

**THE CUPOLIAN SERIES**

*Anya and the Secrets of Cupola*

*Anya and the Power Crystal*

*Anya and the Cavern of Trials*

**ALSO BY N.A. CAULDRON**

*Fishing for Turkey*



ANYA  
and the  
Secrets  
of Cupola



## CHAPTER ONE



### THE SECRET IN THE WOODS

Like most Cupolians, Pillar Walberg strived to be ordinary. He paid his taxes on time, played mock sword fights with his son, helped his wife around the house, and was completely wrapped around his little girl's little finger. He had no intentions of changing his perfect life of ordinariness when he left one morning on his way to work. After kissing his family goodbye and telling them when he would be home, he exited his nice wooden house with its slate roof and two rooms without a worry in the world.

He smiled and waved good morning to his good friends and neighbors, the Wolfs, before beginning his walk down the awakening stone streets of his Cupolian neighborhood. His pleasant whistle followed him off his small side street and onto the wide stone thoroughfare already filling with merchants, vendors, customers, beggars, and anyone else with an errand to run. There he headed west, towards the castle.

The moment he entered the courtyard through the main

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gate of the castle walls, he stopped and saluted his superiors, as policy demanded. Although his sudden halt caused several people to bump into him, he properly maintained his rigid stance until allowed to continue on. Afterwards, he habitually dodged a stray arrow from one of the practicing archers, which, unfortunately, knocked over the packages from one of Ms. Schnee's many shopping trips. Jumping into action, he picked them up for her and carried them to her next destination. This proved to be quite unpleasant because not only did she have dreadful onion breath, but she used it to go into great detail about her collection of small dogs. Finally, his torture concluded, and he was able to traverse the courtyard and exit through the north gate, where he followed the path to the stables.

Pillar was one of Queen Pernicity's knights. This meant he did anything the Queen deemed appropriate for knightliness. Sometimes he paraded around in shiny armor to make her look special, while other times he stayed close to members of the royal family for protection in case anything should go wrong. Not that it ever did. In fact, Pillar couldn't remember a single incident of unpleasantness inflicted upon the royal family. Ever. That must include unpleasant tasting food because the only reason Pillar had been sent out this morning was to replace a recently butchered deer that tasted "off?". He thought the Queen a bit ridiculous, but it was not his place to ask questions, only to follow orders.

He entered the long wooden building and found his squire and horse. It wouldn't be long before his son, Terrence, would be old enough to start training. He would be

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eight this year, and Pillar already had a small short sword picked out for him. But would he even *want* to be his squire? Sure, the boy listened to his stories with alert eyes and a gaping mouth, but children's interests often change as they grow up. As he mounted his gelding and thanked his squire for his work, Pillar decided it didn't matter what Terrence became, he would make sure his son was the best skilled whatever-he-wanted-to-be in the queendom.

He trotted his horse east, past the riding fields, past the Queen's gardens, and to the forest's edge. Once within the trees he slowed to a walk and aimed his horse towards the area the Queen had "recommended" he try today. She had insisted deer caught from that neck of the woods tasted better than from anywhere else. Considering Pillar couldn't remember there being enough animals in that area to hunt, he had his doubts.

The area was lovely though. It reminded him of the walks he and his wife, Birgit, had taken before they were married, and of the wild grassland where he liked to take his two children to play spoonpole.

His youngest, Anya, was but four years old. A precious child with delicate blonde hair and emerald green eyes, she loved daisies and dirt pies. While he felt for his wife, he chuckled at the thought of what she might be having to put up with today. Just last night he had come home to a disheveled and irate Birgit scrubbing out manure from Anya's hair. The wee spitfire had sat sulking in the washtub, while her mother chastised her for having yet another fight in the Queen's cow pasture with a boy from down the street. Pillar

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smiled at the memory. Yup, Anya was a handful already. He could only imagine what she would turn into.

He neared his hunting spot and dismounted to continue on foot. The morning was still young; dim rays of sunlight could be seen peeking through the canopy. He tiptoed through the quiet woods and kept his breath as shallow as possible, for fear of making a sound. His ears strained to hear the slightest disturbance. He froze when he heard it. But it was no deer. He furrowed his brow in concentration. What was that? Why, it sounded like a woman talking!

He crept toward the noise to investigate. One foot delicately in front of the other, he neared its source and peaked around a holly bush. It *was* a woman! Well ... maybe. If that was a woman, it was the ugliest one he'd ever seen. Not that he would ever be so unknighly as to mention it, of course.

There was a cottage nearby, where she was drawing water from a well, but that didn't make any sense. Humans didn't live outside of Cupola, at least according to everything he had ever been taught or heard, unless you counted flabbertails. But flabbertails weren't real ... were they?

He stayed hidden behind his holly bush and watched the woman take the bucket and carry it towards the cottage behind her. She was talking to someone, he noticed, but he couldn't see who. "Who in the gramwhats is she talking to?" he whispered aloud.

Just then, as if to answer his question, a small, brown monkey came out from behind the well and joined the woman. She was talking to the monkey. And he was talking

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back! Not in human speech of course, but they were definitely conversing.

He could take no more. His curiosity getting the better of him, he stepped out from behind the bush and cleared his throat to get her attention. She turned to face him, nonplussed. He had to use all of his might not to gasp and step back in reaction to her appearance. Until now, he had only seen the back of her, wild thin hair and lopsided joints. But the front made “ugly” sound almost kind. One of her eyes was smaller than the other, and her massive nose stuck out like an awkward chimney with a wart on it the size of a baby mouse. Actually, he wasn’t sure it wasn’t a baby mouse.

He caught himself tilting his head and staring at her inquisitively and immediately jerked himself upright. He bowed and announced his name and occupation as was customary when introducing one’s self. “Pillar Walberg, Royal knight of Cup—”

But the woman didn’t let him finish. Instead, she screeched something about the Queen, he couldn’t really be sure what, and then raised a stick up into the air. When she brought the stick down, a bright light blinded him and *POP!* He was a stag.

It’s difficult to defend oneself when one is a deer. By the time he had enough wits about him to think to run, it was too late. He was in a cage.

His cage rose off of the ground and floated into the cottage. It seemed to be controlled by the stick the woman was holding. He vaguely remembered childhood stories of people with sticks doing odd things, like changing a man into

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a deer in this case, but only gullible people believed those stories. They were just silly flabbertails. But this was no flabbertail. This was very real and very, very scary.

The cage carried him down into a basement where dozens of other cages lined the walls, each containing its own animal. He could only assume they were once human too, like him. The woman with the stick produced a food and water dish for him to eat and drink out of, along with some straw to lie on. He tried talking with the hag, pleading with her, but, being a deer, that didn't work out too well. The other animals started vocalizing now, filling the room with barks, squawks, squeaks, and growls. The woman walked upstairs and left him alone in his confinement, surrounded by angry caged beasts. And so there he stayed, his ordinary life made extraordinary without any further explanation as to what happened or why.

\* \* \* \* \*

Anya yanked at her caught hair. Wasn't she old enough not to have to do this anymore? "Ick! Stupid prickleberries!" She dropped the plump green berry into her basket.

"I can't wait ... ugh ... until tomorrow ... OUCH!" She jerked her finger back. A drop of blood oozed out of where a thick thorn stuck out. She pinched the end of the thorn with the fingernails of her other hand, tight enough to not let loose, but tender enough not to snap it in two. Left alone, prickleberry thorns eventually wormed their way to the bone, where they took root and made the invaded appendage shrivel

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and fall off. The last thing Anya's family needed was fewer hands to work the fields. She pulled the thorn free and flicked it aside.

"Anya dear, are you ready?" her mother called.

Anya raised her head over the top of the bush to see what she had left. Just one more pricklybush to go and she was done! "Almost," she answered.

Eight years had passed since her father's disappearance. Eight years of Anya, her mother, and brother working Queen Pernicity's blasted fields. Anya pushed away into the depths of the last bush and began picking at its remains.

She'd always wondered why things had turned out the way they did. Her family didn't have to work in the fields when she was younger. They used to have a happy life with good food and fun times. Now the only time they had good food was during the harvest season. Speaking of which, Anya twirled one of the pricklybushes between her fingers and then popped it into her mouth. It squirted the insides of her cheeks with a satisfying burst. She allowed herself to close her eyes and relish the flavor before diving back into the spiky leaf-monster one last time, an accurate description as the thorns felt like teeth, giving her the sensation of being eaten alive.

Was this what happened to her father? Had he found a bush somewhere and been eaten by it? *Of course not*, she thought. *What a silly idea.*

She desperately wanted to know more about him, like why or how he left, but asking had always made her mother so upset that Anya had learned not to. All she remembered was one day they had to move across town into a smaller house in a

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smellier neighborhood and go to work, all three of them.

“There.” She plopped the last handful of berries on the last day of harvest into her basket and called out to her mother, “I’m done!” She wriggled her way out of the branches, yanking her hair free from their thorns as she went. She placed her basket in the cart with the others’ gatherings and waited in line with her family for her pay.

“Bout time!” Terrence said. “I’m sleeping in till noon tomorrow.”

“Are you going to cut firewood again this winter?” their mother asked him.

“Yeah. I’ve already got a couple lined up for next week.”

“Can I help again?” Anya asked. Being younger and smaller, she wasn’t the best helper, and she knew it, but she certainly tried.

“Yeah.” Terrence sounded more like he giving in than appreciative.

Anya rubbed her dry, scratched and salty skin. They had been there since the first rays of sunlight, the dewy ground sticking to their feet, and the air making their skin clammy. She always relished the morning’s coolness, because she knew what the afternoon brought.

She wiped the sweat out of her brows before it could sting her eyes and peered over her shoulder at the now barren plants. She remembered her first day as a field worker. Since she was the youngest, they gave her the worst jobs there. She had to poke the seeds into the ground so the adults wouldn’t have to bend over so much. They forced her to pick the tiniest weeds missed from when they went by with their hoes. They

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had seemed to think it was easier for her since she was so much smaller. At least she didn't have to do *that* anymore. They still made her gather the last berries though. She jerked her fingers through her sap and juice encrusted hair. "Ick! I'll never get this out of my hair!"

"Yes you will," her mother said. "I'll help you wash it."

The line moved forward, making it her family's turn to get paid. Anya bit back a snarl as the overseer dropped her measly few coins into her palm. She was still getting paid less than the adults, just because she was younger. It wasn't fair, but it's not like she had a choice in the matter. Unless she could make money on her own elsewhere, she, along with every other Cupolian in the same boat, would remain reliant on the Queen's needs. And the only place the Queen needed Anya and her family this year, and every other year it seemed, was in the fields.

Anya put the coins in her pocket. Most of their pay would go to the family's present necessities. The rest would go into savings for the winter, when they didn't get paid. What odd jobs they could find, like Terrence's cutting firewood, helped, but it didn't cover everything.

Hints of the coming evening brushed against them in a breeze on their way home. It brought with it smells of cooking meals. "What's for supper tonight, Mom?" asked Terrence.

"Dumplings and beets," answered their mother.

Anya swirled her tongue into the depths of her mouth, trying to savor what was left of the prickleberries. They'd had dumplings and some type of root vegetable every night this week, but she knew her mother did the best she could. Even

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Terrence didn't complain, though Anya had heard him grunt when their mother had answered.

As their small, one-roomed home came into view, Anya had a passing memory of her old house: the bigger and better house, the one with her father. She tried not to think of those memories. His face grew hazier every year, and that just made her sad.

But this year was going to be different though, she told herself with an upturned chin. This year she turned twelve, and something special happened to children who turned twelve in Cupola.

For one, they didn't have to go to school anymore and learn all those "important" things, like how to work numbers and count money so they could figure their taxes for Queen Pernicity and the Royal Court. For another, they got to take part in Selection Day. That thought put an immense grin on Anya's face, because Selection Day was her ticket out of those fields!



## SELECTION DAY

Anya spent all winter looking forward to the end of it. Not because it was cold, not because it was always a struggle, but because Selection Day was right around the corner. Not having to be in school this year, Anya was able to help more. On top of piling cut wood for her brother, she babysat and cleaned houses with her mother.

Then one day, one frigid day just before spring peeked its nose around the corner, it came. Selection Day. The one day of the year any job openings for the currently ruling monarch were filled. All appointments and promotions were officially made in public, so the whole realm knew everything, including your reaction to the assignment. Some people were very happy with their assignments, but others ... well, we won't discuss the spectacle that took place during Selection Day of '76. That was the gossip of the land for years!

But before she could take off to meet her fate, her mother insisted she listen to some advice. While filling Anya's breakfast bowl with some hot grits, she said, "Now remember, Anya. I know you want to be something lofty, but don't be too

picky. We need the money, and any job is better than none at all, even if it means coming back to the fields with me.”

Anya burned her tongue on the hot porridge. “I know, Momma. But I can ask for something I want first, right?”

Her mother filled a bowl for herself and one for Terrence as well. “You can ask for anything you want. But you’ll have to take whatever you can get. And remember, it’s ‘yes ma’am’ and ‘no sir’, and—”

“—always do as you’re told,” they said together.

“I know, Mom. You’ve told me all of this over and over in the gardens already. Show everyone respect. I’m the servant not the master. I got it.”

Anya quickly ate and put on her older brother’s outgrown and stained clothes. Today was too cold to go barefoot, so she threw on some shoes as well. Her mother and brother wished her well, and out the door she went, holding her arms against the biting cold that greeted her. Her best friend and neighbor, Gevin Lancaster, was closing his own door.

“Hey, Gevin!”

Gevin also wore old clothes, most likely passed down from his older brother, and worn out leather shoes with a hole in the toe. As he came outside, he too slouched and held his arms for warmth against a shudder. He yawned out a, “Hi,” and straggled along next to her. Slightly taller than Anya, Gevin’s fluffy, light brown hair flopped about as they walked down their dirt street together.

Anya’s other best friend, Taika Wolf, bounced on her toes at the end of their street on the main road. Her straight, raven black pigtails jostled on top of the fur coat her mother had

made for her.

Gevin saw her and grumbled, “I wish I had a warm fur coat.”

“Gevin. Don’t start.”

Taika was tall with a beautiful, deeply tanned face. As Anya and Gevin got closer, Taika waved so hard and smiled so big, Anya was afraid her hand was going to fly off and her teeth fall out.

Gevin groaned. “The last thing I want to deal with first thing in the morning is Miss Peppy.”

Anya hissed, “Gevin! Shut up! She’s our *friend*.”

Gevin made a face, but kept his mouth shut.

Taika ran up to them as they entered the main street, clearly about to explode. “Are you ready? I’m so excited! Today’s the day we find out what we get to be!”

Gevin rolled his eyes. “Why are you always so happy in the morning, Taika?”

Anya thought it best to stay out of it and walked ahead to the castle, but she didn’t get far before she ran into someone else. That someone else was another Cupolian waiting at the end of a terribly long line reaching all the way from the far side of the courtyard, through the castle gates, and halfway down the main street. Taika stood on tiptoe to see what was going on, while Gevin wiped the rest of the sleep from his eyes.

He woke up more with the fragrance of the meat cooking in the nearby houses. “Man! I wish I had lamb sausage for breakfast. All we ever get is whatever porridge is on sale.”

Anya nodded and looked around at the houses the wonderful aromas were coming from. These houses had stone

streets to keep their residents' feet and legs cleaner than her simple dirt lane. Their roofs were made of wooden shingles, well kept thatch, slate, or even metal. Every home had a fire, and it was usually tended by someone during the day so that the house stayed warm.

Anya sighed before allowing her gaze to wander back to the queue they were standing in. Ahead of them, a dirty man with torn clothes, calloused skin, and three black teeth said, "I wanna be a Royal Butler. Dey get all the perks, ya know."

"What are you now?" asked Anya.

"Slime scraper."

Gevin pulled his lips back in disgust.

A squeaky voice with an upturned nose said, "Hmph. Well *I'm* going to be a Royal Accountant."

Behind the young trio, an incredibly short man with a round belly that stuck out over his toes said, "I've been playing this trumpet here for two weeks! That oughtta be enough to please Her Highness."

All three raised their eyebrows in disbelief. Anya readied herself to nudge Gevin for the sarcastic remark destined to come out of him.

However, a tall woman with a dreadfully tight bun spoke before Gevin could. After eyeballing the man's rusty and dented trumpet with skepticism, the woman announced to everyone she was applying for Castle Decorator. "Everyone says my house is the most beautifully decorated in the queendom! Of course the Queen would want me to make her castle just as dazzling."

These people talked like they had known their whole life

what they wanted to be, like they were made for it. Anya couldn't remember ever feeling that way about anything. She tried to think of what she wanted. She was tired of saving all of her money and still starving every winter, so she definitely wanted a job that lasted all year long, not just for the gardening season. And she *definitely* wanted to do something inside, something that didn't give her sunburn in the summer or freeze her half to death in the early spring. But otherwise, she really had no idea.

So, she asked out loud to no one in particular, "Why don't I know what I want to do like everyone else?"

Taika answered, "Just because you don't know now doesn't mean you won't know when it matters."

Anya shook her head. "I don't get it."

"It may not matter what you do right now." The line moved forward slightly.

"Then why does everyone make such a big deal about it?"

Taika shrugged. "Because it matters to them. Think of yourself as lucky. You're not going to be disappointed if you don't get what you wanted. Also, if you get what you want now, what will you have left to strive for? You have less to worry about."

Anya didn't see how this was the least bit true or helpful. How did she have less to worry about? But Taika was smarter than anyone else she knew, so she must know what she's talking about.

By now, all three were fully awake and anxious for the line to move again. Gevin had found a cart to stand on in order to watch over the crowd ahead. A merchant came running up to

him, shouting obscenities.

Anya asked as Gevin jumped down and avoided the merchant's swings, "What do you want to be, Gevin?"

The merchant started throwing broken trinkets. Gevin dodged them with ease. "A squire, of course!"

"Do you think you'll get it?"

"No. No one's ever been a squire at my age. They always start out somewhere's else and stand for selection at fourteen. If they're lucky, they get picked. Of course, I wouldn't have any trouble if Clay were still alive. He would've shown me how to be a proper knight, just like him!"

Gevin had worked in the Queen's gardens with Anya ever since his father had died six years previously. His mother and younger brother, Brent, were with him. She didn't know the whole story on his older brother, Clay. She only knew he had died a few weeks ago. This made the poor garden wages the three of them made seem even smaller. Anya didn't know what to say to Gevin.

"I want to be a Librarian," said Taika.

Gevin teetered on a sizable rock with his arms waving outstretched. "That's the lowest paying job in the queendom! And it sounds horribly boring! What would you do all day?"

She stared straight ahead with unmoving eyes. It always creeped Anya out when she did that. "As Royal Librarian for the Queen of Cupola, I will be responsible for ensuring all official documents, queendom scrolls, and written works are accounted for and contained within their proper places."

The line moved ahead a sizable chunk. Gevin jumped down, pointed his thumb at his chest and said, "Yeah, well I

get to become a knight and fight in tournaments and become a real hero and get all the girls a man could want.”

Anya snorted. Taika rolled her eyes and sighed.

“What? It’s true and you know it!”

By now the wait had shortened considerably. The trio went inside the castle walls and faced the palace in place with everyone else. Anya saw an older woman Administrator out of the corner of her right eye. She had several chins that quivered when she spoke, and she waddled side to side like an overfed duck when she walked. Behind her were the supervisors, the ones choosing who they wanted to work for them. There was an elegant looking sort of lady, a very large, very mean looking man, and several merchants. All of them acted as if they’d rather be counting castle mice than be here.

The applicants nearest the Administrator’s line stood at attention. Some held their breath. Some wrung their hands. One woman was biting her lip so hard, Anya was afraid she might swallow it. The massive, surly man crossed his arms and stood behind the Administrator, who stepped aside and said, “Pick out your boys then.”

The man walked over and nodded to a few grateful boys who nodded back with gruff awareness. He then said to the woman, “That’s all, ma’am. Thank you,” and left. As grumpy as he was to everyone else, he still showed great respect towards her. She made Anya nervous.

The Administrator told the chosen few. “All right then. Squires, go on to your new jobs.” The boys followed the Knights’ Commander towards the military side of the courtyard.

Anya saw Gevin's face fall. "Come on, Gev. You knew you couldn't be squire today anyway."

"I know," he sighed.

The selection process worked its way closer to them. The Administrator held a list as she called out names and assignments. "Susan." An older girl stepped forward with grace and pride. Her long, satin brown hair was held back by an intricate glass butterfly clasp. She bent her knees and lowered her head for the woman, her delicate, ankle length powder blue dress almost touching the ground. "You are to be Queen's Maid." There were audible gasps around her by the other girls dressed as royal maids who obviously wanted the position. One started crying.

Susan smiled, curtsied once again, and floated off toward the castle.

"Ms. Susan!" called the Administrator.

Susan stopped and turned with questioning authority.

"You must choose your maids now."

"Of course, ma'am." Susan bowed again. She walked over to the line and addressed each girl in turn, "Mary, Beatrice, and Lily." All three smiled and giggled like the silly little girls they were. They then remembered to curtsy their new matron and followed her to the castle.

That was when Anya decided she never wanted to be the Queen's maid, or any royal maid from the look of things. Nothing could be worth having to be surrounded by giggling girls, wearing gowns all the time, looking vastly uncomfortable, and curtsying everyone everywhere.

The three friends turned silent as more and more

applicants were picked off, and the positions became less and less desirable. Finally, the Administrator got to them. “So, we’re down to the new ones, huh?”

Everyone stood at attention as the Administrator’s eyes looked them up and down and then back over her list.

Anya forgot to breathe. She focused straight ahead, unable to move or even blink. Her vision was blurred, her heart was in her ears, and she wasn’t completely sure she was still standing.

The Administrator called out, “All right, merchants. Choose your helpers.” She then stepped back to allow the stall merchants their turn.

They were allowed to pick from the applicants because it was well known no one would willingly work for them otherwise. Rumors were they had to pay a sizable finders’ fee for this privilege. They glowered down their long, crooked noses at the scared children.

One of the merchants approached a child and said, “Shout, boy!”

The boy yelled out, “Potatoes! Potatoes for sale!”

Anya had seen how merchants treated their help, yelling at them and hitting them incessantly. Merchant helpers stayed outdoors with the stall too. *No thank you!*

When the merchants asked her to shout, she weakly stammered, “M-m-meat. C-c-come get your meat.” They tutted and curled their lips at her before moving on. She smiled and let out the air she had been holding.

They picked the poorest looking children there and left. The Administrator got back to her work, and Anya got nervous again. The next jobs assigned were a grave digger and

a laundry worker. She was relieved not to be chosen for those either!

The Administrator called out, “You there!”

A boy near Gevin pointed to his chest and said, “Me?”

“Yes, you. Go to the fields. They need new workers this year.”

Crestfallen, he spluttered, “But I thought we got to ch—”

“Everyone thinks that their first time through.” Never looking up from her checklist, she waved away his response with her hand. “You’ll do what’s needed. You’ll do what you’re told. What you become from then is up to you and your supervisor.” She raised her head and addressed everyone still in line, “Your duty is to the survival of this queendom. If you’re able to find work elsewhere, then you can choose what you do. But if you’re to work for Her Majesty, you’ll do what she needs, and you’ll do it well, or you’ll be out looking for another job. Do I make myself clear?”

A few consensual “Yes, ma’am’s” could be heard throughout what was left of the aspiring young people.

Anya could feel Taika stiffen in fear. She knew Taika had her heart set on Librarian, and Anya wasn’t sure what would happen if her friend got stuck with something else.

The Administrator came to Gevin. She scrutinized him over frontways and backways. “You’re the new groomsman.”

Gevin didn’t react.

“Report to the stables.”

Gevin gave an almost indiscernible nod and took off towards the stables. Anya looked, but couldn’t tell if Gevin was disappointed or not as he jogged off to his new job.

Anya was next. She held her breath and her head high as she awaited her fate. *Please not the fields. Please not the fields.* She could hear her mind with every breath she took. *Something inside. Something inside. Please something inside!*

“You can be the new Elf.”

*The what?* Anya raised her eyebrows and dropped her jaw.

The Administrator tutted before saying, “Scullery maid, child. You work in the kitchens. Report to the Cook!” She thrust her thick arm to the north wing of the castle. It made the whole side of her body jiggle.

Anya headed towards the northern corridor, speechless. She was to work in the kitchens! No more outside work. She would be inside all the time now, and surrounded by all the food she could ever want. What could have been better?

“You must be Taika.”

The Administrator’s voice made Anya stop and turn to hear what was to happen to her friend.

“Your teachers have recommended you for a post in the library.”

Taika remained motionless. She wasn’t breathing from what Anya could tell. Her eyes didn’t even blink. She just stood there with a look of sheer terror on her face.

“You’re to be the new Librarian. Report to the book tower.”

Taika broke into an immense smile and exhaled loudly. “Yes, ma’am! Thank you, ma’am!” She met Anya’s eyes before running to the isolated tower on the other end of the castle grounds.

Anya turned back and walked quickly to her new post with

a new spring in her step. She passed by a group of swordsmen practicing their drills on the left. On her right stood a building filled with the chatter of women sewing clothes for the royal family and servants. A bit further along the bricked paved grounds of the courtyard, she came across the laundry area. Here clothing hung, covering the dozens of ropes that held them. Those deemed too delicate for public viewing, including those of the Queen herself, were dried inside on ropes in the hot laundry house.

When Anya passed under the last rope, she came to a dead end with a well in the center. The road changed to dirt, and chickens scratched at it, making little craters everywhere. She was about to turn back and ask for directions when she smelled the welcoming aroma of breads and meats and pastries. Anya's mouth watered as she followed the fragrance, nearing the open door to the right.

She crept into the kitchen for the first time. What she saw made her eyes bulge. Everyone ran hither and thither with arms full of saucepans, food, trays, and knives. Anya couldn't imagine what possibly kept everyone from bumping into each other. The smells made her stomach rumble, and she was drawn towards a counter topped with breakfast trays being readied to go up.

A portly, sweaty woman met Anya with fists on her hips. "You must be the new Elf." The woman's faded red curls were held under a white cap with a ruffle. She appeared stout and very capable of her job. "You start at five tomorrow morning. You get every other week off. You share your job with the other Elf over there." She threw her head back to indicate a

small, ratty girl bent over a shallow stone sink. “You do not get sick, but you can visit the healers in your spare time. They will heal you for free since you work for the Queen now. You will not get paid until a full month of satisfactory work is done. I’m filling in this morning for Chef who’s out on special business. So I’ll be your supervisor during your weeks here.” She jammed her chest with her thumb. “I decide what is satisfactory and what is not.” *Jam*. “I decide if you will get paid or not.” *Jam*. “I am your master now.”

Anya pulled herself together and said, “Yes, ma’am. I understand, and thank you for my job.”

Cook was taken aback. “You must be used to work already. You have the attitude of a proper worker.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve been working in the fields since I was four.”

Cook scrutinized Anya up and down. She couldn’t see through her brother’s baggy clothes just how muscular Anya was from all that hard work. “I’ll save my judgment till I see you work a while. Your job is to wash the dishes, keep the castle’s water barrel filled, and light the fires in the kitchen. You’ll have to keep ‘em going, all day too. Do you know how to start a fire?”

“Oh yes, ma’am!”

“Good! Won’t nobody be here in the morning when you come. You’re the first to come in every morning and the last to leave. You will not be late. You may sleep in the kitchen during your shift, if desired.”

Anya turned her head to look at the corner Cook motioned to. It held a pile of straw, presumably for kindling

fires when not being used for a bed.

“We get our share of homeless workers here, but there’s none on your shift just yet. Do you have a place to sleep?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Anya nodded.

“You may have two meals per full day of work, given to you by another member of staff, and no more. You will eat in the kitchen alone, not in the servants’ dining room. You will not speak unless spoken to, and you will stay out of the way when you are not needed. You will wash all upstairs’ and downstairs’ dishes, clean all cooking utensils and pots, and remove all dishes from the servants’ dining. You will purchase your own uniform and be responsible for keeping and cleaning it. Excuses for your attire will be made until you have been paid. Do you understand?”

Her duties seemed a bit much, but simple enough; stay out of the way and wash dishes. Although she wasn’t sure if kindling a stove fire was any different than in her fireplace at home. She was too afraid to ask, so she just muttered, “Yes, ma’am. I understand.”

Cook nodded her off. Anya left the kitchen and went by the stables to find Gevin. They looked rather busy as well. She couldn’t find Gevin anywhere, so she headed back to the castle grounds and towards Taika’s tower. On the way, she passed the poor boy who had been assigned the new laundry position. He looked like he was about to cry as he tried stirring the vat of heavy, sodden clothes. She would probably cry too if she had to smell that all day. The swordsmen were still as hard at it as they had been the first time she went past them.

It took her several more minutes to get to the

southwestern corner of the courtyard where Taika had been assigned. Anya climbed the crumbling stone stairs that spiraled up the loneliest tower of the castle and knocked on the thick wooden door at the top.

“Come in!” Taika looked up and smiled fully at her friend. “Anya! I’m so glad you came to see this! I was so excited to be chosen as the new Librarian, I still can’t believe it! Have you looked out the windows yet?”

Anya tried to answer, but she didn’t get a chance to.

“Come. Look outside.” Taika grabbed Anya’s arm and dragged her to the windows at the top of the stairwell. Anya could see out onto the whole queendom and beyond. She had no idea the world went out that far. Taika said, “That’s not all.”

She dragged Anya back into the library where a black and balding man with graying hair was lounging in a ratty, lilac-upholstered chair. He issued a grandiose yawn. Taika introduced him to Anya. “Otis!”

Otis didn’t move much.

“This is my friend, Anya.”

Anya extended her hand for him to take. Reluctantly, he bent forward to graze it with his fingertips.

“Nice to meet you, Otis,” she said.

Otis grunted.

“Otis is my supervisor. He leaves next year, and it’s his job to teach me how to run this place without him.” Otis went back to his nap, while Taika walked over to a desk in the middle of the room. “I give anybody a book or scroll they ask for when they ask for it. They sign this paper here to say they have the book or scroll and will return it. I even have my own

robes!” She stuck her arms out and twirled once. They were made of a nasty brown felt and had holes all through them. Anya thought they looked like scorch marks, but decided that didn’t make any sense and discarded the idea. They had obviously been worn before. Many times before. Taika continued, “I can read all the books I want, even the ones people aren’t allowed to take home!”

“These,” she said, pointing to a shelf full of dusty items, “aren’t allowed to leave the library.” Every item on it was peculiar with a different color, shape, and size than the others. Some even had jewels or other decorative items attached to them. “I haven’t been able to tear myself away since Otis showed them to me.”

Anya couldn’t help but be amused. Only Taika would be this happy with the most boring job in the queendom. Granted, washing dishes wasn’t exactly what she would call exciting, but at least there was excitement around her. Otis sounded more like an extra chair than someone to talk with.

While Taika continued her fascination with a bunch of dirty, old books on shelves, Anya browsed the library. She found a table covered with glass jars, tubes, scales, and equipment she didn’t recognize. “Taika, what’s this?”

Taika came over and scrunched her face up in confusion. “Otis!”

*Snort.*

“Otis! What’s this over here?”

“Hmm? Oh. That’s left over from the previous age, the time before we were called Librarians. No one uses it. The last Librarian before me tried to, but he wound up a pile of purple

ashes on that spot over there.” He pointed to a big purple stain on the floor. “And that’s how I got this job. Don’t touch it.”

Taika and Anya backed away from the table.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

N. A. Cauldron grew up on the outskirts of modern Cupola. As a young child, she enjoyed listening to the tales told of Cupolian’s history. This ultimately led to a successful career as a research historian and her recent authorship of historical fiction. She is an avid herbologist, and spends her free time hunting out and collecting rare herbs for her potion making. She is especially fond of the snagged tooth humpmoss, and has been known to spend weeks at a time on fungal expeditions.

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