

Sample Chapters from



The Prince
of Morning Bells



by Nancy Kress



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❖ I ❖

Castle Kiril was built of flat gray stone, at the edge of a beech and oak forest for which legend was only a matter of time. There were all the usual castle features: tall pointed turrets that prickled at the tolerant sky, a massive drawbridge capable of shivering ominously whenever it was raised (which was seldom, the kingdom being perpetually at peace), tapestries woven with unicorns and fleurs-de-lis and slightly bored-looking angels. The resident princess, for her first eighteen years, took the castle's silent hint and did all the customary princess things. In the summer she picnicked by the moat and threw tidbits of fruit or strawberry tart to the moat serpent, who leaped for them high into the air, the silver sunlight breaking into shards around his flashing green scales. In the winter she sat at a heavy oak table and conjugated verbs, her tongue stuck out thoughtfully at the corner of her mouth, and unsubtly tried to badger her Wizard into supplying the subjunctive. In the spring she went a-Maying; in the fall she attended harvest festivals and obligingly gave her autograph to any peasant who happened to ask for it. She even worked a tapestry herself, taking the work in easy stages over five years. It was of the Creation of the Natural World, and if one looked at it from any distance greater than two feet it was hard not to get the impression that the natural world had straightened out considerably since its beginning. But her royal parents were proud of it and caused it to be hung in the Great Hall, a little lopsided so as to compensate for the lean in the Tree of Knowledge.

But when she reached her eighteenth year, the princess—whose name was Kirila—grew discontented. It was not the sighing-by-the-window-and-writing-poetry discontent; she

was not that sort of princess. She became moody and short-tempered, and went through a period of issuing decrees by the dozen, many of which later proved contradictory when they got as far as Court test cases.

One spring day, after a strenuous hunt during which Kirila rode as if pursued by the dragon and not the other way around, causing all her ladies to fall off their mounts trying to keep up with her, she clattered up the stone stairs to the top of the highest tower, her riding boots purposefully striking only every other step. Here was the Wizard's deep-shadowed lair.

"I want to go on a Quest!" Kirila blurted breathlessly. She was panting; her breast heaved under her green velvet doublet and stray tendrils of red hair, the color of copper in sunlight, curled damply on her forehead.

The Wizard looked at her with sad eyes. "A Quest?"

"Yes! Just listen, Wizard—I've got it all thought out. Even a Crown Princess hasn't got very much to do around here that's really important—you know that's true!" she asserted, although he hadn't tried to deny it. She knelt on the floor by his chair, her hands restless and excited on the carved wooden arm. "I want to go on a Quest to discover the Heart of the World!"

The Wizard began to pull at his white beard; there were knots in it. "Wouldn't consider something less ambitious, I suppose? The Holy Grail, overthrowing Evil, something along those lines?" The hands on the beard trembled a little.

She squared her soft chin. "If I do it, I'm going to do it right. And that means looking for the Heart of the World."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why? Why does it mean looking for the Heart of the World?"

She was taken aback. "Well, because—because if I find it, and know what's there, at the Heart—" she frowned, looking for words like a man in darkness who knows beyond doubting that he put the candles somewhere, but not just where. She had also always had trouble with the more esoteric uses of the ablative absolute. "-then I'll know what's most important, and why—why I should do things. And

how." She nodded several times, pleased with this, and then added, "And *what* things. It will be a learning experience, as well as an adventure! And if *you* say it's all right, part of my education, then Mummy and Daddy won't object. Much. And anyway, I'm *not* going to that finishing school!"

The Wizard tried to hide his trembling by pretending to rub goosebumps on his arms. Something in the shadowy corner of the tower room, something the shape of mist under a pewter sky, keened softly. Kirila didn't notice.

"You'll do it, won't you Wizard?" She straightened up and looked at him with hopeful, unabashed pleading.

"Where would you look for it, my Lady?"

She paced to the one small window. Far below, smug fields lay in tidy patchwork on both sides of a portly river. The banks of the river were crowded with columbines and heart's-ease and yellow buttercups and shamelessly scarlet roses, the blowsy kind with no thorns. Kirila pointed upriver. "To the north, away from the sea. Where the river comes from when it's still hungry."

The Wizard stopped rubbing his arms and went back to pulling his beard. "Very wise. The Heart of the World probably doesn't lie among beach cottages and surf resorts. Probably."

"Then I can go!" she cried, her young face suddenly so alive that the Wizard turned away, as a man will turn from the stripped heart under the surgeon's knife. The Wizard had known the princess since her childhood.

"You may go, if you can," he said gently, but Kirila didn't hear the second part, any more than she heard the wail of the mist-creature in the corner. But the Wizard heard, and his already pale cheeks turned the color of parchment ashes.

"I'll take my grandfather's sword," she cried, and tugged it down from its oiled-leather straps on the stone wall. It was a beautiful sword, a wide-bladed falchion with an intricately worked pommel the shape of a Brazil nut.

"It's too heavy for you," the Wizard said automatically.

"Pooh, I can manage it," Kirila huffed, awkwardly wielding the weapon with both hands. But however modern her parents had been in matters of liberal education and hunting in a divided skirt and non-sexist children's literature,

she had never been taught sword-play, and in the end she had to leave it home.

She whirled from the room, kissing the Wizard on his ashen nose, and clattered down the steps to see about maps and new riding boots. The Wizard didn't look after her; he sat for a long time staring into the empty fireplace, his old fingers knotting and unknotting his beard. In the corner, the mist-creature made a noise like branches scraping on a cracked windowpane.



Kirila started her Quest on a blue and gold morning when the summer air shimmered and swooned and preened itself. The whole castle turned out to see her off. There were her parents, with identical tear-stained faces like salty marshmallows; her old nanny, who kept remembering things the princess ought to take, crying, "Maw, wait a minute, me Lady," and dashing back into the Castle after them; two or three sullen youths who had fancied writing "Royal Consort" after their names; her second cousin, who was a decent chap and tried hard to repress his knowledge of the line of succession governing lost heirs; the ladies-in-waiting, incredulous and tittering; and several small boys who waved flags and dared each other to touch the horse's knees. The Wizard watched from his tower, blinking, although he wasn't facing into the sun.

Kirila rode alone. She had staved off all pleas to take a chaperone, body guard, squire, lady-in-waiting, or laundress, relenting only when the Wizard brought her a charmed bat as she kept her vigil in the Courtyard the night before the Quest.

"It will only stay with you until you reach the borders of this kingdom," he told her solemnly. "Bats have a strong sense of local color. But I've put a spell on it, and it will talk with you if you get lonely and want a bit of company." He saw her begin to frown and added hastily, "Not that it'll say anything unless you talk first. And never any advice!" He looked at her anxiously; his beard looked like dingy macrame. She took the bat.

It hung now underneath the horse, upside-down, clinging to the saddle girth. Kirila kissed everyone, waved gaily,

urged the horse into a trot, rode back to accept a dozen handkerchiefs from the nanny—they were still warm from the clothesline and hadn't been ironed—and started off again, cantering down the river road with the breeze at her back. The scent of wild flowers rose all around her, and sunlight skipped off the river and ricocheted over the tame hills. She wore a bottle-green velvet doublet and divided hunting skirt, and green velvet ribbons tied a spray of columbine to the horse's bridle. A new bow and quiver of green-tipped arrows were laced at her back, a little jewelled dagger was stuck jauntily in her belt, and her red hair whipped around her face. There were circles under her eyes from the all-night vigil—usually she went to bed at 10:30—but she had never felt more awake, more alive, more complete than when she glanced back over her shoulder and saw the gray spires of Castle Kiril sinking below the sharp line where the buttercups met the brilliant turquoise sky.

II

The clear weather lasted. Kirila wondered if the Wizard had anything to do with that, and, if so, when he would stop. She wasn't really on her own, she felt, while he could still reach her with apple-blossom days and starry nights orchestrated with the chant of crickets. Stubbornly, she refused to be grateful, and held her own by camping out every night instead of using the kingdom's comfortable Inns.

"It isn't as if I couldn't ride in rain," she told her horse fiercely. She talked to the horse often, from sheer exuberance as yet untinged with need. "I *like* rain; I've always liked rain. I like to walk in it, especially." After a moment she added, naively, "It's poetic." The horse tossed his head—a fly had settled on his nose—and continued to trot down the smooth dry road.

"It reminds me of when I was a little girl, and the Wizard would make sure it never rained on my birthday." She smiled at this, and then fell into a reverie, remembering various birthdays. It seemed to her that there had been a great many of them, very long ago.

The bat never spoke at all, and she never addressed it. Each evening, right after Kirila made camp, it abruptly hurtled itself off into the dark, spooking the horse, and wasn't seen again until morning. Secretly she was a little glad; although not squeamish, she was uneasy about the bat, and tried not to think about it clinging underneath her horse as she rode, its wings folded over its little red eyes. It always flew back before dawn, belly bulging, with a sly, sleepy look on its ferret face. Once she saw very small, pale blue feathers stuck in the blood around its mouth, and quickly she looked away.

The second week, dull-colored clouds began to gather

tiredly over the sky. The wind veered sharply and blew from the north, smelling rank and damp. The road left behind the farms and fiefs and ran through rocky ravines and past patches of dark forest where the trees intertwined in desperate half-Nelsons.

"This is more like it," Kirila told the horse, with satisfaction.

She was making camp in a clearing with the woods ahead of her and an outcropping of gray boulders at her back when the bat suddenly spoke, startling her so much that she dropped the frying pan into the fire.

"Going to rain," the bat remarked from his upside-down perch. He had unfolded his wings.

"Ow! Look what you made me do!" She tried to retrieve the frying pan, burned two fingers, uttered an oath the Wizard didn't know she knew, and fished the frying pan out with a stick, which caught fire twice.

"I thought you weren't supposed to speak unless spoken to!"

"Victorian notion," the bat said disdainfully. "And anyway, it only applied to children." He ruffled his full-grown membrane wings. The end bone, the thumb, was clawed, and naked of membranes.

"Well, stop that fluttering—you're spooking the horse," Kirila said, a good deal more bravely than she felt.

The bat ruffled its wings once more, then closed them slowly. She tried not to look at it as she fried her dinner, two fish caught earlier that afternoon. The wind was stronger now, and tasted vaguely of rotting marshes. The smoky fire, only half shielded by the boulders, quavered fitfully in the oily darkness.

"Suicide rate rises when the weather's stormy," the bat said conversationally. "Fact." It had a sibilant, hissing voice: *Sssuisside*.

"Can't you say anything pleasant?" Kirila snapped. She felt obscurely close to tears, which was odd because she seldom cried. Chewing her bread, she leaned her head back against the gray stone. It was the same granite as the walls of her bed chamber at home.

The bat smiled, a stretching of taut fleshless skin around

teeth like the spikes of an infant-sized Iron Maiden. The horse whimpered and danced sideways. With lordly leisure the bat drifted from its underside to a branch jittering in the wind a few feet above Kirila's head. In the blackness beyond the firelight something rustled softly.

"Pleassantnesss iss a point of view. All a matter of cultural moresss," the bat said. "One man'sss meat, and sso on."

The fish were done on one side, and she turned them with the point of her dagger, trying to ignore the bat. The dagger was new, with hilt and crossguard studded with small multi-colored jewels outlined with a latticework of inlaid gold, now dull in the smoky firelight. Something brushed her hair as she leaned over the fish and she sat down abruptly and started to eat them half-raw. A twig snapped in the darkness and there was the sound of scuttling furry feet and a tinny squeak.

"For insstance," the bat continued, "it iss possible to regard Hitler ass a man of integrity in the sssensse of being true to hisss own belieffess, who will be guilty only of failure."

"Who's Hitler?" Kirila asked, in spite of herself.

The bat made a sound like teeth rattling in a skull: it might have been 'Tsk, tsk.' "And you call yourssself educated, with only one tenssse of referencce! But, then, why should you harbor any ssspeccious sssemblanccess—" it took him a good twenty seconds to get the phrase out—"—of knowledge when you are sso pretty?"

"I don't think—" Kirila began angrily, but the bat continued, its voice caressing.

"Sso pretty, and sso ssoft, sso very ssoft—"

As the bat swooped, Kirila screamed and grabbed for the fishy dagger. Before she reached it something hurled out of the darkness, snatched the bat in mid-swoop, and crashed with it into the blackness beyond the other side of the clearing. The murky gloom above the tall grass thrashed and writhed like Chaos during Creation. Then something huge and black trotted into the clearing with the bat in its mouth and threw it into the fire. The bat's spine was broken. It fell grotesquely, unable to struggle, but its red eyes glowed in-

sanely and it screamed a single agonized shriek so piercing that Kirila dropped her dagger and clapped her hands over her ears. Immediately she snatched the dagger up again and whirled around, pointing the trembling tip at a large dog, who grinned at her amiably,

"Put that thing away, honey," the dog said, still grinning. "You're safe enough now."

"Who are you?" she squeaked. "Identify yourself!"

The dog swept out one foreleg and bowed its head, raising his eyes up to her. They twinkled mockingly. "Your noble protector, honey!"

Kirila drew herself up. "I am of the blood royal, Dog. You may address me as Her Royal Highness Princess Kirila, Crown Princess of Kiril." Her voice still squeaked a little and she felt like a perfect fool. Talking bats and mocking dogs; it was just too much.

"You're entitled," the dog said laconically, and she had the grace to blush.

"Thank you most kindly for saving my life." All at once her knees turned to water and ran downhill and she sat down hard, turning to the fire with horrified eyes. The bat had disappeared.

"A bad one, that," the dog said, watching her.

"But he was a gift from my childhood Wizard," Kirila stammered. "To start me on my Quest. A lucky charm!" Her lower lip quivered.

"Well, that's the way these childhood defenses sometimes turn out," the dog said philosophically. "But I'm sure he meant well, although actually I don't have a very high opinion of Wizards. Black-magic fellow?"

"No!"

"Still, you never can tell." He caught the gathering wrath on her face and added hastily, "Speaking of myself, not you. Your Wizard may have just had an off day, or been misled by some new revisionist school. Now me, *I'm* under a genuine curse."

Kirila regarded him with interest. It was difficult to see clearly in the smoky firelight, but she made out that he was not really black, as she had first supposed, but a rich, opaque purple, deeper than royalty, the color of the summer sky

when night has not quite begun and only Vega and Altair are shining overhead. Otherwise, he looked pretty much like any conventional Labrador retriever.

"I suppose it must be awkward going through life purple," she said shyly, and the dog bristled.

"I didn't mean that. Actually, the color is rather attractive, when I haven't muddied it tussling with bats. No, I'm not really a dog at all, in any way. I'm a prince. Fact is, for the last ten years I've been enchanted by a Wizard."

"A young prince?" Kirila asked suspiciously. She'd heard that line before.

"Alas, no," the dog said, smiling thinly. "A very old prince. Old enough to be your gr... your father. Only this wretched dog's body is young, with an old mind in it. That only happens in spells, by the way, the folklore of popular heroes to the contrary, although you see enough of the opposite combination running around." He seemed delighted with these observations until he noticed that Kirila hadn't understood them. He sighed. "What are you questing for?"

"The Heart of the World."

The dog did a very curious thing. He shuddered all over, the shudder running systematically from his shoulders to his purple hindquarters, like a jerked rope. Then he scrambled up, trotted out of the clearing into the darkness, trotted back after a second, and sat down trembling in front of Kirila.

"Take me with you."

She regarded him with astonishment. "You? Why?"

"Because that's where I'm going in order to have this spell removed—the only place in the world it *can* be removed. The Tents of Omnium."

"The Tents of Omnium? What's that?"

The dog looked disgusted. "You certainly don't run a very well-organized Quest, do you? That's where the Heart of the World lies, in the Tents of Omnium."

"I didn't know that!" she exclaimed, delighted. "How do you know?"

"Oh, I've been around one or two places. If we travel together, I could protect you, if you plan into getting into many more arguments with bats, and you—"

"I really can take care of —"

"—could hunt and cook for me."

Diverted, Kirila asked, "Can't you hunt?" She looked at the Labrador retriever's muscled haunches and powerful, long jaws.

"I am not a dog," he said loftily. "I am a prince, and do not care for raw meat. I happen to be very partial to Eggs Anna and apple tart."

Kirila looked doubtful, but she only said, "Do you know the way to these Tents of Omnium?"

He shook his head, his silky purple ears flopping from side to side. "Only that it's north."

"North," she repeated thoughtfully, chewing on the tip of her dagger. "I had guessed that, somehow."

"That's a good way to cut your lip."

Absently she slipped the dagger back into her belt. "What's your name? I can't just keep on calling you Dog."

The Labrador dropped his eyes and muttered something under his breath.

"What? I'm sorry, I didn't hear you."

"Chessie," he said sourly. Kirila looked again at his sleek haunches and broad chest, and began to smile. She opened her mouth but before she could say anything, Chessie snapped, "No, I don't. I hate the sight of so much as a pawn. But the Wizard played all the time, and he named me. His idea of a joke. Ha, ha."

Kirila tried to stop smiling, but the corners of her mouth quirked by themselves.

"He would sit there at that damn board and enchant me into moving white, but not into knowing how. Do you know what it's like to sit enchantment-bound in a drafty castle night after night for years, not even able to twitch your tail, and make a mess of the Sicilian Defense?"

"No," said Kirila.

"Be *made* to make a mess of the Sicilian Defense. It was all at his whim. Once he gave me a stalemate. 'The stalemate is the penalty for mauling without killing. One-half point!' And threw me half a bone. That was supper."

Kirila had stopped smiling.

"In time I learned to play. In enough time you can learn

anything. But I still could only move the pieces he enchanted me into moving. Knowledge without power, ha ha, how funny to watch. So he named me Chessie."

The girl held herself very still. "But you must have another name, your real one, the one you had before the Wizard enchanted you."

The dog raised his head and looked at her, and she was startled by his eyes. They were light brown, the color of burnt sugar, but they had the shifting depths of black eyes, and in them moved something too terrible and lonely to be called simply pain. They were the eyes of a castaway, looking back at where Atlantis had been.

"I can't remember it," he said quietly. "That's part of the spell. I don't know my name, my kingdom, my family, what old prince I really am."

They sat in silence for several minutes before she dared touch him. Then she reached out and stroked his neck, her hesitant fingers gentle as rain, and said softly, "We'll find it. We'll find the Tents of Omnium, somewhere."

They sat still a long time, and then wordlessly prepared for sleep. The wind was still rising, the air smelled of clammy mold, and in the distance thunder sounded. Kirila would have liked to keep one hand on the dog's paw as she slept, but she was remembering the lucky-charm bat, and she rolled tightly in her blankets on the other side of the smoky fire.

III

All the next day it rained, and the next day, and the whole following week. It wasn't an awesome thunderstorm or a majestic downpour, or even the kind of steady rain that makes the pattering illusion of company on the roofs of lonely garrets. It was a clammy, dreary, bone-chilling drizzle that always seemed about to stop but rarely did, and even then hung damply in the air so that no one would forget its imminent resumption. Kirila's bed-roll and clothing became sodden, and sodden velvet never looks anything but tacky. Despite the hood pulled around her face, rivulets ran off the ends of her long red hair and down the sides of the horse, who took no notice of them, plodding on with his great head down. Chessie's fur became matted in muddy patches. He gave off the strong, close smell of wet dog.

The land sloped steadily upwards, and often Kirila had to dismount and lead the horse as he picked his way through brambles or over jagged, irregular rocks. There ought to have been a splendid view, but between thick slate mist and the pockmarked craters in which they frequently found themselves—there was always water in the bottom, and one of Kirila's boots had two tiny leaks, shaped like bat's teeth—they could see nothing of the valley behind them. As they rode, they talked, with the unexpected frankness of travelers who happen to find themselves congenial. Kirila told Chessie about her childhood, her Wizard, the time she fell into the moat, her restless longing for this Quest ("I just felt that somewhere there must be something more than weaving tapestries and hunting quail, although of course they're all right in their place"), the coziness of the Great Hall at Castle Kiril when it was midwinter, and the pet dragon she'd

had when she was twelve (“Only a cub, of course”). Chessie told Kirila nothing, but he sang ballads in a true voice that could achieve a piquantly exaggerated mimicry of almost any accent, including that of a seraph disputing the right-of-way with an airborne buzzard.

They never saw anyone else. Once they heard a hunting horn somewhere in the neighboring woods, a thin, disembodied sound like a consumptive moose. Kirila grew excited, and haloo-ed, and stood up in her stirrups, waving her arms. The sound became fainter.

“Quick, Chessie, follow them! I think they were heading east!”

“We don’t want to go east.”

“But maybe we can trade supplies, or have a campfire, or something!”

“With a communal sing, I suppose.”

“Oh, damn the communal sing! Hurry, before they get away. Oh, the horn’s fading out! Go, Chessie, scent, boy!”

Chessie sat down abruptly on the sopping moss. “That,” he said, offended, “is the sort of thing I never do.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, don’t be so proud. They’re slipping away—oh, there goes the last of the horn!” A few tooting coughs reached them, and then nothing but the drone of rain on leaves and rocks.

“They’re gone,” Kirila said crossly. She glared at Chessie, the rain streaming off her hair and over the tip of her nose. “It might have been nice to talk to someone else, you know. We haven’t seen anyone for over a week.”

“This isn’t exactly rolling farmland.”

“But you’d think we’d see someone. A hunter, or a gypsy, or a woodcutter, or something.”

“I thought you told me that you liked being alone.”

“Well, I do. But not completely, all the time. It would be nice to talk to *somebody*.”

“Thank you,” Chessie said furiously. “Probably we haven’t seen anyone else because they all had at least sense enough to take their water-wrinkled human bodies in out of the rain!”

They didn’t speak for nearly two days, except to icily say things like “Would you like more rabbit, or shall I finish

it?" or "You take first sleep shift, I can wait." When Kirila shot a pigeon or a dove, Chessie fetched it to her and dropped it at her feet with a canine subservience parodied just enough to be insolent. They traveled thirty feet apart, one on either side of the road, foundering through the dripping weeds while the cleared path went to waste.

Eventually the rain stopped. The occasional forest had finally petered out completely, and they were crossing a rocky plateau, the rocks grudgingly yielding place only to straggly, dun-colored grass and a few stumpy trees. The sun never fully came out, but slowly creaked from one thin gray cloud to another, an aging courtesan flirting tiredly with a soiled fan.

On the afternoon of the second silent day, as Kirila was squatting by the horse, checking its shoes for stones, she said abruptly, "I know you're not a dog."

Chessie nodded. "I know." They trotted off, both using the center of the road, smiling at each other shyly. Subsequently, the horse picked up fewer stones.

Kirila made camp at nightfall. There were only a few faint stars and the water was brackish, but she nonetheless hummed as she spread out her bedroll to dry and pinned her long hair up off her neck. After she had scoured the cooking pot and gathered enough firewood for breakfast and set her wet boots by the fire with wadded cloth to plump out the toes, they sat next to each other, watching the glowing flames. Kirila's eyes were dark and dreaming, and she smiled a half-smile without knowing it. A little wind sloughed through the rocks and grass, mourning thin.

"Chant us a lay, Chessie, of errant knights and beasts most dreadful." This might be her first Quest, but she knew the proper forms.

Chessie scratched his ear with his hind foot. "I can't think of one, offhand."

"Well, then, of something else!"

He kicked at the edge of the fire with one forepaw. An ember fell out and smoked redly on the muddy ground, and he stared at it steadily while he spoke.

"Once, in a time not yet come but not far distant, there was no more magic. All the heroes were dead, and men as-

pired instead to be accountants, and forgot that there had been such things as heroes. The old gods had fled, and the weeping of angels in high heaven, and other related sounds, were not heard on earth because no one listened. No one ever saw an elf, or a griffin, or the Wilis. No one even saw a wigyn. No spells—”

“What’s a wigyn?” Kirila asked.

“A species of tiny flying dragon, long believed to be extinct. Crimson, with a pointed tail. No spells—”

“But if they’re extinct anyway—”

“I said believed to be extinct. People will believe any fool thing. No spells—”

“But when they—”

“Kirila, do you want to listen to this or not?”

“Of course I do!”

“Then listen. No spells rode the evening wind, and the moonlight was faulted for not being bright enough to plant beans by. Men preferred flatulence to flamboyance.”

Kirila opened her mouth to say that she liked beans, thought better of it, and settled more comfortably on her rock.

“There was a painter living then who had been born out of his time, as some men always are. He could see colors, and shades of colors, and shades of shades; what’s more, he could see the shapes of things as they were meant to be, and not only as they were. He painted beautiful women, and everyone gasped at their beauty except the subjects, who went home and looked in their mirrors and wept. But eventually he grew tired of painting beautiful women, and he shut himself up in his studio and began to paint shapes he knew in the muscles of his right hand, but not in his mind.

“He painted a Wili, fragile as sea foam, with death-sad eyes and hair of crystal smoke so tangled in the moonlight that it was impossible to tell where one left off and the other began. People who saw the painting felt a choking in their hearts, as if something were missing there, and afterwards several persons refused to go out on moonlit nights. A deputation was got together to visit the painter. They didn’t ask him not to paint any more Wilis—somehow they couldn’t do that, although they would have liked to—but they asked him to paint such things behind bars, slanting across the fore-

ground of the picture, to lend them a little distance, and give the people breathing space.

"So he did. He painted a mist-born dragon breathing fires that dispelled his own birth mist, raging at their loss, his tail whipping the fires into demented crimson frenzy. He painted a little godling tumbling to Earth through a purity of stars and being caught in the white arms of a guardian seraph tender as love. He painted a still unicorn at dawn, and a scarlet, slant-browed demon beckoning lewdly from the fire in a kitchen hearth, and a lovely princess so cruelly bound with chains that a few of the less well-adjusted men suffered foolish fleeting thoughts of heroism. And all of them he painted behind thick black bars, with a few short people sketched in the foreground, looking in.

"The people who saw the paintings were reassured by the bars, and talked with much head-nodding about perspective and color values and geometric composition. The very little children who were brought to the exhibition laughed, and pointed, and lisped 'Zoo, zoo,' or 'A'mal.' But all the children of a certain age, somewhere just before seven, wept to see the paintings, refusing comfort in the form of lollipops or cuddling or promises of pony rides. And one of them, a little boy with thin mosquito-bitten arms and a rounded belly defiantly stuck out, cried to the artist, 'Why did you make those little men in those black cages? Can't they get out ever?'"

Kirila shifted uneasily, and peered at Chessie. He had inched imperceptibly around to the other side of the fire, and all she could make out was a purple-black silhouette, very still. After a long while she said, "But there's still magic in the world now."

Chessie lay down, folding his hindquarters under himself. He began to crack the greasy rabbit bones left over from the stew, pinning each one on the ground with muddy forelegs that had once been the arms of a prince.

"Yes. There's still magic in the world now."

After a while he went to sleep, snoring softly, but Kirila lay awake for a long time in her damp blankets, staring up at the scattered faint stars.

❖
The Prince
of Morning Bells

❖
by Nancy Kress
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❖ About the Author ❖

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