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opening extract from

# The Questing Knights of the Faerie Queen

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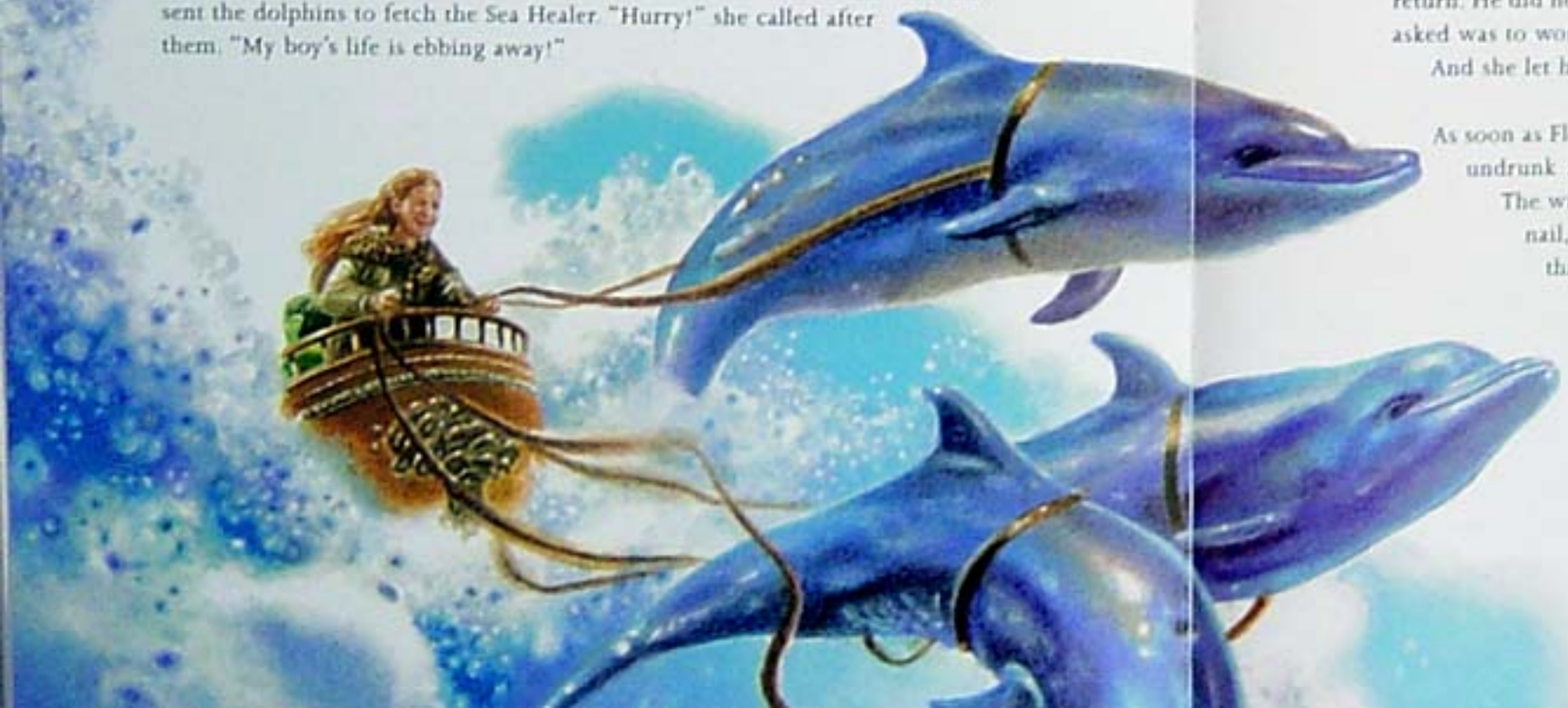
# Chapter Three

## *Under the Sea*

Cymo the sea nymph, driving her chariot over the sobbing sea, looked down at her wounded son and wept. She regretted now her lifelong advice to Marinell never to love, never to marry. Better to have crammed his days with tenderness and love than to have wasted his life in a barren, gem-studded desert. The Prophecy had been wrong! A knight and not a 'virgin-maid' had inflicted this terrible wound!

Between the foam-topped waves shone the spires and minarets of Neptune's palace. Phosphorescent bubbles broke from each gill-slit window, each cuttle-shell chimney, each baleen skylight. Down the steep spiral of a whirlpool Cymo plunged to her bower – an opalescent space like a nimbus cloud, enclosed by hollow waves. Here she laid Marinell on a couch while she sent the dolphins to fetch the Sea Healer. "Hurry!" she called after them. "My boy's life is ebbing away!"





Timian the page opened his eyes and thought he was in heaven. Leaning over him, her long hair brushing his face, was a woman too lovely to be mortal flesh and blood. She was dressed as a hunter, a golden bow across her back, a quiver on her hip.

Something inside young Timian yearned towards her like the arrow of a compass yearning for North. There was a pungent smell of herbs and wild flowers – the medicines of the forest – with which she had bathed and dressed his wounds. The sun stood behind her head, so that sunlight gilded her outline.

She called herself Belphoebe.

Timian loved her in an instant. In the next instant he remembered the foresters and their great clubs of wood – "You must be careful, lady! These wood are dangerous!" – but fell back, too weary to rise and defend his lady.

"Peace, boy. Your courage does you credit. But you must let me heal you, and healing begins with rest."

So began a kind of waking dream, when Timian ceased to serve Arthur and served Belphoebe the wood nymph instead. He did not look to be loved in return. He did not ask for kisses. He did not expect kindness or caresses. All he asked was to worship the perfect Belphoebe.

And she let him.

As soon as Florimell saw the look in Block's eyes, she threw down her cup undrunk and darted between mother and son and out of the door. The witch shrieked, "Catch her, Block!" Florimell's belt caught on a nail, but she was moving so fast that it simply snapped clean through and was left dangling from the latch.

Through the woods she went, on feet still sore from the previous chase. Here, there was snow on the ground, which hid sharp stones without cushioning them, froze her feet without dulling them to pain. She knew the odious Block would not catch her easily: he was about as nimble as a whelk.

But the witch did not send her son in pursuit. She sent her pet instead. "Don't

fret, son. Petal will soon fetch her back," she said cheerily, and opened the door of the bread oven. Like the pellet from an owl's throat, a creature shot out, teeth bared, perpetually hungry, everlastingly eager to eat. "Fetch, Petal! Good Petal, fetch!"

One sniff of the broken belt and it was away through the door, paws threading between the girl's footprints in the snow, jaw drooling. Florimell heard it behind her and cried out with horror. She burst from the woods and on to a beach. Sand swallowed her feet. At every step she stumbled and fell and picked herself up again, sandy from head to foot. Seeing a boat drawn up above the rime of weed, she threw herself against its stern and heaved it into the surf. It banged and bullied her, threatening to push her under or capsize on top of her.

The witch's hyena came barking over the dunes, holding the belt in its mouth, rolling its yellow eyes. Florimell dragged herself over the gunwale and slithered head first into several inches of dirty water. The boat drifted out to sea in sickening dips, turning round and round in the wind, leaving the shore far behind.

Thwarted, Petal snarled and yapped in the shallows while the sea-spray caked its spotted fur in salt. Turning inshore again, it was confronted by an elfin knight. But being without brain or soul, it saw nothing to fear... until it lay dead across the boots of Sir Scudamore, knight of Cleopolis.

Scudamore was on his way to his wedding. He would have liked to return the pretty belt to its owner, but not knowing whose it was, he put it in his saddlebag, as a present for his fiancée, and continued on his way.

Block gazed mournfully out of the cottage door and flicked the latch: tchack, tchack, tchack, on and on, until his mother caught him a blow across the back of the head. "Make yourself useful and shovel me some snow!"

Out of the snow she built a figure – less dumpy and more curvy than most snowmen. When it was finished, it could have been Florimell's twin! It was a comfort – a compensation for her boy – rather like the King of the Sea showering his son with treasure to make up for a life without love.

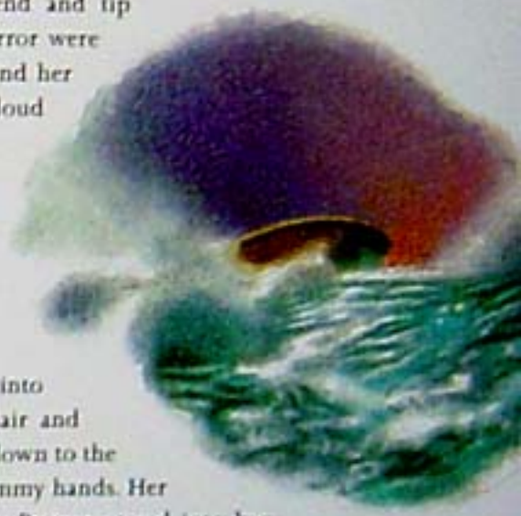
Block would have settled for marrying his 'Snowy Florimell'. But he took her out for a walk one day, sat her down somewhere, then forgot where and





came home without her. His mother should have attached her by a cord to Block's cuff, as she did with his gloves.

The boat was not built for the open sea. The boards were rotten. Soon rain and spray beat into it too, filling it half full of slopping water. Every mountainous wave threatened to stand the boat on end and tip Florimell into the grey sea. Her cries of terror were snatched from her lips by a bitter wind, and her prayers drowned out by thunder and the loud swash of the sea. *"Help! Oh, help me someone!"*



Down in the ocean where all Life began, the god Proteus cocked his head. Preparations were underway for a great feast, but amid the cacophony Proteus picked out the high note of a woman's scream...

As the little rowing boat disintegrated into planks, Proteus caught Florimell by her hair and pulled her aboard his chariot, carrying her down to the ocean bed. The touch of her warmed his clammy hands. Her beauty brightened the deep lightless places. Proteus stared into her frightened face and liked what he saw. He liked it very much. Even wet and bedraggled and afraid, Florimell was lovelier than all the sea nymphs and mermaids. As a collector of beauty, Proteus wanted to own her.

"No!" cried Florimell (not for the first time that day). "My heart was given to Marinell and my heart died with him! I have no love to give you!"

"I'll settle for some kisses," said Proteus licking his salty lips.

"Oh no, no!" protested Florimell. "My love for Marinell is totally pure!"

"Down here everything is dilute," said Proteus.

"No, no! You will never sway me!"

"Down here in the tide-rips everything sways... or else it breaks," said Proteus, ugly now with menace. "Rest here while you rethink your answer!" And he locked her into his deep-sea dungeon, a place of slime and sea slugs and blind, white crabs.

