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The Accuser

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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THE ACCUSER

by
Angelee Sailer Anderson

"I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven."
--Luke 10:18

It was the solstice of winter, when the Lot fell upon me to go to the Citadel. The sun's orbed candle, crimson-hued as blood, reeled drunkenly before the intemperate breath of the mountain winds. Cold was my body beneath thick folds of my cloak, and colder my heart with fear of the Task that was laid on me. There had been those more fearful than I, who had leapt from the jagged heights which ring the valley before their turn came.

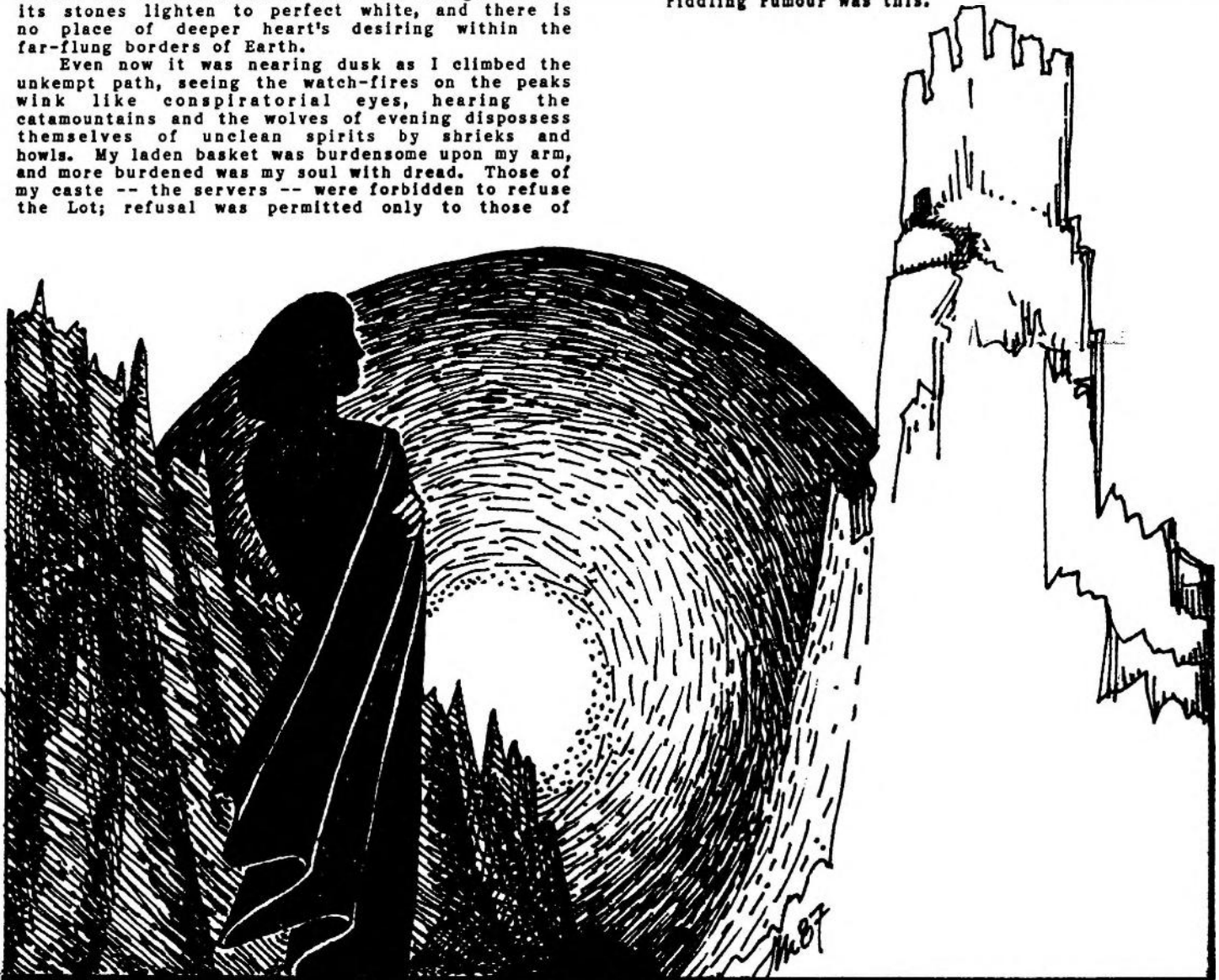
High, high upon the uttermost of peaks in all this northern land stands the Citadel. Its stones, grey in their quarrying, are bleached to ivory by sluggish rays that do not warm them. Its shape is unsettling to gaze on, though not unlovely. The cold of the land, perhaps of every land, emanates from the Citadel and returns to it; however bitter the air it neither freezes here nor snows, nor is the valley blessed with rain except rarely between long droughts. The wind keens within the Citadel's circle of peaks and echoes from them, and the wind carries voices which utter dark sayings in tongues no man living can understand. Yet ever and anon at sunset, a gust from the hinterlands penetrates the valley, bearing with it perfumes that linger still from long-ago Paradise. Then the clouds which wreath the Citadel's Crown turn rose and golden and its stones lighten to perfect white, and there is no place of deeper heart's desiring within the far-flung borders of Earth.

Even now it was nearing dusk as I climbed the unkempt path, seeing the watch-fires on the peaks wink like conspiratorial eyes, hearing the catamountains and the wolves of evening dispossess themselves of unclean spirits by shrieks and howls. My laden basket was burdensome upon my arm, and more burdened was my soul with dread. Those of my caste -- the servers -- were forbidden to refuse the Lot; refusal was permitted only to those of

blood more closely approaching the Royal. The King's seven counsellors had refused the Lot, and the priests who administered the Citadel's corrupt manner of worship. In their stead the Task was laid on pedlars, wainwrights, and stonemasons, on beldames so worn with child-bearing that the strain of steep path and stairs made the air whistle through their lungs like wind through a swan's pinions. The Task was laid on cobblers and shepherds and wandering scholars, and tillers of the soil who sustained families of ten from a small garden's worth of ground. The Task was laid on a sempstress, who once stitched the beauty of the Citadel at twilight upon the thin blanket which too poorly warmed her bed.

The sempstress was I, and the Task was to bring food to the King. Hearers of my tale in lands distant from the valley will question why this Task should be dreadful. The valley-dwellers, in the days of which I tell, desired not to know. Riddling rumour crept forth through the Citadel's cracks to bedevil their dreams; they would not endure to behold the misbegotten form of truth more perfectly till they must. Those who knew, those who had taken their turn at the Task as the Lot fell, spoke truth only as the tongueless speak with their eyes.

The King abode within the Crown of the Citadel, never descending. He took his meat at intervals frequent enough only to preserve his life; had it not been so, the Lot would soon have been exhausted, for those who once had borne his food could not be made to undertake the Task a second time. At every feeding of the King, screams that would curdle the slow blood of the sun issued from the Crown and reverberated between the peaks in concert with the wind's dark parables. The screams were those of the bearer of the King's supper. The riddling rumour was this.



There was, it was said, something unnatural in the countenance of the King. But do not suppose, you who hear, that our Lord Suzerain was hideous or in any way malformed. He was formed, it was said, too perfectly; it was said that his beauty was like an unhealing wound upon which maggots feast, a pestilence cleaving eternally to any who beheld it. It was said that ichor, that which serves the holy Gods instead of blood, flowed through his veins, and that the gleamings within his dark eyes were the last remnants visible to mortals of the primordial Fire of their creation. For all this, many of the young virgins upon whom the Lot fell approached the Task joyfully, thinking to win to themselves the desire of the King when they entered his presence for the feeding. These foolish ones, who could not imagine that what is beautiful may yet be terrible, who came to the Task without the steeling of awe, fared worse than any when their turn was complete. None of these mated except with death, nor spoke again of the love that is between woman and man.

I was not such a one, but was and am still something of a seeress into things hidden and deep. For the shock of the King's face against my reason, I was wholly prepared. It was no spark in the eyes of my Lord Suzerain which kindled my dread, but the rumour of hellfire, the riddle's other part. With that other, my supplications to the holy Ones had not yet readied me to deal unfearing. It was said that in the Crown of the Citadel from which the King did not descend, he did not dwell alone.

So did the rumour run: that on the morning the King reached full manhood according to the priests' reckoning of the time of life, at the age of four and a score years, a Prince of Shadow had taken up its abode at his right hand. Why it chose him out of all kings upon which to prey cannot be known but by the Gods. There are those who say that our Lord Suzerain himself summoned it; for before its coming he had, at the instigation of his false priests and counsellors, dabbled deeply in the divination of the Etruscans and the alchemy of Egypt, had practiced necromancy according to the Chaldean tradition and had read the meaning of the asterisms as was once done within the two-leaved gates of Babylon. It is said that the King had summoned the infernal Spirit, thinking to master it, and had been mastered by it and lived in captive torment since. There are others who say the Being sought out the King as its peculiar object of malice because of his unearthly beauty. For the Being itself had once mirrored the Gods' image so flawlessly as to shame the lamps of Heaven, and had been hurled from the celestial region in ghastly ruin when it dared to presume that its beauty was more to be desired than the Divine.

And it was said that it was unspeakable pain to the Being that there should be born to inferior men one so nearly mounting to its own now-tarnished splendour. It was said that the pain could only be eased by inflicting an unutterable pain upon the one who had been born. So while the counsellors plotted and the priests primed the King for his showing to his subjects in his twenty-fourth year, the Being had bided its time with a malevolence as patient as love. The morn of the King's showing had come, but he who had been hidden from his birth was not to be revealed. A serrated edge of lightning had struck the Citadel; a cry of agony that was his had echoed from the Crown. And after the cry, only silence. And but for the screams of those upon whom the Task had been laid, silence since.

Though the King spoke not nor descended from the high Place which had become his prison and chamber of torture, yet King he remained according to holy Law, and he must be fed. The counsellors hoped that a fulfiller of the Task might one day bring meat that was tainted; they themselves dared not draw near so to slay their Lord in what they named mercy. The priests prayed that he might one evening be in too-great torment to take his meal and might in hunger die. But none, whether through honour or fear of the King or dread of his Tormentor, brought poison; and the Tormentor, wishing not to lose its victim, permitted the King to crawl from his chair to retrieve the food which the doers of the Task spilled upon the Crown's defiled floor, screaming, ere they fled. The King was yet the King and he must be fed for as long as he should live. He lived, and the Lot fell, and in

the forty-second year of my Lord Suzerain the Lot fell on me.

Now, within an hour of the sun's setting, I attained to the head of the path and the door of the Citadel. I lifted my unburdened arm to knock, but door and hand did not meet. So eager to delegate the Task he should himself have done was the sixth in lineage of the King's seven counsellors. He took my raised arm in his talon-like, immaculately clean hand, and led me through the hall where the priests and other counsellors and their toadies grunted like swine over their supper, thinking nothing of the unhappy meal of which their King would soon partake above them. Past these drunken revellers and their pitiful harlots, the sixth counsellor led me to the foot of a dizzying spiral stair.

"The top," he croaked uncontrollably, shuddering like a shaken bag of unjointed bones. "My Lord Suzerain -- at the top -- in the Crown."

I remained beside this spectacle of a faithless servant no longer than I had need, but placed my foot upon the first step and upon the second as my duty required. I did not permit myself, now that my Task's end was so near, to ponder what horror that end might encompass, the King's face or his Companion's infamy. Rising fear was cast down with this knowledge: that I did but go to feed the King, that I would offer him with his food the proper love of a subject for her Lord, that the Being who tormented him had no business with that love and so could not do me harm unless love should cease. I climbed these steps to feed the King with love, nothing more.

And also nothing less. How should I have known to what immeasurable distance a subject's love must go to reach him? None who had gone before me had given his food into his hands, but had spilled it in haste and descended with the horror enfolding them. How should I have known how far from the blessed heart of a King my Lord had travelled?

Knowing not, I wound as the spiral wound and came to the topmost stair. One step more and I would stand within the Crown; I would not lift my eyes to look on what must be faced until that step had been taken and was irrevocable. Yet at the fringes of my downcast gaze hovered the apparition of a hexagonal room, empty but for a man in a chair, a shadow, and a window on the West.

I took the step; I know now that none had taken it before me. Irrevocably I stood within the Crown -- and yet, hearer, and yet within it I was not. Now judge my tale, whether, beyond any unnaturalness of beauty that might be, what then befell did not profane nature. The step before the taking was above; once taken, it was below.

My planted foot and all my body and being felt the downward thrust. Into the Crown I walked -- deep, deep under darkness and weight as from the world's most alpine surface to its nethermost core. Upward behind me without visible end sloped a white tunnel, six-sided after the manner of the Citadel. Before me, not steeply but surely down, tunnelling walls tainted first to grey then corrupted to black.

Where in the material plane that tunnel lay, what it was within the spirit's lexicon, the discernment of my hearers may serve to answer as well as mine. Step upon step through it I went forward, trusting that, in a way not to be understood, it would lead me to my King. The corruption of the walls grew blacker as the tunnel ran deeper, and the illumination, hailing from no source I could see, grew weaker, till I could no longer tell whether the dark were the tunnel's own or that of my failing eyes. And around me as I walked, at first dimly yet swelling in power so gradually that it seemed always to have been at the level it was, rose a sound to which I could not give a name. Footfall upon footfall and little by little, it dawned upon my ears that it was the rustling of wings.

The time came when my feet fell within an utter void, darkness absolute enshrouding me as the unholy dead who await no resurrection. Wings fluttered in monstrous delicacy, wings whirred like gears of evil machines and whipped the world wild in a frenzy of wonderful destruction. And always through the dark and the wings, I trusted soon to pierce the illusion of my Lord Suzerain's Tormentor, trusted soon to nourish him whom I loved more than light from the basket which now cleaved to my arm as though it were an extension of my

flesh. Whether the illusion were but truth's face once twisted, whether it were pierced soon or late, let my hearers judge. For the darkness extended, and I walked within it, for a thousand years.

The stones of the Citadel were worn to fine dust by the floods, the peaks crumbled to litter the valley, interminable eons flickered and were extinguished all in an hour of how those beyond the tunnel count time's passing. Forward I pressed through the weary ages and did not falter, for I must feed the King with love. At the last, a thousand years wasted, I knew that the tunnel had no end.

And now I nearly turned back. Duty-sworn was I to conclude the Task, but how, if it possessed no conclusion? If the heart of the King were beyond help, though I should follow him past darkness to damnation. I paused in my walk, wondering how, if I relinquished my purpose, I should endure the reverse journey. Only the Task had held me in strength thus far; there would be no Task in the returning. As I stood uncertain, a wing's rustle whispered me this secret: a millennium may be retraced in the footfall of a moment.

One backward step, and I would stand again upon the uppermost stair. One gesture of retreat, and I might spill the contents of my basket -- the bread tenderly baked, the wine of self-grown and trampled grapes -- upon the floor of the Crown and be done. I might do only so much, and have done a thousand-year's effort more than those before me, without a scream. I stood uncertain and unmoving, and it seemed to me that the wings throbbed with joy.

There was triumph in the drumming, but it was short-lived. Illusion once conquered, I would not be deceived a second time. "There is no barrier," spake the voice of the Gods through mine.

The wings exploded into fury, then their noise died away. There was no barrier. I stood within the Crown of the Citadel, and the shadow had shrunk from o'er me, and the King sat in his chair a step before me, and it was but a moment till dusk.

I looked upon the face of my Lord Suzerain that was so evilly renowned, and I acknowledged its beauty but marvelled that any should fear it. It was not the beauty of the Gods, but only of a man, and I had come too near eternity's portal to be daunted by mortality. The King's eyes, dark as the ocean's caverns and rudderless as the wave-flung foam upon its breast, turned to me. My eyes echoed their gaze with a subject servant's love, and in the King's eyes was wonder and the vestige of light reawakened.

The wings' silence solicited my attention. I turned to them, and saw in a vision a bright Being paced forth and back among flaming stones which were the foundation of the Citadel and the pavement of Heaven. I recognized in the Being a restless uncertainty, like that which had plagued me in the tunnel when I knew not whether to abandon the Task or go on. Even as I watched, the Being's unsureness became sure with an unalterable fixity, but it was the sureness of catastrophe and wrong. The brightness turned vile, and in that vision of a time before time was, the Being was reduced to only the shadow beneath its own wings.

But those wings were now no longer silent. Their rustling began again, and their nearly-expired substance manipulated the air to form a Voice speaking words I understood.

Let the hearts of my hearers reveal what words they were, for I shall not reveal them. They were words of truth and of torture, and at last I knew how without rack or thumbscrews or bonds my Lord Suzerain had been prisoned and punished. The words were words of accusing, as the shadow of the wings troubled the aether to tell the King of each fatal defect beneath his beauty's mask. The words were of judgement that abides no mercy, tunnelling deeper into the heart of the King with each goading, guilt-wrung moon that waned and waxed. The wings rustled, and every shaming sin and every lawless lust and every hate and every incursion of the shadow itself into the heart of the King was made known to him. Look within your hearts to know as well.

The accusing words were true, and I saw the King, my sovereign Lord, wither beneath them. I could not change their truth; neither could I bear to know his pain. My love could not and my Task would not bear it, for clenched in the vice of such pain the King could not eat. Fixing my will upon the shadow, within my heart I commanded it to accuse me.

The Voice's torment veered, and the secrets of my soul were lifted from obscurity into a light as of martyrs burning. Then might I have become as my Lord Suzerain the Crown's perpetual slave. But though my heart testified to the accusing's rightness and abhorred my day of birth, joy breathed upon the hell of the words and smothered them to ashes. For as I looked on the face of the King, I saw pain run away and the tide of majesty return.

With the words' brimstone yet raining on me, I stepped to the King's chair and fell to my knees, setting my basket in front of me. Before the consummation of the Task the wings were stilled, and the shadow of the Accuser was scattered as through the window from the West poured the wind-borne scent of the Garden and the setting sun.

With the shadow's departing, the greater measure of the King's beauty departed also, and under the rose and golden rays his face was but the face of an ordinary man at the threshold of his declining years. But it was a face without pain, knowing what lay beneath and at peace with the knowledge. Transfigured to blessedness even as the Citadel's stones were whitened by the twilight, it was a face to frustrate the schemes of wicked counsellors and make blaspheming priests go mad. Though I should wander all the tracks of Earth, never shall I see a face more beautiful to me.

The eyes of the King were upon me, and their wonder was unbounded. I uncovered the basket, and withdrew a chalice and a flagon of deep red wine. I filled the chalice, tore a generous piece from



I knew whose wings they were and that their pleasure had no part in me. I stepped forward to the Task which had not for despair been removed from me. There was rage in the beating of the wings.

When the minutes after the millennium had grown to one half hour, I penetrated the meaning of the illusion. However long I walked still as I had walked, I should not come to the Lord I must feed. For I paced everlastingly within the shadow of the Tormentor's wings, while my King was an unshaded step away.

My voice, untried for centuries, sounded sublime and strange as the wings were familiar and obscene. "There is an end," I said.

The wings fell silent. A blackness profounder than flesh's blindness enfolded me. Then the blackness paled and passed, the wings renewed their drumming, and I saw before me a hexagonal wall, the tunnel's end. I pressed all the little weight of my ancient body against it. It was solid as the roots of mountains, and impassable.

the fresh-baked loaf, and offered the bread and wine to my Lord Suzerain. A thousand years were behind me, and the life of more than a sempstress ahead, but I could not rest in past nor future till the Task of the moment was done.

The King's hands reached forth and grasped the wine and bread, and we held them together for an instant before I released them that he might bring them to his mouth. Within that instant, within the rose-gold light's last benediction before retreating into night, I who would be Queen spoke my first words to my King.

"Your supper, my Lord," I said, and smiled.

SONNET IN DEFENSE OF THERSITES

by Joe R. Christopher

You old defender of the common man--
You trusted not the nobles or the king,
And were no puppet pulled upon a string,
But spoke, proclaiming the way your judgement ran.
Odysseus and Achilles felt your tongue,
And thus had cause to hate you, as you knew;
But still in fray a goodly speech and true,
Keeping not back yours@lf--that speech you flung.

What mattered it, if at the king it struck?
What mattered, though nobles hated democracy?
You spoke the truth, however came your luck,
And sounded the call unto eternity:
Your cause shall rise, though beat into the sod--
Rise again, though scourged by Odysseus' rod.

THE PRINCESS IN THE TEFLON SLIPPER

retold by
Stefan Bilandic

CINDER, ELLA (1537-1603). Wife of King Louis XXXVIII of France. Born to her stepmother, she decapitated her father at an early age. Of her life between that time and her marriage to King Louis (then Prince No Name), only that is known which is preserved in the myth Ellacinder...

-- Encyclopedia Stupida

Her name was Ella Cinder, and she had never been to an imperial ball, or seen the world-famous Prince Without a Name. And that is why she did not care when her step-sisters, Snow Red and Rose White, were planning to go. All she did was keep house for them, anyway. The last time they went to a ball, Ella smiled as she remembered, Snow Red (or was it Rose White?) got lost and spent three years in the forest with seven dirty little old men. At least she had taught them to wash themselves properly.

One day after lunch, while Ella was cleaning up, her fairy grandmother appeared. Ella was glad that her grandmother was a fairy, because that meant that she would never be involved in any of those drastic horrors called fairy tales. Fairy tales, of course, never have any fairies in them. Little did Ella know that there were exceptions to that rule.

"Ella," said her grand fairymother, "how would you like to go to the ball tonight?"

"Bawl," said Ella, "is what I do when my Russian steppe mother hits me."

"No, no, no, no, Ella! A ball is what you'll have if you go! Very amusing for me, very profitable for you -- if you know when to leave."

Ella saw nothing wrong with pleasing her grandmother, and so it was decided -- she would go to the ball, even though her step-mother had prohibited it. The fairy arranged everything. Ella rode in a golden pumpkin -- a gift to the fairy from a fellow named Peter. It was pulled by seven rats from the dregs of Paris, turned into white horses for the occasion. Ella's English cousin Rapunzel Godiva rode on the lead horse (but that's another story). Ella wore a white dress, four hundred and twenty-eight petticoats, and glass slippers (covered with Teflon).

When this caravan pulled up at the palace, Ella slipped quietly into the ballroom, while the Royal Morality Bureau made a fuss over Rapunzel.

Once inside, Ella treaded carefully down a side corridor to avoid being seen by her sisters, who had already arrived. While looking in the other direction, she bumped into a young man wearing a coronet, which fell off. As he retrieved it, she asked him, "Are you

the Prince?"

"I don't know," he replied. "You see, I have no name. But just between you and me, my father has promised to name me Louis when I become king." It was the Prince. Ella was astonished. "By the way," he asked, "who are you?"

"My name is Ella Cinder."

"Oh! I sure admire your playing. But I thought you were taller, and... Oh my. I must be thinking of someone else. Yes, Lew Alcindor." *

Ella was mad by now (and angry, too), so she shouted "CINDER! ELLA!" This was a mistake. Ella simply could not stop the Prince from calling her Cinderella.

But the Prince was a fine dancer (if nothing else) and Ella found herself carried away. They could have danced all night, and nearly did, too; but one of Ella's Teflon-covered glass slippers fell off and broke into ten million little pieces. Shortly afterwards, a blood-curdling shriek was heard. Ella's bare foot had stumbled into what was left of her slipper. Heads turned. Fearing that she would be recognized by her sisters, Ella ran out the front door and onto the dark road heading for home.

Soon she was passed by a strange dark figure. It grinned at her. "I am the gingerbread man. Catch me if you can!" it said, and bolted off cross-country. Then a group of angry men came up. "Have you seen a gingerbread man?" they asked. Ella said, "He went that-a-way," and pointed off cross-country -- in the other direction. The men lumbered off.

Next morning found Ella at home reading the want ads. She was looking for a job to raise money as bail for Rapunzel. She opened the door at a knock from outside. It was the Prince! Ella was astonished. "Oh Cinderella," he cried, "you danced so beautifully -- will you marry me?" Here was an offer Ella could not refuse -- so she didn't.

They did not live happily ever after -- only moderately happy, and only until death (or, in some versions, divorce) did them part.

"But how did you ever find me?" Ella asked one day. "Very simple," replied her Prince. "I looked you up in the phone book!"

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* Nobody had told the Prince that the basketball player had changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabaar. It would only have confused him.