

The Bell Princess

Nicki Noermark

Wilson & Hound Publishing

Copyright © 2025 by Nicki Noermark

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permission requests, contact the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

For more information, visit wilsonandhound.com

Book Cover by Samitha Perera

1 edition 2025

Contents

Prologue	1
The Bell Princess	4

Prologue

If you visit Denmark today, you'll find a land that is flat and quiet. The fields are green, the trees are full, and the rivers drift unhurriedly through the countryside. It is a gentle place, even a pleasant one—but not imposing, not like the Swiss Alps or the Yellow Mountains of China you might know today.

But once, it was different.

Once, Denmark was a kingdom of mountains that scraped the sky and deep, mist-veiled valleys. The wind howled like wolves through the cliffs, and the world felt taller, wilder, and stranger.

But the mountains did not rise of their own accord. No, the land had been sculpted by trolls.

Trolls shaped the land much as beavers build dams—not by choice, but because they were born to do so. A flat land unsettled them, just as a rushing stream unsettles a beaver.

And so, they carved and heaved and shaped the land until Denmark stood proud as the green mountains of Scotland, or as deep as the fjords of Norway we know today.

But trolls were not the only beings that roamed the land.

Witches, twisted and hideous from the weight of their own wickedness, were so feared that no man dared take them as wives. But when powerful men craved power beyond their reach, they sought out these witches. The witches did not ask for gold—they asked for children.

What they did with them, no one knew for certain. Some believed the witches raised them as their own, teaching them dark magic and twisting their hearts until they became as cold-hearted and wretched as their adoptive mothers. Others—and perhaps this was the darkest fear of all—guessed that the children were eaten, their bones ground into powders for potions.

And there were mermaids, beautiful and deadly. They sang sailors to their deaths, crashing ships on rocks with voices so enchanting that the few who survived tried to recreate them in songs and poems, but nothing ever came close to the siren's song.

Little else was known about mermaids. Only that they loved treasure—glittering coins, jeweled crowns, and strings of pearls. And it was said they could smell which ships carried the most.

There were others too—gnomes, haunted animals, and earthbound gods that either helped or preyed on people in need.

But if every enchanted creature in old Denmark were named, this tale would never begin. Because though it holds witches, trolls, and seas that swallow ships, this story isn't truly about magic.

It is about love.

And though some say magic was born from love, that'll have to be a tale for another time.

The Bell Princess

The town bakery and the butcher's shop stood side by side, which made it inevitable that Viggo and Frila would meet, and just as inevitable that they would become friends.

Each morning, they walked together to the great stone castle that overlooked the sea, delivering bread and meat to the royal kitchens. The guards came to expect them, and grew fond of their laughter echoing down the stone halls.

Viggo was the butcher's son, with broad shoulders shaped by hard work, yet thoughtful by nature. He fell in love the first moment he saw Frila. She smelled of cinnamon, and her skin was white as flour. But it wasn't her beauty that caught him.

She was humble and kind. It was the way she carried bits of bread in her apron pocket, offering them to any animal

she passed. A songbird followed her everywhere. She had rescued it as a chick, and now it repaid her with song.

Viggo didn't know how to say what he felt or if he should say anything at all. So he kept quiet, letting the feelings sit inside him, waiting for a better time.

Frila worked hard. Harder than most girls her age. Her father, Erik, known somewhat affectionately as the One-Armed Baker, had lost his arm in the last war against Sweden.

Since Denmark had lost the war, any promise of pension or glory went with it.

Still, with what savings he had, Erik opened a bakery.

And when Frila's mother died of fever, Frila left school to help him, trading her childhood for early mornings and weary nights.

But she never complained. She laughed often and sang while she baked.

Viggo's family lived just outside of town on a small farm. They were good people and famously chatty. First they talked to the animals. Long conversations with cows about the weather, gossip was exchanged with the hens, and they had daily debates with the barn cat, who had a habit of making a mess of the feeding bins. So by the time people got to their shop, the words just kept coming.

So if you stopped by in a hurry, you learned to talk fast and say something like, “Can’t stay, left the porridge on the stove!” or “Morning walk, doctor’s orders.”

Otherwise, you might be caught in an hour-long story about goats with personality disorders or the latest calf born with spots shaped like some of the Danish islands.

Still, no one ever had a bad word to say. And on slower days, people came by just to chat.

The castle was a crown of stone, overlooking the sea—a symbol of Danish pride and power.

It stood guarding the narrow throat of Denmark like a Lindworm, coiled in stone and copper roofs sharp as spears, watching all who dared pass.

The king and queen spent long seasons there, accompanied by their only son, Prince Valdemar.

Valdemar was everything a prince should be. Handsome, well-dressed, and a little too fond of admiration. His long blond hair had earned the adoration of every visiting princess, and he knew it. He spent lavishly, bragged shamelessly, but he was not unkind. Just... accustomed to having the world bend for him.

And one day, as he strolled past a high window, he glanced down and saw Frila in the courtyard.

He'd never seen someone so remarkable. Such natural grace even with flour on her cheeks and a bird on her shoulder. She wasn't polished like the court ladies, but he didn't care. In that moment, he decided—not a single princess in the world could compare to her. And so, naturally, he decided he should marry her.

The very next morning, the Prince of Denmark arrived at the bakery with a small army of attendants, guards, and curious onlookers trailing behind him. Never in the town's memory had royalty set foot in a common shop, let alone one that still smelled of yeast and ash from the morning's bread.

The townspeople whispered and pressed their noses against the windows. Inside the bakery, Frila stood in her apron, hands still dusted with flour. She stared at the prince, who stood gleaming with confidence in the small bakery.

"I wish to marry you," he declared, as casual as if he were ordering a loaf of bread.

Frila blinked. "You don't know me."

“I know enough,” the Prince said. “And I know what I want.”

Her father, though hesitant, stepped between them. He had married for love when he had married Frila’s mother, long ago, and he wouldn’t let his daughter do any less.

“You may marry her,” he said carefully, “only if she chooses to come inside the castle of her own will. You will offer her no riches, no gifts, no bribes. You may speak only during her daily deliveries, and no more.”

The prince looked startled. He hadn’t imagined anyone would protest to his offer, but he nodded and agreed to the terms set by her father.

From then on, each morning, as Frila arrived with her bread, the Prince met her at the castle gate. He was charming, persistent, and always dressed like he was about to pose for a portrait.

Viggo waited nearby with his wheelbarrow, now empty of meat, listening as their conversations grew longer.

He had never wanted riches. But now, he found himself wishing his sheep’s wool would turn to silk, that his hens

would lay golden eggs. Foolish wishes, he knew. But envy had grown inside him.

And all the while, Frila's world grew heavier.

Her father fell ill. So Frila worked alone, rising before the sun and collapsing long after it set. Yet, she did not waver, trusting that the hardship would pass and her father would soon recover.

With her father bedridden and unlikely to object, the Prince saw an opportunity and arranged for extravagant displays to pass through the courtyard in an attempt to sway Frila.

Each day, something new awaited her: a live giraffe draped in silks, statues carved from Greek marble, a chair so ornate it looked impossible to sit in.

But Frila only shrugged at these spectacles, thanked the Prince politely, and returned to her baking.

Her father, when strong enough to speak, clutched her hand.

"Frila," he whispered. "You've already given up so much for me. Don't give away your heart too. Marry for love, only love. No crown is worth it, unless it's what you truly want."

"I'll do what feels right," she said softly, tucking her doubts behind a forced smile.

Each morning began the same way.

Frila waited by the bakery steps, brushing flour from her sleeves, her songbird perched on her shoulder or circling the sky above her. Viggo arrived with his wheelbarrow of wrapped meats, and together, they walked.

They spoke of everything and nothing.

Of the goose that refused to leave the coop. Of a loaf that had risen too quickly. Of a strange man selling wind chimes made from sea glass. They laughed, as they always had. They passed the crooked fence post that marked the halfway point, and they leaned over the bridge to look at the lazy stream.

It was as if nothing had changed.

But Viggo felt it. The way Frila's eyes lingered on the horizon. The way her smile faded. She was thinking of her father, of his failing breath, of the small savings she counted each night, always coming up a little less than the day before.

She thought of the Prince.

Viggo said nothing.

He told a joke about a goat with royal manners. She laughed, genuinely. But when they reached the castle gate, and Frila turned to go speak with the Prince, Viggo's gaze didn't follow as it normally did.

He stood by the wall, listening as her footsteps faded into the distance.

He didn't want her to choose the Prince. But he didn't know if he had the right to ask her not to.

He waited until he heard them speaking, then turned away and walked back alone.

And though his wheelbarrow was empty, he carried something heavy with him—the terrible weight of words left unsaid.

The sun had not yet risen when Viggo entered the barn. The animals stirred gently, hooves shifting in hay, feathers twitching in half-sleep. His father, Jens, stood by the window, mending an old harness—just one of the many tasks that marked the start of his day.

“I need to speak with you,” Viggo said.

Jens nodded but didn't turn and guessed, “About Frila?”

Viggo hesitated. “Her father is ill.”

“I’ve heard,” Jens said softly. “The whole town has. The Prince can help, can’t he?”

Viggo nodded, eyes downcast. “He can. And I think he will.”

“So what’s the matter?” his father asked, setting down the harness.

“I love her,” Viggo said. “I have for a long time. I walk beside her every morning and talk about chickens and bread crusts because I’m too afraid to say anything real. And now she’s speaking with the Prince—who can heal her father, who can offer her a castle.” He hesitated again. “Shouldn’t she know how I feel?”

His father finally turned, flexing his fingers as if shaking off the work. “Do you want her to choose?”

Viggo opened his mouth, but the words caught.

His father walked toward him, slowly, as if the words weighed him down.

“When I met your mother, she was a seamstress. That’s what her father was, so by blood, so was she. Then she married me...”

He looked out at the barn door, as if seeing something far away.

“If Frila marries you, she becomes a butcher’s wife, just like your mother. Her hands will callous. Her back will

ache. And she'll likely never see the inside of the castle or the courtyard again."

Viggo swallowed hard.

His father's voice dropped. "But if she marries the Prince..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

He didn't have to.

Viggo turned away, his jaw clenched and his heart screaming.

"I understand," he said quietly.

He stepped out of the barn and into the morning mist. Birds stirred in the trees. Somewhere, a church bell rang in the distance.

And had he looked back behind him, he would have seen the shape of his father shimmer and change.

His eyes lost their life, turning flat and painted, like those on a statue.

His skin took on the colour of pale clay.

A witch stood in his place, watching Viggo's silhouette through the barn doors.

She had whispered what she was meant to whisper. She had shifted the weight of fate—just enough.

But as the barn grew silent, her hand rose to her cheek.

The last of her natural skin turned to stone. Then a crack began to form, just beneath her eye, where a tear should have fallen.

Witches were no strangers to wickedness—but cruelty of the heart still left a mark. And this had been cruelty, even by a witch's measure.

The following morning, Frila found the street empty. She waited by the bakery steps, just as she always did.

For a long time, she stood there in silence, watching the horizon—certain that Viggo would appear, grinning and waving like he always had.

But the road stayed quiet.

So, Frila picked up the basket and walked the path alone.

She delivered the bread, spoke briefly with the Prince, and all the while her eyes drifted—to the gate and the corners of the courtyard—searching for a boy who wasn't there.

On her return, Frila continued past the still-closed bakery and butcher's shop and followed the winding path out of town. Past fields of rye and barley and slow-chewing cows, to the butcher's farm.

Jens was at the gate by chance, coaxing a stubborn pig toward one of the barns. He was meant to have taken Viggo's place that morning, but the pigs had broken through the fence, and by the time he'd wrangled them back, Frila was already walking up the path.

She asked where Viggo had gone. Jens hesitated, then offered the story his son had left behind: that the town had grown too familiar for Viggo, too quiet, and he had set off to try life elsewhere.

"He said he needed more than the same old routine," Jens added with a shrug.

But even as he spoke, he felt the lie in his own mouth.

Viggo had whispered those words too quickly, too stiffly, as if rehearsed.

And though Viggo'd never said it outright, Jens knew—he knew it in the marrow of his bones—that Viggo loved Frila.

If only he had been the one to hear it—and not the witch who had stood in his place—perhaps he could've stopped Viggo. Perhaps he would've sent Frila after him.

But all he had were his own beliefs, so he said nothing.

Frila nodded and a puzzled smile brushed her lips. "He never said goodbye," she said.

Then she turned and walked away.

Each morning, just after the bread cooled and the night gave way to day, Frila made her way to the castle gates.

Jens walked beside her now. Quiet didn't come naturally to him—he was a man who usually filled silences with stories or weather talk—but the look on Frila's face told him this wasn't the time.

So he didn't speak much, not on those walks.

He saw how she lingered after the delivery—how her eyes kept searching the road behind them. He wanted to say something. But what could he say?

Day after day, they returned to the castle. And though Viggo never came, Frila kept hoping he'd return, because hope, like a bad habit, can be hard to put down.

But one morning, after a particularly rough night for her father, she stepped closer to the Prince and whispered something in his ear.

The Prince smiled and offered his hand. Frila took it—and stepped into the castle, knowing nothing would be the same again.

Behind her, the kitchen staff crowded to see the baker's daughter who had won the Prince's heart. But Frila didn't

look back. Not at the courtyard, not at the gate where Viggo often stood.

Still, just before the door shut, she hesitated—perhaps hoping, for a moment, that she might hear Viggo’s voice.

But no voice came. No one stopped her.

The door was closed.

Within days, doctors and physicians arrived from every corner of the world to treat the one-armed baker. They examined him carefully, made him swallow pills, and drink tonics from small flasks, with all manner of foul-tasting flavors. And just like that, Frila’s father began to recover.

So it was that Erik stood tall in ceremonial robes at their wedding—no longer the one-armed baker, but a newly appointed diplomat, chosen by the Prince to help mend the rift between two uneasy kingdoms. The labor and battles of his past were behind him now; his hand bore no new scars of war or work. From now on, it would be his knowledge, his years of experience in the army, that would do the work.

Frila had done what needed doing. But love, as we know, is not so easily arranged.

At first, the castle was filled with celebration. The baker's daughter had become a princess. Musicians played for days. The finest clothiers in the realm tailored dresses from imported silks. Artists painted her smile.

But smiles can be worn like jewelry. And Frila's never quite reached her eyes.

She had hoped love might grow in time—after all, the Prince was kind, and kind men are rare in high places. He gave her everything she could ask for. Except something unspoken. Something she couldn't quite name, but felt the absence of all the same.

She also came to miss the rhythm of the bakery. She missed dough under her fingernails and the songbird perched on her shoulder. At the castle, it wasn't proper to keep a bird, so she had to settle for visits and its songs at her window. She missed Viggo—his quiet glances, his clumsy jokes, the way he'd carry her things just to walk beside her longer.

The Prince, however, grew to love her. He loved her fiercely. Desperately. More and more each day. And the more she pulled away, the harder he clung to her.

Frila began walking the stables alone, feeding the horses in silence. She took to baking again—not in public, of course, but in the castle’s lower kitchens where the cooks pretended not to notice her presence. She lost herself in dough and flour, just as she once had. She knew she was living in a place most only dreamed of.

Still, her heart ached, missing something true.

Years passed, and one day, from a high tower window, she spotted Viggo’s father, Jens, arriving with a delivery of meat.

It sparked something in her, and later that day, she rushed down to the town and visited the old butcher’s shop, the same way the Prince had once visited her, in her father’s bakery.

The shop was bustling, as always, and a small crowd gathered outside.

She asked after Viggo—where he was now, how he was getting on. Jens wiped his hands on his apron and gave a small, knowing smile.

“He lives in a village far to the west, where the hills are low and the fences are made of driftwood,” he said. “Has a farm of his own. Good land, good animals.”

He paused, then added, “He works hard and keeps mostly to himself. But he’s doing well.”

Frila nodded—already oozing with the grace expected of her new station.

“I’m grateful for the update,” she said, her voice measured and clear. “It brings me comfort to know he fares well.”

She offered a small, practiced smile, the kind one gives in court. Then she tilted her head slightly and turned to go. She hesitated, as she often did when it came to matters involving Viggo. She wanted to say something, but decided against it.

Instead, she straightened her shoulders and walked out through the crowd.

People stepped aside without being asked. A few bowed their heads as she passed, not out of duty, but quiet remembrance of who she once was.

That night, Frila stood by her window, holding back tears.

And then, quietly, she made a decision.

She approached her most trusted maid and handed her a letter sealed with wax. Frila gave the maid the directions and added, almost in a whisper, “Make sure he knows... it’s from me. Frila. Not the princess.”

The maid traveled quickly, and a few days later, she arrived at Viggo’s new shop.

She quietly stepped inside. Viggo looked up from behind the counter. When he saw her, he froze—not from fear, but recognition. It was the way she held herself: hands folded neatly, chin lifted just so. He’d seen that composure before, in the quiet dignity of castle staff.

She handed him the letter. He read it in silence, and when he was done, he held it to his chest.

“She says you shouldn’t think of her differently,” the maid said softly. “That she’s still your friend. No matter what her title is.”

Viggo gave her a friendly smile. “Even before she was a princess,” he said, “standing next to her always felt like standing beside royalty. So for me, nothing’s changed.”

That night, he packed what he needed and left for the docks.

At the harbour, Viggo waited for a boat to carry him to the central island on his journey east. Reaching the castle would require two crossings—this was only the first.

Two beggars sat nearby, cloaked in shadow.

As he passed, one reached out a gnarled hand. Viggo, instinctively kind, dropped two coins into the palm.

But the beggar grabbed his wrist.

She was hideous—her skin cracked like bark, her eyes like hollow pits of black. A witch.

Viggo flinched, but her fingers bit into his skin like thorns.

“Turn back,” she said in a deep, hoarse voice. “A journey that doesn’t wait for daylight is a journey cursed with evil spirits and death.”

Viggo pulled free and backed away.

“Fortune tells, that you’ll find the one who waits for you, young fool,” she continued, “though it won’t be what you hoped.” The witch muttered, sounding almost sorry for him.

“The day I take advice from a witch is the day I know I’m cursed,” he barked.

“Oh, you misunderstand, boy,” she croaked. “It’s not advice—it’s a warning.”

A long rowboat approached. A broad-shouldered man rowed while another held a lantern high. Viggo hesitated—but only for a moment. He stepped aboard, the witch’s final words echoing in his mind.

The boat ride passed quietly. The only sounds were the oars slicing through water and the dull creak of wood. A few other travellers were on the boat, but Viggo kept to himself, Frila’s letter tucked safely into his coat.

Not long after, he arrived on the central island and set off toward a horse breeder he’d heard about. The boat he arrived on had been too small for a horse, and though a larger ferry would take animals across by morning, Viggo hadn’t wanted to wait.

Carrying an old lantern, he wandered into a deep, dark forest.

Every now and then, he thought he heard laughter echoing through the trees, and without even realising it, his legs had begun to run.

The lantern's light blew out, and the laughter grew louder, and sometimes he felt hands grabbing at his clothes.

Branches broke as he pulled free. In the distance, he spotted a light and raced toward it.

Whatever chased him seemed to breathe down his neck.

Finally, he saw a light—a farmhouse!

He stumbled to the door and knocked frantically. A woman with wild hair and strong arms opened it. She took one look at him and ushered him inside.

“You’re lucky you found me,” she said, handing him water. “Most don’t get through that forest after dark.”

He was handed something warm to drink, and he learned that she was the very breeder he sought.

He was offered a bed of wool blankets, and gladly accepted.

At dawn, Viggo purchased the fastest horse he could afford and began galloping across the island.

The island was large, and halfway across, Viggo rested by a small lake while the horse grazed.

A storm brewed on the horizon.

A nearby farm took him in just as the winds began tearing at the countryside.

Strangely, while the farmhouse shook under the storm's force, the barns remained untouched.

As Viggo went with the farmer to check on one of the barns, the wind seemed to shift. Now the barn shook while the house stood still.

He grew uneasy.

It seemed as if the storm was following him.

Fearing for the family's safety, Viggo decided to test his theory.

He grabbed two heavy milk canisters and leaned into the wind, hoping it would be enough to keep him on the ground as he made his way to the barn where his horse waited.

He mounted and rode away as fast as he could.

At a safe distance, he looked back. The farm was still—no wind, not even a leaf stirring.

But then the wind returned, heavier than before, and it took shape as it charged. A colossal bull of wind and rage, its horns curling like clouds, its breath hot with storm. It tore through the land, snapping fences, uprooting trees,

trampling everything in its path as it thundered straight toward him.

As he rode away, he pushed the horse harder and harder.

They rode for some time, and he felt the horse wearing out.

Viggo spotted a small cave ahead, but even from a distance, he could tell the horse wouldn't fit inside. He halted beside it, slid off the saddle, and with a reluctant hand, he slapped the horse's flank, sending it galloping away from the storm.

The storm caught up to him just as he squeezed into the cave. He heard the storm bull bellow as it threw itself against the cave.

The tiny entrance collapsed, and he was trapped. He heard the bull circle and stamp the ground around the cave, as if it was waiting for him to step back into its path.

Exhausted, he lay down on the cold ground and soon fell asleep.

He opened his eyes to nothing. Inside the cave, darkness reigned. There was no way to measure time—no sun, no moon, only silence and cold stone.

Viggo clutched Frila's note for comfort as he contemplated his new predicament.

He pushed against the stone walls and boulders, hoping something might move—but nothing gave way.

Hours passed. He sat on the cold ground, wondering if this was how it ended. Then, from somewhere deep within the cave, a wind stirred. It snatched the note from his hands and carried it into the depths.

Blind and stumbling, he chased the fluttering paper by sound until it pinned itself to a large rock. A single beam of sunlight fell upon it, as if pointing the way.

He reached for the note, and a large rock rolled aside, revealing a narrow tunnel.

Viggo stepped into the sunlight and stretched his limbs. Then, from the road, he heard the clatter of a passing carriage.

He flagged it down.

The driver was an old man with a tired face.

“Do you know what happened?” Viggo asked, staring back at a storm-torn land and knocked trees.

The man shrugged. “Storm. Unusual storm,” he said. Then added, “But then again, everything is unusual around here.”

The carriage dropped him in a sprawling port town, where sails crowded the horizon and the smell of the sea filled the air.

After a warm meal and a short rest, Viggo moved among the fishermen, traders, and soldiers until he found a young captain with a swift little ship bound for his home island, where Frila would be.

But the sea had its own plans. Halfway home, the winds shifted, and Viggo's luck unraveled.

A song rose from the depths, so beautiful it bent the world. Bliss slipped into every man's chest, and they all sighed as love filled their hearts. Viggo, gripping the railing, looked out, and one of them was singing to him. Or so it felt. Her voice reached inside him, pulled something loose. The sea vanished. There was only her. The golden siren. The unbearable beauty of her. He stepped over the edge of the boat.

The spell loosened its grip, and he saw: the sea was filled with mermaids.

They circled like sharks, dragging men down. Viggo kicked toward the surface, but something caught his ankle.

A mermaid. Her eyes shimmered like pearls as she gave him a villainous smile. Her fingers dug into his skin. Water filled his lungs.

Then, stillness.

As Viggo's body sank, the mermaids turned to leave. All but one.

The one that had pulled him down hovered near him. Something in his chest called to her.

A heart in love fights longer. It beats stronger and drums differently.

She had drowned many, and she knew the sound.

Love left a scent in the water, like blossoms carried on a current—too beautiful to crush.

She brushed his cheek. Then, gently, she kissed him.

Viggo's eyes opened.

He was breathing, underwater.

The mermaid pointed upward. He hesitated, just long enough to see the sorrow in her eyes, then swam with all his strength.

He burst from the sea, gasping, coughing water into the sand.

Soaked and shivering, Viggo pulled himself from the surf. The castle lay somewhere beyond the hills, and with no horse, no ship, and nothing left to lose, he set off on foot.

He walked for half a day, and it should have been a quiet walk. But nothing about his journey had been quiet.

A low, echoing laughter returned in the distance. He turned to see two women on the road behind him. The same beggars from the dock. But now their disguises fell away.

Witches.

One, the bark-skinned and hollow-eyed, from the dock, raised a stick. Blue lightning shot out, striking the ground near Viggo.

The second witch, pale as stone with painted-on eyes, the very one who had once worn the face of Viggo's father, spoke a curse.

The sky turned a sickly shade, neither night nor day. Everything beneath it seemed twisted with hunger, like the world itself was yearning for something to die.

"What do you want?" Viggo shouted.

"Only what's left," hissed the bark-skinned witch.

"Your life," growled the other, firing another bolt.

Viggo rolled and hurled a rock at the bark-skinned witch, chipping her cheek, revealing how fragile her skin truly was.

She screamed and raised her wand. The sky opened.

Lightning fell like rain. One bolt struck Viggo in the back.

He fell, but instead of landing in grass and mud, he fell through the ground. The world turned upside down. Bones, broken swords, and empty armour lay scattered around him.

When he looked up, far up, he saw the grass field where he'd been attacked.

His own body lay lifeless in the grass.

And in the distance, the two witches were already walking away, their silhouettes shrinking as they disappeared into the trees. They seemed to be upside down. Or maybe he was. He couldn't tell.

A tall, dark figure approached. It was Death.

Viggo grabbed half a sword and waited for Death to come closer. As Death reached out, Viggo swung the sword, but it passed right through him.

Death grabbed Viggo's arm, and he glimpsed his reflection in something shiny tucked into a rope-like belt. A dagger.

He grabbed it and stabbed into the shadow-like cloak of Death.

Death staggered.

Viggo broke free and ran toward a cliff's edge. Death hovered behind, untouched by the rocks and wreckage.

Looking over the edge, he saw only thick clouds, hiding whatever lay below. There was no path forward, no way back.

There was no time to think. No other direction to run.

So Viggo did the only thing he could. He jumped.

But instead of falling through the clouds, he fell upward and away from them, toward the grass field where his body lay.

Though falling at great speed, it felt like landing on a soft mattress when he hit the ground. His eyes opened, as if waking from a deep sleep. Death was gone. So were the witches.

As he stood, he caught his reflection in a puddle. He looked older—years older.

He glanced down at his wrist, where Death had gripped him. The feeling lingered, cold and deep, but it was fading now.

He guessed Death had stolen time by a single touch.

Viggo sat down on a flat stone, breathing hard, brushing dust and debris from his clothes.

Why him? Why all this? Witches, storms, curses. None of it made sense. He was just a butcher's son.

Maybe he should turn back. Maybe he'd already gone too far. But then he thought of her. The princess. Frila. And a feeling stirred in his chest—not just love, but something close to it. Worry. The kind that tightens the lungs.

Maybe she was in danger. Maybe all this was somehow about her.

That thought alone made him rise. He didn't have answers. But he had to be sure.

And so, he kept walking.

It wasn't the castle he saw first, but the old bridge with the missing plank and the tree with the split trunk. Viggo knew he was close. He could feel the pull of home in his bones.

The peaks of the castle towers became visible in the distance, and though the forest was often used by trolls moving between mountains, it remained the quickest way to the castle.

The worst, he figured, had already found him—storms, curses, even Death itself. So he took a breath and stepped into the trees.

Halfway through the forest, Viggo stopped in a small clearing. If he stood just right, he could see the castle in the far distance.

He imagined what he would say.

Would she still want to talk to him? Would she even recognise him?

The wind shifted.

From the trees came footsteps. Voices.

Trolls.

They emerged from behind bark and boulders—nothing like what he'd imagined.

Twice the size of any man, but nothing about them felt monstrous. Their shapes were carved from strength and long days of labour. Moss hung from their arms and shoulders like armour the forest had set there on purpose. One had a beard down to his chest, thick with vines and dotted with small blossoms, as if the woods had made a home in him. Another had hair thick like roots, long and heavy, like nature had woven itself into his hair.

“Are you Viggo, son of Jens the butcher?” asked the tallest one.

His eyes weren't savage. He didn't roar—he simply spoke, slow in both word and step. Whether it was dullness or just his nature, Viggo couldn't tell.

Viggo swallowed. “No,” he said. “I’ve never heard of him.”

The troll frowned. “Pity. Better if you were him. But still... stone you shall be.”

Viggo bolted.

They reached for him with slow, enormous hands. He slipped through their grasp and scrambled up a tree.

Trolls can’t climb—not well. So they argued below, about what to do.

“If not the butcher,” one said, low and calm, “why not let him go?”

“Because the butcher’s son is headed to the castle,” the other growled. “If this one’s him, he’ll show up there—and that’ll be a mess the Prince won’t like.”

“The Prince?” Viggo whispered from the branches.

Then a troll from the back hurled a boulder.

The tree crashed down and Viggo rolled to the ground, surrounded once more.

“I give up!” he sighed. “I’ve outrun storms, been drowned by mermaids, cursed by witches, and I’ve fought Death himself! If you were sent by the Prince, then I’ll save you the trouble—I’m Viggo, son of Jens the butcher.”

The trolls murmured. Their leader stepped forward.

“Turn him to stone,” one chanted. The others joined in.

Viggo raised a hand. "At least let me choose where I stand."

The leader squinted. "No tricks."

"No tricks. Just one last look."

They followed him back to the clearing.

He took out Frila's letter and pressed it to his chest.

"I'm ready."

The troll touched his shoulder.

A glow spread—soft and silvery—across his skin.

Stone crawled up his arms, over his chest, across his face.

And then he stood still.

Forever watching the castle.

Forever longing to see the princess.

Days passed.

Then weeks.

Frila waited by her window every morning, looking out over the forest.

Viggo never came.

She told herself he'd lost interest in their friendship. Fallen for someone else, maybe.

Perhaps the maid she'd sent had charmed him—she never came back.

Or perhaps the Prince had intervened somehow. He'd never confess to it, of course, so no point in asking.

Besides, she had no proof of any of it. Only silence. And heartbreak.

So time, for better or worse, moved forward.

The Prince, for all his faults, succeeded in brokering peace between humans and trolls. The war that had lasted for centuries ended without a single arrow fired. He took full credit, though none ever learned how the treaty had been forged.

Frila stopped waiting at the window.

She baked again, spending long hours in the castle kitchens with the staff. She came to know their names, their jokes, their small dreams.

The King and Queen disapproved, of course.

But the Prince did not. He loved her still, fiercely. When her father visited from Sweden, he made sure it was often, because that was when Frila smiled the most.

And then—she became pregnant.

Hope bloomed again.

But it withered quickly.

The child was a brief light, gone too quickly.

The royal physicians whispered behind gloved hands. “Too much work,” they said. “Too much strain.” They blamed her un-princess-like habits.

Frila returned to silence. She stopped baking. Stopped smiling.

And sometimes, when the halls were quiet, she wandered them like a ghost.

The years passed slowly, each one quieter than the last. Frila roamed the castle halls, did the things expected of a princess—she wore the gowns, sat through the lessons, waved from balconies. But her heart never caught on anything. She moved through the days as if waiting for something to begin, though she no longer knew what.

But one cold afternoon, Frila discovered a door left ajar.

She entered a room that stretched wide and empty, its purpose long forgotten. Dust veiled the old portraits, which were scattered everywhere—grim-faced kings and queens in golden frames. She moved between them, wondering what kind of people they’d been.

Then she heard voices.

Through a crack in a hidden door, she saw a room lit by flickering candles.

The Prince stood with three figures: an old woman leaning on a gnarled cane, a barrel filled with sloshing water, and a cloaked man so tall he sat hunched beneath the rafters.

“A child was owed. And a child was taken,” said the old woman.

“I didn’t know it would be her only one,” the Prince replied.

“You knew the cost,” she snapped, then vanished through a secret door.

From the barrel, a soft voice rose—young, but sharp. “You said the last one held treasure. It held trinkets. Insults. We do not sing for scraps.”

There was a pause. The tone went impatient.

“Give us another. The one deep at the docks. Gold sweats from its hull. It stinks of riches.”

“That ship carries a peace ransom to the Swedes—” the Prince began.

“Then send another,” the voice snapped. “Gold for peace can wait. We are hungry now.”

Frila’s heart stopped.

Then she burst through the chamber doors, her breath short, her voice sharp with disbelief.

“You offered them our firstborn,” she said, the words nearly choking her. “You made deals with these... monsters!”

The Prince stood by the window, startled by Frila’s sudden entrance.

“My father is on that ship.”

But even as she spoke, she saw it—through the high glass behind him, the sea changed, waves pulling in unnatural patterns, as if something below was getting ready for something.

Then came the voice like a song threading through stone, beautiful even as it chilled the spine.

“That ship is already ours.”

Frila stepped back once, as if to retreat. Then she turned—and ran. There was only one thing left she could do.

Save her father.

“Stop! Stop!” the guards cried behind her, but Frila slipped through narrow halls and servant doors only few remembered. Let them chase, she thought. She had no time to waste.

She burst into the bell tower. With all her strength, she pulled the heavy rope. The bell rang.

She ran up the stairs, each ring louder than the last. Throwing herself against the ledge overlooking the sea, she caught sight of her father's ship gliding away in the distance.

She screamed her father's name, but the wind couldn't carry her voice all the way.

Frila knew the bell, when rung at odd hours or in times of war, was a signal of retreat—sometimes even surrender. Her father would hear it and he'd know something was wrong. She just had to make sure he knew it hadn't rung by accident.

So in desperation, she grabbed a wooden beam and slammed it against the bell, forcing it to ring again.

She watched helplessly as the ship fought to turn back. Sailors leapt into the sea, overtaken by song. The ship veered hard, as if a drunk man held the wheel, steering wild and wrong—until it struck something just beneath the surface. The ship cracked in half.

As she saw her father's ship sink beneath the waves, something changed in Frila.

She collapsed at the tower's edge, her legs giving out beneath her. She buried her face in her hands and wept—not like a princess, but like a mother robbed of child, a daughter mourning a lost father, and a girl who had

tried to be clever, to be good, to choose what made sense. But finding nothing but pain at the end. The sort of ache that brings innocence to its knees.

Nevertheless, she could not forget. She could not forgive. So she made herself a vow: Whenever a ship leaves the docks, she would find a way to make the bell ring.

It had once warned of war. Now, it would warn of mermaids.

The first time, the guards tried to stop her. But she slipped past them—quick, determined, her feet knowing the way. She reached the top and slammed her shoulder into the great bell, again and again, until its voice echoed across the sea.

The ships turned back.

The Prince was furious.

He had struck a new bargain with the mermaids: in exchange for their restraint, he gave them schedules, routes, and flags of foreign ships heavy with gold. The Prince even paid them a modest tribute, sacrificing a few of his own ships to maintain the alliance. But when the deep ships

came—merchant galleons fat with treasure—they split the spoils. It was cleaner than war. And far more profitable.

The second time, she paid a guard—just enough to buy his silence and his hand. When the ship began to drift from the docks, the bell rang once more. The sails turned back. And the Prince's fury deepened.

In distant ports, sailors whispered of a bell that tolled when mermaids stirred.

So when foreign ships heard its chime echo across the water, they turned back—fleeing Danish shores before the mermaids could lure them overboard.

Even local vessels returned to their docks, refusing the Prince's orders to continue, no matter the cost. To many sailors, defying the Prince was worth time in prison—better chains on land than death at sea.

The third time, they caught her halfway up the stairs. The bell stayed silent. The ships sailed. And the mermaids did the rest.

Prince Valdemar tried to reason with her, as if what he'd done could be explained or excused.

"I'll be king soon. What I did will stop wars before they start. The people are tired of fighting, of hunger. They want peace. And sometimes peace comes at a price."

Frila looked at him unwavering.

“Funny how it’s always someone else who pays the price for peace.”

The Prince gave up and ordered Frila locked in her chambers.

Frila was locked in her chambers for days—kept from the tower, from the bell, from every path that might have led to warning. She wept for the ships that sailed blind into danger, for the sailors who would never see their homes again.

But on the seventh night, a strange chill crept through the corridors. A wind that did not move curtains, a shadow that walked without feet.

An old woman appeared in Frila’s chamber. Stepping into the moonlight stood a figure with stone for skin and eyes that never blinked, as if they were merely painted on.

“Dear princess... You mustn’t be locked away,” she said as she raised a hand.

Frila took a step back, but was blocked by a wall.

“One teardrop true, one chime for you. Cry for love, cry for pain... and the bell shall sing again,” the witch hummed.

The air around Frila filled with light, like swarms of fireflies, and the candle flames flickered through shades of gold and blue.

And inside the large bell tower, the great bell gave a low, distant hum, as though it had heard.

The witch sighed as she touched her own cheek, where the stone started to thin—just a little. Even the crack below her eye healed.

“One kindness,” she whispered to herself. “And already it fades.”

“I don’t understand.” Frila looked at the witch, confused.

“Oh, we overdid it, darling. A pinch of wickedness is one thing—but this? This was a feast of sorrow. And when the innocent suffer... well, it stops being fun.”

She stepped onto her broom, flinging her skirt, making it swirl like smoke.

“What of my child!?” Frila asked.

The witch purred, swirling a crooked finger in the air.

“Better off with us than tangled in your prince’s lies. Changes have been made—too late to undo. But the child is safe. Happy, even. Happier than you’d believe.”

“I’ll do anything,” Frila begged.

The witch paused and her expression turned somber. “I am sorry. We... are sorry. The thread’s tied. What’s coming, can’t be undone.”

Frila didn’t know what to say. And before she had the chance, the witch made a final declaration.

“Let this land curse itself,” she said, and flew out the window, where a sky full of witches waited, black against the moon.

And then they all vanished, leaving only the faint scent of damp moss and boiled herbs. No witch was seen in Denmark again.

Ships still sailed. And Frila, from her window, wept.

And each time her tears touched the ground, the bell rang—loud and mournful, echoing across the sea, and approaching ships turned away.

The staff began to whisper.

No guards saw her climb the tower anymore, yet the bell tolled with each departure. They called her the Bell Princess, though none knew why. Only that the ringing had started with her, and so they assumed that she must have something to do with it.

The Prince grew uneasy.

He ordered the bell tower sealed.

The bell still rang.

He posted guards at every exit.

The bell still rang.

So at last, in a fit of royal rage, he ordered the bell itself removed.

It was hoisted by ropes, carried through the streets, and cast into the sea. Its descent sent ripples across the harbour.

Frila still wept.

And far beneath the surface, the bell kept ringing.

To nearby sea life, it sounded like thunder in the deep.

Unbeknownst to Frila, or anyone on land, the sound drove the mermaids mad. Some swam into the blackness, the deepest parts of the Danish ocean. Others fled to faraway places—anywhere the bell could not follow.

And for a time, the waters were quiet.

The Prince could not understand.

The gold he offered floated untouched on the waves. The mermaids no longer came.

And yet, with every ship that sailed, the ocean seemed to pulse and vibrate.

The Prince came to her in her chambers.

“Tell me how you ring it,” he demanded. “The bell is gone—thrown into the sea. And yet, the mermaids take no ships.”

She looked at him, but she didn’t answer. That silence undid him.

Hurt and angry—angrier still that she would never love him—he had her locked in the bell tower. There were no walls at the top, only stone and wind, cold enough to crack bone.

“Let her freeze,” he said. “Let her cry for her ships if she won’t cry for me.” He said it with bitterness, but unknowingly, he had explained the spell itself.

She was dragged to the bell tower, not as royalty, but as a prisoner.

But a few guards pitied her, and the kitchen maids too. They smuggled blankets and bread, and candles rolled under the door. And somehow, through the snow and solitude, she made a home of it.

In her mind, she had endured worse with less. Her soft skin only hid how weathered she truly was.

Years passed, and a lesser man took the one-armed baker's place as diplomat. So, as time went, tensions built. And since the mermaids were driven away by the drowned bell, it was just a matter of time before the Swedish ships finally arrived, loaded with cannons and soldiers.

The castle was no longer safe.

The Prince reluctantly had the Princess summoned, and they fled with a handful of guards and a carriage full of valuables. But the road out of the city was clogged with townsfolk, dragging carts and carrying what little they had. The royal carriage could barely move.

Valdemar, restless and fearing the worst, leaned from the window.

"We'll take the forest," he said.

"But the treaty—what about the trolls?" a guard asked.

"We're royalty," the Prince replied. "They'll let us pass."

The forest had grown darker and stranger. Even the trees seemed to whisper.

Then Frila saw something off the path—half-buried in moss and vines. A statue standing where it made no sense to place one.

It stood, hands pressed to its chest, facing the castle. It looked almost... peaceful.

She had the carriage stopped and dismounted.

The figure was strong, his face familiar. Something about him stirred in her memories. How could he feel both known and unknown? She turned to the trees.

“Trolls!” she called. “Who is this man?”

The Prince climbed from the carriage. “It doesn’t matter,” he said eagerly. “We need to move before they turn on us.”

Frila narrowed her eyes. “You know who he is.”

“I don’t,” the Prince lied.

She stared at him.

Then Frila went back toward the carriage, pretending she was ready to leave. But without warning, she snatched a crossbow from one of the guards.

“Who. Is. He?” she demanded, aiming it at a troll peeking from behind a tree.

The troll stepped forward, like he accepted the challenge of an arrow to the chest.

“Songbirds perch on his shoulders,” the troll said. “They sing him stories of a princess who waits at windows. They sing she weeps for the ships... but sometimes, for something she’s lost.”

From the branches above, a songbird fluttered down and hovered in front of her.

Not the one she’d saved long ago—but it chirped as if it knew her still.

Then, it dropped something into her hands.

It was a scrap of paper, crumbling with age. So damp and delicate it nearly fell apart as she tried to read it.

It was her note.

She saw it now, plain as day. The bird had saved the note moments after the spell had taken him. She didn’t need to be told. She knew. She knew him.

Frila’s voice cracked. “Can you bring him back?”

“We can.”

“Please,” she whispered.

The troll stepped forward, reaching out to the statue—

“Wait!” the Prince barked, stepping closer. “You can’t. We had a deal. A deal for peace. That ends if you do it!”

The troll turned his head slowly toward the Prince, his hand still hovering over Viggo's shoulder.

"Peace wants silence. Silence wants lies. But lies steals sleep. The truth will give us rest." He fixed his gaze on the Prince. "A truth buried is just a war delayed."

And with that, the troll placed his hand on the statue's head.

The vines fell away and the stone shimmered and cracked. Flesh emerged beneath the granite. Viggo collapsed into Frila's arms.

He looked up at her with dazed eyes. "I never thought I'd see you again," he whispered.

"You came," she said, trembling.

"I tried."

They held each other. But not for long.

The Prince stepped forward, the crossbow that only moments ago had been in Frila's hands.

"You love him?" he asked, voice shaking.

Neither of them answered.

"I'm a prince," he said. "He's a butcher. What can he give you that I cannot?"

Frila turned to him, eyes strong but wet with tears.

"I don't blame you for not knowing. You've never walked beside someone just to be near them. Even if I told you, you wouldn't understand," she said.

The Prince lowered the weapon.

“You knew?” Viggo whispered, surprised she had never said a word.

“I wasn’t sure,” she said quietly, glancing over her shoulder. “But something in me knew. Can you forgive me?”

“Of course. Always,” Viggo smiled.

Frila smiled as she turned her gaze to match her stance, meeting the Prince’s eyes.

The string snapped.

She gasped and fell into Viggo’s arms.

Even the Prince looked horrified. He threw the crossbow to the ground in disgust at his own action, then turned away, retreated to the carriage, and gave no order for the field medic to tend to the princess. Instead, he climbed inside and told the driver to go.

Frila lay in Viggo’s lap, her breath short, the arrow deep in her chest.

Viggo begged the trolls to help. “Please, do something, anything!”

The trolls gathered. One knelt beside her and gently examined the wound.

“We can’t,” the troll said quietly. “When trolls are hurt like this... they don’t survive.”

Frila tried to smile. “It’s alright.”

Viggo shook his head. “It’s not.”

He kissed her forehead, holding her tighter. Then quietly he said, “Would you spend a few thousand years with me?”

She chuckled, though it hurt. “Seconds will have to do.”

“No,” he said, and looked to the trolls. “Can you turn us to stone? Together?”

The trolls exchanged glances, uncertain. “You want this?” one asked.

Viggo nodded and looked to Frila.

Frila placed her hand over his. She knew what he meant to do—and smiled through the pain.

“Just in time to say goodbye,” she whispered.

“No. Just in time,” he said, like it couldn’t have ended any other way, and kissed her.

A troll knelt and touched their shoulders. A soft light rippled outward. Viggo bowed his head, pressing his forehead to hers.

They closed their eyes.

A strong glimmer lit up the forest. Even the Prince, riding far ahead, saw it behind him.

Then the light faded, and they were stone.
Frila, resting in Viggo's lap.
Viggo, holding her as though she might still wake.

From then on, generations of songbirds sang of the love between the Bell Princess and the butcher, and it was a magnificent song. Yet the song was too sorrowful for the trolls, who fled to Norway.

As time went on, the mountains began to collapse, for there were no trolls left to maintain them. With each mountain that crumbled, flocks of long-forgotten birds emerged, spreading across the land. These celestial birds came to be known as the Sorrow Crows. Because they could steal away a person's greatest sorrow—plucking it from their hearts like a thread from cloth.

So at first, they were seen as harmless creatures, feeding on memories and relieving people of their loss and loneliness. But the Sorrow Crows could not always distinguish sorrow from other memories, and sometimes they took too much—stealing names, faces, even entire histories.

So Denmark forgot. It forgot the trolls, the witches, and the mountains.

But sometimes, when the songbirds sing too close to the statues, tears roll down the Princess's cheeks. The drowned bell rings beneath the sea, its deep, mournful sound frightening away the mermaids, ensuring no ships crash themselves against the rocks.

And though their names are lost and their story forgotten, their love hums through roots and rivers, and sighs through feathers and leaves. And those who have never known such love feel it anyway—a hollow in the soul, a longing, if only for a moment, to be loved as Viggo and Frila loved each other.