the direct route. "Can you tell me how you'll finish it?"

The panther was silent. His muscles tightened as if he were holding back a strong emotion, anger no doubt. I worried I'd asked the wrong question, or the right question in the wrong way.

The panther growled low in his throat. I fell further back, certain I'd gone too far.

"I was told blood and tears must be spilt, then it will be finished," and he was silent again.

I wondered if I should feel sorry for whomever we were looking for when the panther got hold of him.

* * *

The panther remained silent as he strode through the woods, never looking back at me. At least now I knew he knew I was there, since his back remained rigid for many turns of the path. I stopped watching him for signs of relaxing, or any sort of emotion, and concentrated on keeping up without getting in his way. I decided that meant staying a couple steps back, not so far that I couldn't see him, but far enough that he could ignore me if he wanted to, and above all, not falling too far behind no matter how fast he walked.

By midday, I had gotten so used to putting one foot in front of the other that, when the panther stopped by a stream to drink, it took me a moment to realize I could stop too. I might have kept going if Footstool hadn't stopped right in front of me, almost tripping me.

Once I regained my balance, I knelt by the stream near the panther. He had leaned forward was drinking, his pink tongue scooping up the water just like a house cat, so I

decided it was safe enough. I cupped my hands and dipped them into the freezing stream. As soon as he heard the splash of my hands breaking the surface of the water, the panther glanced over at me. "I will be back in a quarter of an hour," and he melted into the forest without another word.

Left to myself, I drank several handfuls of water while I wondered where the panther had gone and why. In the end, I decided I would have to be content with his non-explanation for his disappearance. Once that distraction was gone, I became very aware that my stomach was empty and the cold water was making me feel it more intensely. I took out one of my sandwiches and unwrapped it, spreading wax paper over my lap to catch the crumbs. Every few bites, I switched the sandwich from one hand to the other, tucking my free hand in the folds of my skirt, trying to warm my icy fingers.

While I ate, Footstool wandered around the clearing, watching my reflection in the water. I broke off a piece of the sandwich and held it out. "Would you like some?"

Footstool looked over at me, shook his front half, and went back to exploring the stream.

Apparently furniture, even enchanted furniture, did not need food. I ate the rest of the sandwich, then shook out the crumbs for any birds that might want them. I folded up the wax paper and tucked it in my bag, thinking it might come in handy later. I had refilled my water bottle and was having another drink from the stream when I heard a clanging sound, like cans rattling in a bag, but heavier. I sat up to listen, but it was gone before I could tell what it was or where it was coming from.

A few minutes later, the panther melted out of the shadows, licking his lips. He went to the stream and drank again, then looked up. "Are you ready to continue?"

"Yes." I would have answered the same no matter what. I would not be the cause of any delays.

The panther nodded and found the path again. Footstool followed, glancing back to see if I was coming. I stayed frozen in place. I had heard the clanging again, when the panther had started walking, but from where I still couldn't tell.

Footstool made a small motion with his front half, urging me on. I swung my bag over my shoulder and hurried after the panther and Footstool, glad the panther had not looked back and seen me hesitate.

* * *

The panther kept up his quick pace, gliding between the trees, never looking back as I struggled to keep up. It wasn't getting any easier. The forest became denser and less light filtered through, making it harder to see any obstructions while throwing more things into my path. I got used to my skirt, used to how far I could move my legs and how to kilt up the fabric as I scrambled over roots and fallen limbs, but I couldn't get used to the branches and twigs that slapped out at me, catching on my sleeves and tangling in my hair. The handles of my bag caught on low branches and slowed me down.

And then, as I stopped to untangle my bag from what felt like the hundredth branch, I heard the clanking noise again, clearly now over the rustle of the forest. It must have come closer to us. I realized I'd been wrong; it didn't sound like cans at all, more like tools in a metal box, I turned to the panther, but I could tell he'd heard it this time.

"Of course he heard it," I chided myself. "He's a panther. He probably heard it ages ago." I edged closer to

the very large, very safe form of the panther. Footstool snuck between us.

We had gone a few more yards when the sound became louder. It was now accompanied by a great shaking of branches. The panther stopped short. Footstool and I stayed close to him. The panther's back was tense. His eyes were fixed on the shaking leaves.

Even though I would have liked nothing better than to run back to the stream, or even all the way back to the hedge, I forced myself to stand my ground, trembling hands and all. I could feel Footstool press against my legs. The panther stepped forward, his hackles raised, something that sounded nothing like the growls he'd used on me rumbling in his throat.

The branches snapped out and something made of iron and rust burst out onto the path. The panther edged to the left, putting himself between me and the newcomer, his whole body tensed and ready to spring. I could feel that, as happy as he'd be to be rid of me, the panther would not let anything happen to me if he could prevent it. Then Footstool pressed against my legs again, and I wondered how much of his protection was for me and how much was for his friend's welfare.

The figure on the path turned and straightened. I recognized it as a knight, in tarnished armor, about a foot taller than I was, with broad shoulders, his face hidden by a raven-shaped helm with a half moon cut from the end of his nose to the corners of his mouth, and a small slit for his eyes that kept them hidden in shadow. He stared at the panther, but did not draw his sword. I glanced down but saw that he did have one; its rusted hilt sticking out of its cracked leather scabbard.

The knight spoke first. "Are you one of his?"

The panther stopped growling but did not relax his stance. "One of whose?"

The knight did relax. "I see by your reaction you have not encountered the dark one. You are travelers then?"

"Yes," the panther said.

"Then accept my service and I swear I will guide you safely through these woods. They are dark and dangerous and filled with his minions." He drew his sword and held it with the blade pointed down, part of his oath I assumed.

The panther stared at him. "How can I be certain you will not betray me?"

The knight did not answer but drove his blade into the ground and knelt behind it. "I swear upon my honor as a knight that I will see you to safety." He removed his left gauntlet and touched the blade. A drop of blood slithered down the sharp edge, looking black against the dark metal.

This ritual seemed to convince the panther. He relaxed for the first time since I had met him.

The knight bowed his head, then rose and sheathed his sword. The ritual seemed to be over. "If you will follow me, I will take you to my camp."

The panther nodded and followed the knight into the brush. Footstool pushed against my legs, then trotted after the knight himself. As I followed the panther, I couldn't help thinking that, if the knight had no honor, his oath would be worthless and he would not hesitate to break it. I pushed that thought out of my head. After all, the panther had waited for a knight for a long time. He obviously knew about them and clearly knew more about this world than I did. Besides, accepting the knight's oath had calmed him down. After his response to me being right about the maze, I didn't want to see his anger if I suggested getting rid of the knight.

Ella and the Panther's Quest is available as a trade paperback (list price \$13.00) or an ebook (list price \$3.99) at Amazon.com, iBookstore, Kobo, Sony Reader Store, and other retailers.