

Chapter Twenty-one
the queen's last words

THE QUEEN LOVED SOUP. She loved soup more than anything in the world except for the Princess Pea and the king. And because the queen loved it, soup was served in the castle for every banquet, every lunch, and every dinner.

And what soup it was! Cook's love and admiration for the queen and her palate moved the broth that she concocted from the level of mere food to a high art.

On this particular day, for this particular banquet, Cook had outdone herself. The soup was a masterpiece, a delicate mingling of chicken, watercress, and garlic.

Roscuro, as he surfaced from the bottom of the queen's capacious bowl, could not help taking a few appreciative sips.

"Lovely," he said, distracted for a moment from the misery of his existence, "delightful."

"See?" shouted the Pea. "See!" She stood. She pointed her finger right at Roscuro. "It is a rat. I told you that it was a rat. He was hanging from the chandelier, and now he is in Mama's soup!"

The musicians stopped playing their guitars. The juggler stopped juggling. The noble people stopped eating.

The queen looked at Roscuro.

Roscuro looked at the queen.

Reader, in the spirit of honesty, I must utter a difficult and unsavory truth: Rats are not beautiful creatures. They are not even cute. They are, really, rather nasty beasts, particularly if one happens to appear in your bowl of soup with pieces of watercress clinging to his whiskers.

There was a long moment of silence, and then Roscuro said to the queen, "I beg your pardon."

In response, the queen flung her spoon in the air and made an incredible noise, a noise that was in no way

worthy of a queen, a noise somewhere between the neigh of a horse and the squeal of a pig, a noise that sounded something like this: neiggghbbbiinnnnkkkkkk.

And then she said, "There is a rat in my soup."

The queen was really a simple soul and always, her whole life, had done nothing except state the overtly obvious.

She died as she lived.

"There is a rat in my soup" were the last words she uttered. She clutched her chest and fell over backward. Her royal chair hit the floor with a thump, and the banquet hall exploded. Spoons were dropped. Chairs were flung back.

"Save her!" thundered the king. "You must save her!"

All the king's men ran to try and rescue the queen.

Roscuro climbed out of the bowl of soup. He felt that, under the circumstances, it would be best if he left. As he crawled across the tablecloth, he remembered the words of the prisoner in the dungeon, his regret that he did not look back at his daughter as he left her. And so, Roscuro turned.

He looked back.

And he saw that the princess was glaring at him. Her eyes were filled with disgust and anger.

"Go back to the dungeon" was what the look she gave him said. "Go back into the darkness where you belong."

This look, reader, broke Roscuro's heart.

Did you think that rats do not have hearts? Wrong. All living things have a heart. And the heart of any living thing can be broken.

If the rat had not looked over his shoulder, perhaps his heart would not have broken. And it is possible, then, that I would not have a story to tell.

But, reader, he did look.