

Cinderella's Daughter: An excerpt

By Diane Samuels

Chapter Three - The Grave

"Askenbasken said she only wanted a rose-tree, with the roots and all. She wanted to plant it on her mother's grave." "Askenbasken, who Became Queen", from "Jyske Folkeminder", Evald Tang Kristensen Princess Amanda hovered under the arch at the entrance to the graveyard. She cradled a brace of lilies in her arms and tried to keep her balance. The last year was spinning too fast and she could not find her foothold. How the queen had clutched at her throat as she started to choke. Amanda had watched her mother's face redden then drain blue. And then she had sat beside the body in the throne room where Cinderella, myth, monarch and woman, was laid for all to pay their respects. She had held her mother's hand in her own for three days and three nights. She would eat and drink nothing. The chief lady in waiting tried to offer some of her favourite hot milk. Just a sip? Maybe without the cinnamon out of respect for the deceased? Princess Amanda had refused even to smell it. She concentrated her senses onto Cinderella's motionless form. She could not believe that her mother could be quite so still as this. The king had sat opposite Amanda for the same three days, clutching Cinderella's left hand, silent as hell. Then the Chancellor had unravelled the yellowing scroll and whispered that the allotted moment had come to return her majesty to the earth. The king had repeated the customary words. Amanda had mechanically done the same as if she were a clockwork mouse. The king had then pulled his hand out of the clasp. He flashed an eagle-eye at his daughter to do the same. She knew that there was no point in disagreeing with daddy. He never took it well. He became severe or upset, depending on whether he was in public or private. So she let go of mummy's leaden palm. As she did so, she noticed that her father was kneeling now at her mother's feet. He placed his hands upon the crystal slippers which had been dressed upon her corpse. With one hand he pushed against the slipper on Cinderella's right foot, firming it into place. With his other hand, he tugged. Off slid the shoe like a lump of ice. Then, gripping the dainty footwear to his breast, King Rufus III strode out of the throne room towards his bed chamber, muttering an instruction for his daughter to come to sit in contemplation with him at midnight. Princess Amanda blinked out of her reverie. The sun cast her shadow into the graveyard. How might her father treat her today? She had not seen him during the daylight hours since that first vigil. For the last year, each night, at 11.59 pm, she had been taken to join him as the castle clock began to strike. As soon as the twelfth ring had rung, they had bowed to each other and taken their leave. She had seen no more of him than

this brief and dark encounter once every twenty four hours for four entire seasons. And here was the same late summer day again. Would he even remember who she was? She was glad she had come ahead of the rest. She could have some precious time on her own with mother before life (supposedly) began again. "Whoa. The skin on her, the hair on her..." Florence was all bug eyes peeping over the edge of the grave which had become a hidey-hole. Gloria held back. "If you can see her then she'll likely spot you." she warned. The Ugly sisters were wary. Their ears rung with their pap's maxims which included the oft used "Dig or be dug for", "Every rotter ends up rotten", "No worm turns once it's been eaten by a bird" and "The lowest of the low are to those on high what the Underworld is to the Sun God." When they'd asked about the Sun God, their pap had told them that he was the source of all life. When they'd asked about the Underworld, their mam told them that this place was the source of all darkness. And both parents together warned that if the likes of them blotted any noble's vision for one second, they would be buried alive instantly. Many funerals had passed, including that most tragic affair the previous year for Queen Cinderella, with Flo and Glo cowering in a half dug grave. "She ain't looking this way not one bit." determined Florence. So Gloria dared to push an eyelid up to viewing level and shot a glance towards the object of Florence's gawping. "Aaah." she let out a gasp. "How does she get to be so floaty and soft?" "I'd do anything to know the answer to that one." said Florence, not realising just how much she meant it.

Princess Amanda had no recollection of how she'd moved from the archway to the spot in which she now found herself. Maybe she had glided above the surface of the earth, blown by the breeze. But the air was quite still in the damp aftermath of the storm. So maybe she had stayed where she was and the ground had shifted beneath her feet. Last time she had stood here, there had been a hole with walls of mud descending before her and the coffin of ebony (the buttons on her dress were made from the same source) had slowly been lowered on black ribbons until the box dropped until it would drop no further. Then the ends of the ribbons were released and fluttered down, their own fate sealed too. Now, a year later, there was a slab of granite, grainy and grey, where the hole had been.

The princess did not notice that all around were identical slabs, each one as plain and simple as the others, and on each was the name of a king or queen or princess or prince, going back precisely four generations and no further. All those from before were buried in the vaults of the castle in which Princess Amanda lived. Her great, great, great grandfather, King Rufus I, had fallen out so badly with his own father, King Randolph VI, that he had avoided the old

tyrant's funeral. As the canon boomed to mark his father's encryptmen, he had stomped along the banks of the river for until he had stopped to pick blackberries from the wild brambles. The fruit was ripe, sweet and bitter in turn, and burst on his tongue with such flavour that it made him weep with joy. He could hardly believe that he had survived the cruel ogre who called him "that feeble arse" and never smiled at him once but swore at him, "bugger", "bollocks head", "little shit", every day of his life. He had himself sworn in a holier fashion there and then, purple berry juice staining his fingers and lips, that this is where he would be buried when it was his turn. His wife (even though he didn't have one yet) would also be buried here and so would his children and their children and on and on hereafter. Not one of his own descendants were to be laid to rest beside that "foul jackal", the father whom he hated like only a son can hate a parent who has the nerve to bring him to life and then treat him as if the fault for being born was his. King Rufus I had a productive, law-filled reign and when he passed away he had been buried downriver, beside the brambles as he decreed, with plain granite, unpretentious and durable, for his headstone. Thereafter, it became fashionable to be laid to rest in what became a thriving graveyard beyond the Capitol. Out of disappointment and rejection can the most unlikely creations flower. Such was this graveyard, a beautiful, peaceful sanctuary to the noble dead. A new king had broken away in life and death from his cruel father.

Queen Cinderella's headstone, her daughter did notice, was marked in precisely the same lettering as all the other royal headstones with no more than her name, the date she was born and the date she died. Princess Amanda held out her arms, full of lilies.

"Mummy. I got these for you."

She said this to the stone, or more precisely to this name written upon it, because she wasn't sure where else to direct her words. She laid down the lilies just below the numbers which revealed that her mother had been exactly forty when she had died.

"They're not roses. I'm sorry."

Florence's whole head had now appeared above the parapet of the new grave. Gloria bobbed right down as if concealing herself more would somehow make Florence less visible. "I'm not with her. Nothing to do with me." she was thinking, practising in case someone interrogated. "Did you ever see a girl so black and beautiful with arms pouring petals so white?" salivated the incorrigible Flo.

Gloria just couldn't keep down any longer. Up she sprang. Her head wobbled from side to

side.

"I want a dress like that. I want buttons that do up to my throat." she moaned, taking the words right out of Florence's mouth.

"Some get silk, others get soil. Only idiots hanker." spat Florence with double the force because Gloria had no right to steal her own most precious longings.

Cinderella's daughter continued to arrange the lilies, stem by stem.

"You do like lilies too, don't you?" she checked with the name on the stone. "I wanted to get roses. I did try. Lilies have a more powerful perfume. I thought there might be more chance of you smelling them. If you still have a nose that is. You do still have a nose, don't you?"

And suddenly she wasn't talking to the stone but directing her words through the layers of soil, down to the ebony coffin, to her very mother, whatever remained of her. Oh heavens, what did remain of her by now? What did she look like?

A cacophony of flapping. From every bush, every tree, every stone, the crows spread their wings like the cloaks of so many vampires when the sun has at last set. From all sides they drew together directly above princess Amanda as she knelt beside Cinderella's grave.

"What's up with them?" whimpered Gloria.

"What is up with them?" wondered Florence.

"Mummy? Can you hear me?" urged princess Amanda.

The cawing was deafening. The princess turned her face upwards to observe the circle of beaks and feathers above her. It blocked out the sun perfectly.

"You, crows, can you hear my mummy speaking? What does she say?" she implored.

"I reckon it's a warning." muttered Gloria like an old shepherd interpreting the clouds at dusk.

"How's it a warning?" sneered Florence.

"I know it when the dark birds do speak." said Gloria, her eyelids half closing and a dusty aura beginning to emanate from her face.

"All you know is what drops out of their backsides." pricked Florence and Gloria's magical bubble was burst.

The crows were circling so fast now that they had coalesced into a single shadow above princess Amanda's head. She shrunk downwards and appealed to the gravestone.

"Are you angry about the roses?" she trembled.

She hadn't wanted to admit how she had gone out this morning to the beds of salmon pink, ruby red, luscious maroon blooms. These were Cinderella's pride and joy. Since her mother's funeral, she had become too afraid to approach the gardens, terrified that the thorns would

scratch her to death. When a servant brought a vase of freshly cut stems into the castle, the princess had run screaming from the room. This morning she had woken up and braced herself. "Courage." she had said in the voice her father used when the things in life we'd rather avoid have to be faced. Then she had stared at the image of herself, so like her mother, in the mirror. "Flowers from her daughter for the dead queen." This was the tradition. How could it be anything other than the beautiful roses? She had clenched her fists as she approached the flowerbeds. The urge to run a million miles in the opposite direction swelled in her breast. But princess Amanda possessed her father's will and this is what steeled her. The head gardener had handed her his secateurs. She'd bent down, shuddering, ready for the thorns to lacerate her skin. She grasped the flower just beneath the petals to hold it firm. Was the blood flowing yet? Would anything remain of her hand when it was done with her? And then something most unexpected had happened. The flower did not attack. Instead it drooped as if she had attacked it. The second rose had done the same. The third had shed its petals as soon as her fingers came near. And the fourth and the fifth. The head gardener had never seen anything like it. He bit his lip hard as she had grabbed wildly at the stems, screaming at them to stay alive and keep their beauty. Still biting that lip, he had led her away to the hothouses where the lilies were thriving. He was obviously concerned that the princess would destroy the entire crop. He didn't want to have to answer for a vista of bare beds. He took some relief that the softer lilies seemed to calm her a little. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth as she gathered the thornless blooms. Later, he noticed a smearing of blood below his knuckles which he had to lick off.

"I promise that I did my best." Princess Amanda struggled to explain to the gravestone and the crows, circling and crying above.

"I tried to pick roses for you but every single one wilted when I went near it." She bit back the tears, "Isn't it meant to be the other way round, mummy? Shouldn't the princess fear the prick of the thorn rather than the flower droop at the pick of the princess?"

As if to quiet this most disturbing of questions (but somehow serving all the same to underline it) a trumpet blared in the distance. The crow circle immediately froze and seemed like it might drop, hard as a discus of lead upon the princess and her mother's grave below.

"I wish with all my heart, that there was some way.....I'd do anything, mummy, anything to bring you back."

Another plaintive trumpet note sounded, nearer this time, and the saucer of black in the sky burst like a clay pigeon hit bang in the middle by a perfect shot. Birds scattered in every

direction. The sun shone again on Amanda's head as a lone, black feather dropped silently onto the grave directly over the name CINDERELLA. Amanda picked it up. A feather from heaven. Keep it and you will be protected. Cinderella had told her about birds. She slid the quill sideways into the pocket hidden in the seam of her skirt.

At my mother's funeral, my father did something wonderful for me.

After my younger brother and sister and I, my father and all the relatives and members of the community, had followed her coffin to the grave and watched it lowered into the ground, the rabbi offered the spade to dad so that he might shovel the first fragments of earth to bury her. Dad took the shovel and then said aloud so that everyone could hear, "You have the right to do this. You're her first born child." And he held the spade out to me and I took it and I led the burying of my mother. I was thirty five years old. There are many things that my dad has never understood about me but when it came to parting from a parent, he understood before I did.

My mum was sixty when she died. Two weeks before she fell into a coma and passed away we'd talked about her funeral.

"How do you want it to be? Is there anything you'd like to happen?" I'd asked.

"I can't imagine it." she said. "I won't be there, will I?"

The day before the funeral, at the undertaker's, I stroked her skin which was colder than I knew skin could possibly be. I kept expecting her to move. Of course, she didn't. This was unnerving. Her over-heatedness, the flush of her presence was one of the most distinctive things about her. Pallid had never been her style. I talked to this reduced version of her. So did my sister. We decided to tell her everything we'd wanted to tell her in life but hadn't. My sister had a lot more to say than me. Ten months before I had said most of the difficult things I needed to say. She was still able to reply and we'd both been very upset, and I almost didn't dare, but I am now forever grateful that I did. Mum was still in her wheelchair when we had that talk. She did grow to understand over the following months that I had not played the silence game of "protecting her feelings" because the protection was a fence of barbed wire between us. I said:

"I'm so angry with you about so much that it's getting in the way of being able to care that

you're ill and being able to give you the consideration and love I want to give. I want to be able to get beyond feeling so furious and this is the only way I know how, telling you outright." And so I said how much I'd hated the hitting and the shouting and the judging and the way she didn't believe me when I told about the bad half-memories of my sufferings as a child: the threats that the shears would come and slice off my head if I said anything about what had been done to me (whatever it might be for I could not remember); a feeling of being trapped inside my skin and needing to flee and having nowhere else to go but to the topmost corner of the ceiling behind my head from where I watched myself trying to escape from what could not be seen because my down-there eyes were closed and my up-there eyes were averting their gaze. There were also the recurrent nightmares about crocodiles swimming upstream, their jaws dripping with my blood and torn flesh whilst I still swam desperately ahead of them, still trying to get away even though I was already done for.

And so I spoke. And she listened. And we both cried. And she said after three hours of this:

"I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?"

"And I said that the little girl who could have forgiven no longer existed. But I was left and I did love her."

The tumours on her spine were to make her paraplegic and lay her up completely a few weeks after this conversation. The last eight months of her life were spent in bed. This last period was by far most positive between us. We were able to be more open and warm than we'd ever been able to be with each other before. Her feet lay like lumps at the end of her bed. She had absolutely no feeling in them and a strange aspect of her illness was that her belly and arms and legs were bloated with water retention whilst her skin became dehydrated. Her toe nails were growing, curling and yellow, and her skin was flakey. She asked me if I'd take care of them for her. So I carefully cut each nail with the nail-scissors, scraped away the dead skin and massaged baby oil into the foot from toe-tip to ankle. As I did this, she smiled and told me that my brother was furious with me for being so inconsiderate as to attack her when she'd been ill. She was referring to our difficult conversation. I asked her again if she understood why I'd said what I had. She said that of course she did and she'd told him that things were much better between us now because of it and that he was to put it into the past. District nurses visited three times a day to change the urine bag, check the catheter, re-dress the bed sores, change the sheets, clean her and raise her up in the hoist so that she could poo. Dad had to help with that, plastic gloves on, because she had no control of any of the muscles below her waist. I watched them hoist her up. She liked me to stay with her when I came up on the train to visit. And she'd listened to my shit so I bore the expulsion of hers. I found it appalling

how hideous she looked with her legs splayed, her body bloated purple and pink and white by the drugs, the tumours and being so stationary. She smelt strongly of something between stale sweat and decay. My youngest son shied away when she held out her arms to hug him. He whispered to me later that she made a bad smell and he couldn't bear it.

My mum was not in the least bit bothered by her odour. She had been born without a sense of smell and had been able all her life to clear out rotten food, pass near seeping drains or unflushed toilets, clean up vomit and put her nose into a bottle of sour milk, without flickering an eyelid. It also had its disadvantages because she couldn't smell fresh lavender or her roses from the garden or a handful of mint. She said that it didn't bother her because she'd never known any different.

"It's like trying to imagine a colour if I was born blind." she'd say. "What's the point?"

My mum was the Queen of Allergy. Her world was strewn with dangerous substances, like curses, which had to be watched and kept at a safe distance. She was also determined to co-opt her children into the same system of reference. From as early as I can remember, feathers were dangerous. Whenever we stayed in a hotel (in the early days when such luxuries could still be afforded), mum would enter a room and make straight for the pillows.

"Are there feathers in those?" she'd demand of the chamber maids or porters.

There invariably were and the whole lot, in the children's room too, would be despatched in favour of pillows with synthetic stuffing. Air freshener was a no-no. Many perfumes gave off subversive fumes (of course mum couldn't smell the scented element). Only pure silver or gold could be worn in jewellery. Any impure metal would trigger some kind of reaction. This meant that pierced ears were forbidden because the mere pricking of the ear-lobe was asking for trouble. House-dust was like nerve gas and changing the hover was a perilous process. Wasp stings could put you into hospital. The world was full of stuff that would make you sneeze, itch, swell and, in mum's case, bring on a lethal asthma attack, desperate gaspings for breath, rattling in the chest, bulging eyes. As she got older, the list of hazardous substances increased: alcohol was no good for her, most E number food colourings would "set her off" (which ruled out a large number of processed foods), wool could not be touched let alone worn, lamb could not be eaten (I am yet to understand why this hazardous quality was particularly possessed by sheep). But the strange thing was that we lived with cats for years. I would go around with a streaming nose and red eyes most of the time, always had piles of tissues wherever I went, and neither she nor I ever made the connection between my physical symptoms and the possibility of a cat allergy. When I left home, at the age of

eighteen, the symptoms abated. I realised that what I thought was a normal level of sinus irritation was an unpleasant problem. My eczema also disappeared when I left home. I used to have bleeding scabs inside my elbows and knees for most of childhood.

Chapter Four - The Slipper

"Before the queen died she took a ring from her finger and gave it to the king, saying, 'When you have to marry again, marry a woman whose finger fits this ring - not too slack and not too tight.'" "Dona Labismina", from "Contos Populares do Brazil", Silvio Romero

The trumpet blasts were loud and near.

"More royalty." Florence continued to contort her frame so that she could be hidden but still see everything.

"Is the setting-in-stone starting then?" Gloria was trying to see too, despite her wariness.

"Course, it's starting. What do you think is going on - the seven wise angels come to make you the bleeding queen, turd face?"

Gloria ignored the put down and double-checked further. "And is our Lord and king approaching?" She didn't dare look at all now. It was far, far too risky.

Florence couldn't bear not to look. She forced herself into a very awkward position which afforded a decent view from the entrance arch all the way to Queen Cinderella's grave. It was worth the pain.

King Rufus III made his appearance like a being from another domain. He was sleek as a panther in a perfectly tailored, understated jacket with a high collar in the classic style, parallel-lined trousers and laced shoes. His hair was so black that it made the graveyard crows look washed-out by comparison. He walked a few paces behind the trumpeter, the rest of the little procession behind him. Then he stopped beneath the archway where he hovered for a long, agonised moment, just as his daughter had done. He too closed his eyes as he recalled his one-year younger self in precisely the same spot. Everyone behind him came to a respectful halt, their eyes averted. The trumpeter held the brass mouthpiece a hair's breadth from his lips. Time stood still. The world waited. The king opened his turquoise eyes with pupils of jet. He looked at the dark shape standing beside the grave and his brow furrowed.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"That is your daughter, sire, the princess." replied the Chancellor without moving.

"Aaah, yes." remembered the king. "She has taken it badly, hasn't she?" And he nodded to himself in answer to his own question. "The stone has been set, I see." Another moment of silence. Then, as if he had been given an inaudible command, the trumpeter let the mouthpiece connect with his ready pucker, blew a note of brass and paced towards the princess and the headstone. The king strolled behind. After him came the Chancellor with his cropped red hair, blanched skin and slim frame, wearing his suit of inky blue-black with narrowing trouser-legs and pointed shoes. Beside him was the High Priest, white curls tight above his dark brown forehead and wearing a cassock of deepest grey. Then came the senior members of the king's staff and the princess's chief lady-in-waiting. Unlike the funeral, the setting of the stone was a private, low-key affair. There were no pitch-black stallions, no drums, no battalion of infantry with polished buttons and rifles, no representatives from every walk of life and every other land. This time the main body of the court and the ordinary people were out on the streets at the Capitol, preparing to welcome their monarch back to the world after the twelve months of mourning had officially ended. As her father approached, princess Amanda stepped back to vacate the prime position. Only in that moment did she realise that she had been keeping the spot warm for him.

Gloria could not take her eyes off the slipper. Ringing in her ears were the words she'd been taught from birth:

"My mam had a sister, like I've got you, and did she cop the prince? Like hell. She got off with the lousy grave-digger that buried her mam and step-dad and so she was married to the spade and soil for the rest of her days. And all coz her feet was too damn big."

The slipper sparkled in the sunlight. That sparkle illuminated a mighty door of lost opportunities revisited. That sparkle promised another way of being, lost in the embrace of a king and not any king. This was the king who had once been the prince and who was now older and handsomer and more rugged than when her mam was full of hope and had fallen head over heels for him.

"I'm bloody trying that on!"

Spade in hand, Gloria Ugly leaped out of the grave.

"Glory be, Gloria Ugly. Get yerself back in here." frothed Florence, all in a lather of terror. But Gloria was hoofing across that graveyard at thunder and lightning pace. "My Lord and Majesty. I give my foot into your regal hand." She plonked herself bang in front of the King. "For to try on the slipper and be proven as bride."

Florence was gasping for breath, gobsmacked at the way her stupid, useless, appalling sister had gone over the top.

"Bog me if I'm being left behind."

And out of the grave she too jumped, bounded over to where Gloria was standing, elbowed her aside and placed her own foot where her sister's had been.

"Great and mighty king. Take my foot for your test of love."

The King knew too well how women clamoured when the slipper fielded its challenge. All modesty was abandoned in the name of naked desire. That desire had in turn amused, charmed or excited him when he was younger and believed in the power of love to satisfy all longings. Now he felt less than nothing. Everyone else started when the demons from the mud appeared. But the king did not flinch an inch. Princess Amanda, on the other hand, nearly popped out of her skin.

"What are these?" she gasped.

"I believe that they are a variety of female, your highness." informed the Chancellor.

"Human females?"

This wide-eyed inquiry broke the tension. The entourage chuckled indulgently. Mourning was over and they were able to express humour publicly again. What a relief.

The Chancellor called the applicants to attention.

"First arrival first."

Gloria was chuffed to see that Florence didn't dare protest.

The Chancellor continued, "Foot please."

A page knelt on all fours to make a human stool. Gloria sat on his back and raised her leg as the Chancellor indicated. The king took up the crystal slipper and knelt before the Ugly girl whose mother he didn't remember but who had sat before him as eagerly all those years before as her daughter did now.

"With this slipper, I honour thee my consideration." he intoned as he held the crystal just below her foot.

Gloria slid her toes onto the transparent sole of the slipper. It was cool to the touch and ungiving. She realised at once that her mother's fate with this shoe foretold her own exactly. There was no way her plate of meat was going to fit. Then the pit of her brain spat up a memory that couldn't possibly be hers: it was her grandmother offering her mother a knife. Florence, watching, had the same memory too. How it got into both their minds when this happened before they were each born, is not clear. Maybe it had been inserted into mam's story one night when the wind was high and the bint, her heart still spiked with bitterness, was too knackered to censor events. But the sharpness of the memory acted like a very clear

instruction.

"Blow me if that isn't a flying pig. Look! Up there!" shrieked Gloria, pointing to the sky where the crows had formed their circle just before the king had arrived.

Everyone stared upwards expectantly.

Extremities clearly demanded extreme measures. "Come here you stupid foot." Gloria raised her spade and braced herself. Big breath in and...slash! In a flash she sliced the blade down across the place where her toes nestled. Hackety hack, hack, hack until there they lay, five stunted potato tubers in the mudddy grass.

"The aviating pig seems to have eluded us." observed the Chancellor turning his gaze back to the applicant and her test.

"It fits." declared Gloria.

"It fits." confirmed all the rest in attendance.

"It does seem to fit." declared the Chancellor.

Florence's jaw dropped to her knees.

"Out of the graveyard and into the palace!" shouted Gloria with a far too much bravado.

"His majesty must inspect and confirm." stated the Chancellor.

"My eternal love." breathed Gloria.

The king ignored her as he had ignored his daughter during the midnight chimes of mourning. Gloria's bottom lip was beginning to twitch. His stillness made her nervous. How she longed for him to embrace her, to still her too. The slipper fitted, didn't it? They were made for each other (even if surgical adjustment had been needed to prove the fact).

"You majesty?" The Chancellor still required the regal affirmation.

"Daddy?" Princess Amanda whispered. How could this supposed female, more or less the same age as herself (she guessed), become the King's wife! Her mother! And yet the Chancellor was behaving as if the wedding was all but organised. The creature herself was salivating at the mouth. It was disgusting. And that wasn't the only place from which she was oozing. There was some other substance. What was it? A wooziness came over princess Amanda. She pointed to the claret pool forming beneath the toe of the crystal.

"Oh daddy, look, look." she pressed. "Look at all that stuff pouring out of her. Is that normal? Get it away. Please, get it away."

The king lowered his eyes to view the offending extremity.

"Chancellor?" he said in a tone, which suggested affirmation not of the validity of his bride but of his certain belief that she never had been anything of the sort.

The Chancellor was on the case at once.

"Is that crimson trail yours, madame?" he challenged.

"What trail?" Responded Gloria as vacantly as she would to one of Florence's admonishments (although this time her words were laced with innocence rather than surliness).

"That bloody mess behind you." insisted the Chancellor.

Gloria looked down, doing her best to maintain her air of blamelessness even though the endeavour was becoming as hard as pushing a boulder up a hill. When she saw the goo where her foot prematurely ended, she felt this boulder refuse to go up any further.

"Blummin bummer!" she whined.

And the boulder began to tumble back. She tried to jump out of the way but it was too late. It flattened her. The Chancellor drove her humiliation home.

"More of a scissoring than a fitting is it?" Princess Amanda whimpered at the very thought. She couldn't bear to look.

"Let us not prolong the agony." pronounced the King, without harshness. Some flicker of life was stirred in him by this re-enactment of events from his youth. He realised how much he wanted to have his chance again. He had never imagined that he would face growing old so alone.

"Forgive me. Oh Highness. Please. Forgive me." Gloria was on her knees. If only he would look at her and see how she loved him, enough to sacrifice even more of her body parts to fit his requirements. For him she would carve herself to the torso because once he took her, whatever remained, to his heart, then she would be made more whole than she had ever been before. The King glanced her way for a split second. She caught a flicker of acknowledgement.

"Back down the hole." instructed the Chancellor, seizing the moment.

Gloria was swept up by the human stool and another page exactly like him. The water slooped in the bottom of the half-dug grave as she plopped into it.

"Why did she do that to her toes?" asked princess Amanda, peering through her fingers at the nuggets as they congealed in the grass.

"When you're older, darling, I'll tell you all about these things." replied the king as he bent down and scooped them up in his hand.

"Ugh." Princess Amanda's belly heaved.

The King took out a handkerchief from his pocket and dropped the five little piggies into it. A page instantly cleaned the royal hand (the same page who had already cleaned the slipper), another page handed him a fresh handkerchief, whilst a third page received the bundle.

"Return these to their mistress." instructed his majesty, exuding a sense of fair play.

Florence watched as the page dropped the bundle of toes into the grave where Gloria lay. The older Ugly was moved by the King's gesture of consideration. That he should show the Maggot who'd tried to cheat him such respect, and him a high monarch. How then would he treat the one he loved? Florence's heart burned to succeed where her mother, aunt and sister had failed.

"Don't forget about me, my dear Lord." she prompted.

"Must we put ourselves through this again?" muttered his majesty.

"Respect the law and it will be for you an anchor and rock." pressed the Chancellor.

"Of course. Continue." acknowledged the King.

The same page knelt into a stool again. Florence sat on his back and raised her leg again. The King took up the crystal slipper again and knelt before the second Ugly girl whose mother-in-her-pre-mother-youth he was starting to remember. Wasn't there something about the determination of the clamped jaw that was familiar?

"With this slipper, I honour thee my consideration." he intoned as he held the crystal just below her foot, again. Florence had her turn now to slide her toes onto the transparent sole of the shoe. It was just as cool and just as ungiving as before. She realised at once that the fates of the other women in her family foretold her own exactly. Again she envisaged her grandmother offering her mother that knife. Florence used all her power to brush the spectre away. She would not repeat their mistakes. She was the right one. She had to be.

"The foot is far too big." observed the king, preparing to rise.

"No, really, my beloved majesty, just you hold it tight and push hard. Don't be afraid. I can take it." encouraged Florence.

The king looked up at her then, for longer than he had looked at Gloria. It was beginning to come back to him, this pleading expression to keep trying. Every single face belonging to every single foot appeared in his mind's eye. One face, most of all, presented itself. Its features were smeared to a mess. They belonged to a creature hidden in a back room, at whom everyone had scoffed. He recollected the mutters, "Poor, desperate fool thinking her foot will fit." and "Is she really human?" and "She's got no chance." He'd almost believed the comments himself, but he had an ache that needed her balm wherever she was, and his desperation urged him to try every single possibility no matter how sordid. And because he had been prepared to embrace even the most debased creature on the earth, he had been granted his reward. By lifting her on high, so had he been raised on a high which made low his worldly status. Beneath the ashes he had found her. Gold lives, after all, in the slime of the river bed. And the

King now looked at Florence and remembered the ash girl. He looked closely at the shoe and at the size of the foot. It didn't seem possible. But what was not possible if one wished hard enough? "More...more...don't hold back." urged the girl.

"If it could happen once," the King tried to believe, "Why not again?" And so he pushed the little slipper hard onto the big foot. Florence bit her lip as her bones crunched. Princess Amanda covered her mouth to keep the rising tide of bile from surging out of her. "Harder." urged Florence.

Hard, yes. Hold nothing back. The King forced with all his might. Splinters crackled inside Florence's toes and at her heel.

"Are your bones breaking?" asked the king.

"Not mine. I'm fine. Look. It nearly fits." promised Florence.

The King refused to notice the patches of blue spreading across the skin.

"Even harder." pressed the girl.

Even harder he pressed. And then it was on.

"How it fits." gasped Florence.

But the King did not feel the elation that he should.

"Can you stand?" he asked.

"No problem." said Florence. She had to clench her every ounce to rise onto both feet. Princess Amanda squealed as the wretched creature stood. Florence beat down the screech in her breast.

"Can you hop?" intervened the Chancellor.

"Why shouldn't I?" replied Florence.

But she was kidding herself. As she let her body weight drop onto her broken foot, crammed to overflowing into the delicate slipper, her screech escaped with such appalling ferocity that Princess Amanda was now forced to cover her ears.

"Enough." declared the king, "Relieve us of this agony."

Within seconds Florence was crashing on top of Gloria who had not had the will to move from the bottom of the grave. And there they lay, motionless, one Ugly sister on top of the other, in the mud. The story had repeated itself. It had a life of its own and they existed, mere mortals, to feed the hungry narrative with its pound of flesh. Both were wondering if being dead wasn't a much more desirable state than being alive ever could be.

Princess Amanda was relieved that her nausea was abating. She was also overwhelmed with curiosity.

"Father, why did they harm themselves for the slipper? Please tell me." Surely the day when she was old enough to know more of these strange rites of courtship had arrived?

"Do you not want to marry a prince above all else?" asked her father.

"Oh yes." she said with enthusiasm.

"Well, so did they. And they were misguided. But you are right. Princess-and-prince-together is the purest form of happiness." The king could not take his eyes off the slipper in his hands.

"Prince and princess. Be assured, nothing is purer." confirmed the Chancellor.

"And is it not the most beautiful slipper?" mused the king.

"May I try it on?" asked Princess Amanda. She had always been captivated by the special slippers. Cinderella had let her wear them once. They had flapped about her ankles and she'd nearly smashed one of them because, although strangely durable, they also had a very particular and translucent fragility.

"You want to wear your mother's slipper, my dear?" The King was touched by her sweet request. He remembered the tottering and the heel-flapping. He recalled how he and her mother had laughed together at their little princess who so longed to be a queen.

The page bent behind the princess now. Amanda sat. A lady in waiting removed her black court shoe. The entourage burst into spontaneous applause as the king kneeled rather ostentatiously. Was there even some sense of fun in the air?

"Give me your foot, my darling."

"Here father."

And Amanda let her heel drop into her daddy's hand. She shivered when it touched his open palm and realised just how very, very terribly she had missed all the cuddles and hand-holding and hair-stroking that had been their way together and had abruptly stopped the day her mother collapsed.

"What a delicate foot you have." the King observed, suddenly noticing that it was more shapely than he ever remembered. He slid the slipper over the toes and then back over the heel.

What happened now has been told many times by adults to children, by children to other children and back to adults, by minstrels in the light of the camp fire, by animated figures on the big and little screens. What happened next has happened before and will keep on happening again and again.

"It fits!" beamed Princess Amanda. If only mummy was here to see how she'd grown.

"So it does." muttered the High Priest to the Chancellor.

"Indeed, it does fit." said the Chancellor.

Princess Amanda was delighted. She stood up and let her weight sink into the sole. The point of the heel tapped against the stony path.

"I can hop!" she declared and did so with tremendous ease.

The attendants burst into applause as she held her arms aloft in triumph.

"May I dance in it?" asked the princess.

"If it fits. Of course." replied the King.

Princess Amanda raised her arms in an arc in front of her and, one shoe ash black, one shoe gleaming crystal, she began to step out in rhythm.

The King felt as light-headed as he had felt the first time the slipper had found its owner. He saw the foot in the shoe, jiggling down the path through the graves. He watched the skirt swirling around her legs, alive with the tempo of the dance. He noticed her mauve jacket, the same material as the lining of his own. He took in the raven black hair and the porcelain skin. And then his eyes met hers. Emerald green, sparkling like the slipper. His only love. How could he have been deceived into believing that she would leave him alone forever?

"Ella? My Ella?" he choked. "Cinderella?"

She stopped her dance right in front of him.

"It's me, daddy. Amanda."

"My beloved." he gasped.

"Beloved. Yes. Because I am." Princess Amanda was so grateful that at last her daddy was remembering who she was.

"Whomsoever's foot the remaining slipper fits, low or high, poor or proud....." said the King, trailing off, pausing, not completing the sentence. Not yet.

"Do I have to take the shoe off now?" asked Amanda, looking around for more mud-streaked applicants to emerge from holes in the ground. She supposed she'd had enough fun and it was time to get back down to business.

"No." smiled the King, "You can keep it on for as long as you like."

Was he indulging her again like he used to? Was her daddy returned to her at last?

He held out his hand. "Shall we dance?"

Princess Amanda was filled with the flurry of all the dances past, her feet high in the air, the king's off-duty hands tight against her ribs, holding her up. Dancing with daddy was always like flying. She flung herself into his arms and he received her. Why had they been so separated this last year? What a waste. He clutched her tight, not round the ribs now, but his

palms hugging her shoulders, pulling her hair from her face, pressing his clean-shaven skin against hers.

"Dance with me, my love." he said and shifted her gently into position, letting his finger tips slide across her palm. His other hand dropped down to the base of her back and pressed her firmly. No music was playing but he seemed to hear it anyway. As they began to dance she realised that her feet, with their odd shoes, were still touching the ground.

A flap of black. Something landed on the gravestone decorated with lilies. The feather in her pocket was fluttering now as her skirts swished, as the dance built up pace. Were they taking off? Where were they going? The king was asking the same question. He'd been here before but it seemed like an adventure into the unknown all the same.

"Whomsoever's foot the slipper fits, low or high, poor or proud, will be my rightful wife and queen."

They were swirling through the graves together, the King and his daughter.

"The slipper fits. It fits you perfectly. Everything about you fits." He was pressing his forehead upon hers. She could feel his breath on her cheek. As for the king, he could feel his blood flowing hot in his veins. She was warming him back to life. She was bringing him to the boil.

"Your majesty?" The Chancellor was puzzled. The High Priest's brow furrowed with unasked questions too. The princess's legs crumbled beneath her. The dance stopped. The King was displeased.

"Is something bothering you, Chancellor?" The royal voice had that razor edge which made Amanda chill. It made the Chancellor chill too.

"Princess Amanda is....."

"She is the one, no?" asked his majesty.

Neither the Chancellor nor the Priest looked puzzled any more. They looked nervous.

"What has been lost must be replaced. A new queen shall be selected for the King forthwith." quoted King Rufus III by memory.

"Indeed your majesty, but the princess is...."

"The law dictates and I bow to it, do I not?" The king's voice was now en garde and pointing deep into the Chancellor's breast, almost breaking his skin. "The slipper has chosen has it not?"

"It has, my Lord."

"If anyone objects, then they are clearly in contempt of the law."

"Your majesty...?"

"Respect the law and it will be for you an anchor and rock. Is this not so?" The blade of the King's voice now turned on all those in attendance. "Who wishes to challenge the King and his law?"

Everyone was silent. King Rufus I was undoubtedly turning not two hundred paces away in his grave. But the reviving King Rufus III was oblivious to his dead ancestor's disquiet deep in the ground.

"Well?" he challenged.

"It does fit." agreed the Chancellor and the High Priest. All the others attending nodded their heads. Princess Amanda did not nod her head.

"I really should take off the slipper now. " she decided aloud. She pulled her hand out of her pocket, let go of the shuddering feather, and removed the shoe herself. No page or lady in waiting could have got it off quickly enough.

"We'll have another one made just like it. You will wear them for the wedding." Everyone else present, relieved that they were no longer in the line of fire, clapped their hands. Their lives depended on it. Princess Amanda felt so bewildered that she had to ask outright the question which no one else appeared to have the courage to voice.

"Are you going to marry me, father?"

"Of course I am."

"But how can I become my own mother?"

"Were we not all so happy?" he responded.

She could not disagree with this. "Very happy."

"And believe me. Trust me, my only darling. We will be again."

The promise of all the old happiness being restored seemed too glorious to refute. Could he be right? He always had been before. What reason on earth could she have to start mistrusting him now?

"Now, come here. Let me kiss you."

She turned her face dutifully. "Yes, father."

"Why do you offer me your cheek?"

Then she felt his hand cup her chin and raise it towards him. He bent down. Turquoise eyes. Emerald eyes. Her father's kingly lips. Her own lips. His mouth was wet. Hers was dry. Somewhere a bee was stinging a tongue. Whose tongue? Where was it? Deathly silence. When, at last, he pulled away, the applause of the entourage was far too unbearably eager.

"I thought I'd never taste such happiness again." smiled the King, twice as entranced with this girl as he had been with her mother when she was only three years older than her daughter

was now.

Princess Amanda did not dare to wipe her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Is this really what happiness tastes like?" she asked.

He held out his arm to her. "This is only the beginning. I promise. Come with me now to the palace."

Two crows shot into the air in unison, singing their tuneless ditty overhead. The feather was desperate to escape from her pocket.

"May I please stay here a little longer?" She asked.

"Whatever you want, my love." said the King and pressed his lips, his eyes closing momentarily, to the tips of her fingers. "Don't be long."

The trumpet flourished. King Rufus III bowed to his daughter, his future wife. The royal entourage left the graveyard and headed back to the castle where the crowds were waiting, ready to cheer.