



THE GIRL WHO WRITES THE FUTURE

PART ONE

BY FREDERIC S. DURBIN

FABLE THATCHER COULD do miraculous things, but she could not keep the sun from setting. It sank in fire behind the purple mountains, refusing to wait for the end of her chapter. She squinted at the book in her hands as the dusk deepened. The branches around her were not helping. They only gathered the gloom faster, catching it like big, soft brushes heavy with paint. The silver moon, just past full, blazed in the sky of deep, velvety blue.

Whether or not the poor woodcutter's son would ever catch another glimpse of the princess—whether he would find his way out of the forest—would have to wait until tomorrow. With a sigh, Fable closed the book and tucked it into her pocket. Her feet

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had gone to sleep, propped in the tree's fork. Hanging on to a limb, she twirled her ankles until their feeling returned. Then she climbed down and dropped into the moss.

Fable straightened her dress and brushed at the stains of grass, earth, and tree sap. The dress had started out white, but no dress could remain white on Fable till the end of a summer day. What did it matter? No one who came to the Moonlight Faire noticed her anyway. If they glimpsed her dashing across the field where fireflies glimmered—or flitting among the wagons, racing the night's full dark—they never guessed that she was the greatest secret of Roderic the Astonishing.

Fable was pushing the limits, returning after moonrise. Already, the much-trampled field had filled with crowds. She kept to the shadows outside the ring of brightly painted wagons with their awnings and wooden steps, their arched doorways inviting the village folk into realms of wonder.

"For the meager price of a bronze *cleybat*," intoned Salt Maude, resplendent in her scarlet headscarf and her cloak of golden eyes, "see the wonders of Tramontania! Behold the bones of the sea dragon, the claw of the dreaded *gartlish*! For the sacrifice of a mere silver *triskai*, bewilder yourself in the Hall of Mirrors! Shudder at the sight of the hairy Man-Beast, not for the faint of heart!"

Fable sprinted across the open ground to the wagon standing apart from all others—the wagon of midnight blue, ornamented with golden horses and carved sages

holding crystal seeing-globes. In front of the wagon, Roderic's broad-shouldered assistants wrangled the throng into an orderly line. Fable headed for the trapdoor on the wagon's underside. If any of the jostling farm folk or crafters saw her, they assumed her to be a servant girl.

Twisting the complex latch, Fable listened to the end of Salt Maude's speech: "But, my gentle souls—for the inconsequential sum of a golden *shokira* . . ." Here, Maude always lowered her voice, for she had the crowd's full attention. "For that trifle of a cost, venture into the presence of Roderic the Astonishing, who makes wishes come true!"

Fable heard the gasps, the exclamations of disbelief and eagerness, the hurrying feet. The trapdoor swung down. She wriggled up into the dimness and the scent of faraway spice.

Her kneeling cushion and low desk awaited. Fable scrambled to take her place, grabbing her pen. Behind the curtain, she was invisible to Roderic's customers; they saw only a floor-to-ceiling veil painted with strange symbols, and before it, sitting cross-legged on an exotic carpet, magnificent Roderic.

Fable could see through the curtain from her side, not perfectly; the figures of the master and his customer seemed wreathed in mist. Roderic had heard her arrive, and as he chanted in ancient Ishantrian and gestured mysteriously with his hands, he gave her a reprimanding look.

Before Roderic in his robes and tassels, on the wagon floor's lower tier, sat a farm boy half-choked by aromatic fog from the censers. He could not yet have been twenty, his eyes wide with hope. He must have saved a long time, Fable thought, to afford the gold piece.

Would his wish bring him joy? Fable felt sorry for the customers, who handed over their money so eagerly. In her fourteen years, Fable had learned that her prophecies rarely made others happy in the end.

"Love," said Roderic solemnly, switching back to the common language. "You, Hins Welling, long for the love of Daisy Whitfield, and it shall be yours! Three days hence, Daisy will give you a sign of her affection." Roderic spoke the names clearly, so that Fable would not fail to write them down properly.

Fable dipped her pen, blotted it, and scrawled as quickly and clearly as she could in the bound book of pages, setting the love prophecy on paper. It would come true, just as everything Fable wrote came true, unless she wrote concerning herself. Her own life, she could not change by writing—only by living, Roderic said. It was a part of the gift, the curse she'd always had. If she wrote, "I shall have cakes and butter tomorrow," it came true only if the cooks decided so. If she wrote, "Fable Thatcher will find three golden coins next Wednesday," she could search from morning till night and would find nothing of the sort.

What frightened Fable were the *other* prophecies, the ones she wrote without meaning to,

when her mind was asleep and her hand moved the pen by itself. She had no control over these, but like the rest of her foretellings, they always came true. She shivered, thinking of the One Prophecy—the one about herself that had not yet been fulfilled. It was terrifying, but Roderic had told her not to fear it. Fable tried, as always, to push it from her mind.

But Hins Welling had escaped his fate of despair. He would have his Daisy, and he thanked Roderic again and again until the master was obliged to push him out the door.

Behind the curtain, Fable chuckled. Gratitude always went to Roderic the Astonishing, the granter of wishes. No one imagined that the wishes were fulfilled by a girl, with ink and pen, hidden nearby.

The second customer seemed a wealthy traveler, a merchant who said he'd heard of Roderic in the City of Spires. Removing his velvet cap, he pushed his straight, well-oiled hair back from his eyes. "Is it true?" he asked urgently, leaning forward. "Can you grant wishes?"

His hungry gaze made Fable uneasy.

"Some," said Roderic, adjusting the lamp's wick. "Not all."

"Can you give me eternal life?"

"No." Shadows danced over Roderic's face. "There are laws written in the stars. The length of each life is written there and is not ours to know."

"The hand of Queen Alodia in marriage, then, and the throne of the kingdom?"

Roderic took the merchant's gold piece from the coffer and placed it before the man. "You ask inappropriately, sir. I do not give the hand of anyone wed or promised to another; nor do I give a kingdom for a gold piece. I cannot help you. Good night."

Fable held her breath. She did not like the merchant's scowl, or the way he kept his hand near the jeweled knife in his belt.

"You choose, then," said the merchant, "the favors you will grant."

"I have told you: I obey the laws, just as the stars, sun, and moon obey them. Without the law, we would have—"

"Chaos," said the man, with a sly smile. Or at least, that was what Fable heard. In truth, the richly dressed stranger had said a name: Khaos.

The candle flames wavered then, and the light of the lamp. The censer's smoke whirled, as if a cold wind had blown through the wagon. Fable felt its chill. She gasped.

At the sound, the merchant tipped his head, turning his face to stare directly at her.

Fable shrank away from the curtain, dropping the pen, wrapping her arms around herself. Surely the man couldn't see her . . .

His eyes seemed fixed on hers, and his smile broadened. "So it is true," he said, his voice a whisper. "She is here. The child who writes the future."

Fable pressed herself against the wall, heart pounding. How could this man know about her?

Roderic sat on his knees, unflinching. In a commanding voice, he said, "Take your money and go."

"No," said the man. "What I seek is here."

The stranger drew his curved, gleaming knife.

But columns of fire shot upward from the brass urns on either side of Roderic—the fire spirits that protected him. Blazing red, they towered over the kneeling master, whirlwinds of flame that nearly reached the ceiling.

The merchant watched them, his face bathed in their glow, and still he grinned.

Fable's hands bunched in the collar of her dress. It was as if the air had gone out of the room; she could hardly breathe.

Outside the wagon, people screamed. Eerie light flared beyond the narrow windows. Fable heard the drumming of horses' hoofs.

Focused upon each other now, Roderic and the merchant rose to their feet, their movements measured as if they were beginning a ceremony. Fable knew then that the

stranger was a master of the magic arts, like Roderic. A black flame sprang from the man's upturned palm, a fire that was shadow. The room's light rushed into it, consumed.

"Fable," said Roderic quietly, "the Sarcophagus."

She knew what Roderic meant, but she wasn't about to leave him. She stretched to where the spear hung on the wall, the long spear with which Roderic, many decades ago, had killed the Turgonian Boar.

"FABLE!" shouted Roderic. Perhaps he heard her tugging at the spear's brackets; more likely, he knew her too well. His tone allowed no argument. "The Sarcophagus! Now!"

The light was fading, for the curtain seemed to have grown thicker, darker . . . No. The rippling darkness was the flame summoned by the other sorcerer. It raged over the walls, across the carpets, devouring tapestries, rolling against the ceiling. Acrid smoke seared Fable's nose and throat. The roar of the shadow fire was deafening.

Two figures moved in the swirling dark—Roderic and the enemy.

Fable screamed her master's name, her voice swallowed up. The heat lashed at her face, her arms. She could not reach Roderic. She had no choice but to obey him.

Before the light was entirely gone, she scooped up the book for writing prophecies. She snatched the pen from the floor, praying its nib still held enough ink. Then she stumbled to the Sarcophagus lying in the far corner, the gleaming cabinet of brass and iron



in the shape of an ancient king. It was not a real sarcophagus; Roderic had made it for decoration, and as a hiding place for Fable. He knew the time would come when she'd need it. No weapon could pierce it, no hammer crush it, no fire could burn it, and it locked from the inside.

Fable dragged away a trunk and a coatrack; she whisked off a dusty blanket that covered half of the Sarcophagus. When she'd heaved open the lid, she dove into the cabinet's plush, cushioned hollow and pulled the lid shut. The interior brought blessed relief from the heat. In the pitch-black, she took several deep, trembling breaths.

There was utterly no light. Fable's dress rustled against the satin padding and clung to her sweaty skin. Her breath hissed, but no sound penetrated the metal shell.

She had no time to lose. Working by feel, Fable opened the book. It didn't matter whether she had a blank page or a full one; all that mattered was that she wrote. Her arm was at an awkward angle, the book too close, but she pressed the pen's tip to the page. Doing her best to form letters she couldn't see, she wrote:

*Roderic will defeat these enemies.
He will be alive when I come out.*

Her thoughts were hasty. She was sure she might have done better, but she had to get the words down in time. She dared not write more, for the nib must surely be dry already.

Now there was nothing to do but wait.

Roderic was a wise master—stern at times, but never cruel. Fable thought of her first glimpse of him, when she'd been an orphan, spying on him from a treetop. He'd given her a home with the Moonlight Faire and had recognized her talent—her gift. Her curse.

He would open the Sarcophagus when it was safe. Roderic alone knew how to open it from the outside. Surely he would come soon. If only Fable could hear something!

She waited and waited, clutching the book to her chest. It was impossible to count the time slipping past.

Finally, she could stand it no longer. The air inside the Sarcophagus had grown stale, too thin to breathe. Carefully, Fable found the catch and squeezed it, and at the loud click, she pushed open the lid—just a fraction at first. Gratefully, she gulped the fresher air.

What she saw puzzled her, for the purplish glow around her was entirely wrong for the wagon's chamber. Smoke floated, and fires crackled. Embers glowed.

She wasn't inside the wagon at all! It was gone—destroyed, its walls collapsed and smoldering. The radiance was firelight mingled with the night air, the sky just beginning to pale before dawn.

There were no crowds. Every wagon of the Moonlight Faire was a burning wreck, and its people were scattered; they must have fled into the night. The hoofs of horses had churned the field into mud. Strings of party

lanterns draped the bushes, their paper sides smashed, their flames gone out.

But I wrote a prophecy, Fable thought as tears welled in her eyes. I wrote that Roderic would defeat the enemy . . . that he would be here when I came out. Shaking, she crept from the cabinet and dropped to her knees in the mud beside the wagon's charred remains. The painted carving of a wizard lay on its back, its blackened hand clutching a crystal globe now shot through with cracks.

Peering at the moon, Fable drew up her knees. Sharp grief twisted her insides. Silently, she wept for Roderic.

A voice called her name. Jumping up, she followed the sound past the ruined Hall of Mirrors. There, leaning against a rock in the last moonlight, lay Roderic. He was covered in soot, his face badly burned, his breathing shallow.

"Master Roderic!" Fable knelt beside him, gripping his arms.

He was alive—her prophecy had come true! And there

were no enemies. Roderic had indeed been victorious. But the shadow of death was on him; Fable had seen it more than once. Her mind spun.

"Ink!" she cried aloud. A new prophecy. She had to save him.

"No." He grasped her hands, not letting her go.

Tears obscured her vision. She fought to get free. She must find her pen and some ink that was not destroyed. "You can't go!"

"Fable. Listen." He could barely speak, his words coming in faint bursts. "Go . . . to Hush Castle . . .

The Silent Sisters will help. Say . . . my name . . ."

Though Fable called his name with many tears, Roderic did not answer. He had journeyed onward from life, beyond the Gates of Time.

Daylight grew in the field of burning wagons. The Moonlight Faire was gone, now a part of her past. Fable Thatcher arose. She, too, had a journey to make.

to be continued

