

ANATOPSIS

Part I

Chapter 1

In the latter half of the Universe's most recent outward explosion, when things were slowing down a bit but not yet falling apart, when “alive” was still an exciting if not completely safe thing to be, there was a small planet with which you are familiar. In its youth, it had been bright blue, like a marble, but had since turned the color of badly mixed paint. And if you were to draw near it, you would in fact see that its waters were comprised of a mishmash of pigments—rust, algae, methane, phosphorus—all whipped together by the tremendous waves and whirlpools that plagued this planet's surface. This was not a hospitable place, not the sort of world upon which one would expect to find life. And yet, there was one small spot of life left: a gaudy eye of land, its pupil grassy, its iris glinting with steel and glass, the lids speckled with castles and moats and lined with twin blue rivers.

On the southern lid of this island, in a magnificent castle atop the hill, there lived a princess named Anatopsis Solomon. Anatopsis—or Ana, as she preferred to be called—was the daughter of a witch, descended from a long line of witches, and there would be nothing especially unusual about this except that her mother, Queen Abigail Solomon, happened to be chairperson and president of Amalgamated Witchcraft Corporation (or AW, as it was more commonly called).

If you picture Ana's mother as the old-fashioned, cackling-but-colorful sort of witch one finds in fairy tales, you will be dangerously mistaken. She was a modern witch—shrewd, calculating, commanding to the last degree. She presided over a board of twelve witches and warlocks, directed thousands of employees, both magical and ordinary, and worked day and night to maintain her reputation as the most powerful woman in the Universe.

To the casual observer, Ana appeared to be a perfect copy of her mother. She was blessed with her mother's beauty—the long flaxen hair,

moon white skin, and green eyes so essential for beguiling friends and enemies. She had also inherited her mother's aptitude for all things magical. By the age of two, she had read her first Magic Primer; by three, she had mastered all of the Counting Spells; and by the age of five, she could set a cat to running in circles so tight it would explode with static electricity. In short, she was a prodigy.

The similarities between mother and daughter ended there, however. For whereas the Queen interchromafied her hair a necromantic black and kept it perfectly coiffed, Ana's hair resembled an unraveling rope. And whereas the Queen never behaved in any manner that did not suggest pride, dignity, and complete confidence, Ana was moody and unpredictable. One moment she might be shouting and flying about the castle with an old sword, whacking the heads off the gargoyles; the next she might be glowering and melancholy, a princess trapped in a windowless tower. And whereas the Queen believed there was no question that Ana would follow in her dear mother's footsteps, Ana had no interest at all in the family business.

"I want to be a knight-errant, like Father," she said, one morning a few days before her thirteenth birthday. She and her mother were seated at the long, polished witchadder table in the dining room. Ana had managed to spill melonfish juice and crumbs of newt bread all over her ice blue dress. "He gets to travel and meet lots of interesting people. He doesn't sit at a desk all day worrying about his net worth or which employees don't like him."

"Darling," the Queen replied, her back perfectly straight, her elbows tucked in, the skin of her melonfish removed in three deft movements of knife and fork, "if it weren't for *my* net worth, your father would be peddling used spells to half-witted hags. Or, more likely, hanging from a hook in a dragon's lair."

Ana scowled. Her father, Sir Christopher, was the best knight-errant in the Guild. He had traveled to nearly every corner of the Universe and brought back more relics and rare artifacts and disposed of more dragons than any knight-errant in history. Nevertheless, what her mother said was true: Without the Queen to support him, Sir Christopher would likely be a pauper by now. And without her protection, he might have been eaten long ago, or worse.

"In any case, Anatopsis, I did not ask what sort of future you *want*," her mother went on. "I asked what sort of future you expect to have. You've missed two classes this month, and your tutor informs me that your performance has been abysmal."

“But it’s so boring, Mother,” Ana said. “I go to class all day. I do my homework at night, and then it’s dinner and more homework and bed. I never get to go anywhere or see anyone or do anything. I hate it.”

“Well, I took you into the city for your birthday just last year,” the Queen said. “We went to a very nice restaurant, as I recall, and—”

“And then to your office, where you made me sit through that awful lecture about the new spellbinding system.”

The Queen scowled. “I see,” she said, stabbing at a fleshy cube of melonfish on her plate. “I had no idea you felt that way, Anatopsis. But since it was so awful for you, perhaps *this* birthday should be spent in class.”

“You wouldn’t!” Ana said, horrified at the thought of losing her holiday.

“Of course I would,” the Queen said. “However, as it happens, Madame Mumm is gone. I dismissed her this morning.”

Ana dropped her fork. Madame Mumm, the pinch-faced one-eyed crone who had been her tutor since she was three years old, was gone? Why? What had she done?

“Oh, don’t look so surprised, Anatopsis,” her mother said. “It is going to be your thirteenth birthday, after all. That means exactly one year from Friday, you will be taking your Bacchanalian examinations. Surely you didn’t expect me to rely on a decrepit old thing like Madame Mumm to prepare you for the most important moment of your life?”

“Are . . . are you sending me away, then?” Ana asked, remembering all the times her mother had threatened to send her to Arctura 5, the remedial education planet.

“Oh, quite the contrary. I am giving you a little holiday until your new tutor arrives, and then I am chaining you to your desk,” the Queen said, leaning back in her chair. “Mr. Pound will be here in a few days. I think you will find him quite . . . unique.” She said this with an amused twist of the lips that did not bode well, Ana thought.

“In addition to a new tutor,” the Queen continued, “I will be adding a new pupil to your class: Barnaby Georges.”

“*Prince* Barnaby Georges?” Ana said, now completely bewildered. To be allowed to have a classmate—after all these years of begging and pleading—was a shock in and of itself. But Barnaby Georges, son of King Georges, the Queen’s most hated competitor? Ana’s mother could scarcely mention the King’s name without turning twelve shades of purple. Why would she invite his son to share lessons with Ana?

“I—I don’t understand. Why him? Why here?” Ana said.

“It’s a tradition, darling,” the Queen replied. “The heirs of the Solomon and Georges families have always shared their final year of their education. Didn’t you know?”

No, Ana had never heard of this tradition. And judging by the look of mock innocence on her mother’s face, she had not been meant to know—until now.

“You see, darling,” the Queen explained, “your new tutor, Mr. Pound, has prepared every Solomon witch and Georges warlock for the Bacchanalian exams since your great grandmother was your age.”

“But—but I’ve never even heard of him,” Ana said. “And why does he teach the two families together? It doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t know why you have never heard of him. Perhaps if you listened more and complained less, Anatopsis,” the Queen said. “As for teaching the two families together, it certainly would not be my preference. But it is a condition of his services, and, as you will shortly learn, one does not question Mr. Pound’s conditions.

“Now then, when I was your age, I went to Georges Castle. When my mother was your age, Archibald Georges the Second came to our castle. It has been that way for thousands of years now, and odd as it may seem to you, the arrangement is well worth the trouble. For without Mr. Pound’s gifts, our glorious little clan would be nothing more than a mediocre family in a dreary, mass produced castle along the river.”

“I don’t understand,” Ana said.

“No, you don’t. But you shall. In the meantime, consider this: You have the potential to be a great witch. In fact, you might become the greatest Solomon witch ever, if you listen to your dear mama. Prince Barnaby, on the other hand, has been through a dozen different tutors and still cannot remember which end of an asp to avoid. It’s amazing King Georges hasn’t obliterated him.

“Nevertheless, Mr. Pound *is* capable of miracles, and this boy will be your competitor one day. So I suggest you be on your guard and devote yourself completely to your studies, lest you find yourself working for *him*. Is that clear?”

Ana nodded.

“Good. Now, I’m going to have a guest room made up for him,” the Queen continued. “He’ll be free to return to Georges Castle on the weekends, but I doubt he will. His father has been much more temperamental than usual, of late.”

“Aren’t you worried he might spy on us?” Ana asked.

The Queen laughed. “Prince Barnaby is an incompetent nut-brained imbecile,” she said. “I doubt he could discover how many flames there are on a candle, much less anything useful. Nevertheless, he will be monitored.”

The Queen excused Ana from the table but stopped her as she reached the door.

“I want to be absolutely clear about one thing, Anatopsis,” the Queen said. “Barnaby Georges is coming here because Mr. Pound demands it—no other reason. You will share classes with him, but beyond that, you are to keep your distance. He is not your friend. He is not a playmate. He is the enemy, and you will remember that at all times. Is that clear?”

Ana nodded. The Queen dismissed her again, and Ana walked out dazed and bewildered. How could her mother have kept this tradition—if that’s what it truly was—a secret all these years? And the way she had smiled at the mention of Mr. Pound—what did that mean?

She went in search of her father, hoping he could shed light on these mysterious changes. She found him in the Subterranean Spell & Curse Casting Range (or SSCCR, as it was called)—an underground practice area that was little more than an enormous cavern hewn out of rock beneath the castle. Its illusion generating mechanism could reproduce anything from a single venomous vipermoth to an entire six-dimensional city, and there were only two such facilities in the entire Universe—one at Solomon Castle, the other at Georges Castle.

As Ana entered the chamber, a large slavering ogre with a terrible overbite was charging toward her father. Sir Christopher, a tall and gangly knight with comet white hair and a nose like a sword point, was standing in chain mail and tunic with sword drawn, ready to lop off the ogre’s head. He did not notice, however, the Eonian saber-toothed slug darting toward him from the side. As Sir Christopher attacked the ogre, Ana fired a Salt Stream Spell at the slug, dissolving it into a puddle of ooze.

Sir Christopher commanded the SSCCR’s mechanism to stop. All traces of the slug and ogre disappeared, leaving only a dozen mice to scurry off into the darkness. There were always mice in the cavern—the SSCCR needed “living frames” for its illusions, and mice were far easier to house and care for than real trolls or saber-toothed slugs.

“Darling, I appreciate the assistance, but that was a bit cruel, don’t you think?” Sir Christopher said, sheathing his sword.

“Sorry. It was the first spell that came to mind,” Ana said.

While her father unbuckled his sword and began removing his grieves, she told him about her conversation with the Queen. At the mention of Mr. Pound, Sir Christopher suddenly looked very sheepish.

“Ahem. Yes, well—I suppose it’s time, isn’t it?” he said.

“You knew about him all along? And you didn’t tell me?” Ana said.

“Your mother said she would banish me to the outer moons of Jupiter if I so much as whispered it in my sleep. But don’t worry. Mr. Pound’s an unpleasant fellow, but he has taught every generation of Solomons and Georges, and they’ve all come through without a scratch. Besides, I’ll be here to protect you.”

“I thought you were going off on another grail quest in a few days. ”

Sir Christopher blushed. “Yes, well, knight-erranting’s not what it used to be, you know, and these grail quests are a frightful waste of resources. So I thought perhaps I would stay home for a while.”

Ana could not believe her ears. Her father had not stayed home for more than a month at a time since she was born. He had missed at least half her birthdays. And now he was going to be here every day?

“Oh, Father—that’s wonderful!” she said, throwing her arms around him.

“I thought you’d like that,” he said, grinning. “I just have to pop over to Guild Headquarters tomorrow to apply for a leave of absence.”

“Tomorrow? But my birthday’s in two days,” Ana said.

“Oh, I’ll be back in plenty of time.” He gave Ana a kiss on the forehead, then went off to change his clothes.

As Ana climbed the eight flights from the deepest part of the castle to her bedroom, she wondered what her new tutor would be like. *Unpleasant fellow*, her father had said. What did that mean? She hoped it only referred to his appearance, but she was too excited by her father’s news to care. Her father was going to stay! She could not wait to tell Clarissa.

