

CHAPTER 38

UP, UP, AND AWAY

As soon as the pilot left, Marc-Oliver ordered his ground crew to free Hagen, the balloon, of his ropes, which held him tied down to wooden stakes in the ground. The moment the ropes were untied, the great big pink balloon lifted off.

Jacob, squinting at the clear bright sky held his breath and prayed to get back alive. Glancing at the cheering crowd below, he saw people waving their arms over their heads and happily jumping up and down. Many were throwing their hats into the air. Jacob was afforded a bird's eye view of the kingdom below, spotting a royal garden he never new existed. Pink bamboo grew straight and thin into the sky with pink branches way at the top; its long thin pink leaves swaying in the mild breeze. The bamboo trees were filled with hooting and hollering playful little monkeys. There was a pink bridge, made entirely of bamboo, reaching across a lake. Pink flamingos paraded gracefully along the lake, showing off their fanciful hot-pink feathers.

Soon winding roads and rivers and its green fields and forests stretched out below him. He had no idea that there had been more than just a castle.

"Up, up and away!" the queen shouted cheerfully, shielding her eyes from the sun, her long black hair dancing cordially...in an aimless sort of way... to the playful moods of the wind. But her purple cape and hot-pink veils took on a more dramatic flair, as if in anticipation of an approaching storm.

Hagen had no worries in the world. He wasn't the life-less looking blown-up blimp anymore. Once in the sky he seemed to take on a life of

his own; up there he was in his element! And having a rebellious inquisitive nature, he took happily and hastily to the sky.

Considering all the weight the gondola held, Jacob had expected the balloon to rise gradually... above the tallest tree line perhaps...as the pilot had suggested. But Hagen went straight up! Jacob could hear his thunderous trumpeting as he rose higher and higher.

“The balloon is putting on quite a show,” Jacob mumbled.

A flock of wild geese flew by him, and a cold breeze whipped through Jacob’s hair. As the balloon continued to pick up speed, the queen felt even more revitalized. The royal musicians looked extremely pale, although their natural color could only be described as a paler shade of pale, if there was such a thing. Jacob thought it strange that they were all smiling, yet desperately holding on to their hair with one hand, and clinging to their precious musical instruments with the other.

Focusing on the musicians and on the sky, Jacob had completely forgotten about the view below. When he remembered it, he saw no more land, only clouds beneath him... beautiful, white, billowy clouds. “There goes hundreds and thousand of gallons of water;” he thought, “simply floating in the air.” He remembered from school that it took billions of tiny droplets to make a cloud. And when they became too heavy to float they’d drop down; and it would rain.

The moment Jacob began to relax, Marc-Oliver, the crew chief on the ground, shouted into the radio, “Your Majesty, tell Hagen to stop climbing. Please! He’s dangerously high!”

But the queen laughed, “I’ll send you a postcard,” she hollered through the cloudy sky. Turning to Jacob, she commanded, “Turn that thing off! I won’t have him spoil my fun!”

As Jacob turned the radio off, Hagen rose higher yet, shooting straight through layers and layers of new clouds.

Helplessly, Jacob pointed to Hagen in disbelief, “How is it possible for him to keep on rising without adding more helium, your Majesty?”

“Hagen has his own bag of tricks, he surprises me every time,” the queen said, seemingly amused. “He’ll stop eventually...I hope.”

Jacob was stunned, wiping the sweat from his face, “You hope?”

“There’s nothing to worry about... yet,” the queen answered. “So far it stands to reason for Hagen to climb. He had to avoid a high mountain range right away; and now a violent storm is in the area. He has no choice but to climb some more! Those flat clouds we just broke through were rain clouds.” And after a moment’s pause to catch her breath, she continued cheerfully, “You’ll find out, there’s a silver lining to every cloud!”

“Whatever that means,” Jacob mumbled too quietly to be heard. Nev-



ertheless, the weather in the higher regions seemed to be against them. The sky turned black, and soon a heavy storm broke loose all around them. Hagen gathered speed, but the gondola began to swirl, as the storm grew stronger.

Soon the balloon was sucked up into a giant whirlwind, causing him to spin around and around, faster and faster. Jacob hung on for dear life... but judging by the queen's expression and Hagen's jolly trumpeting, both appeared to enjoy every minute of it. Even the musicians in the drummer's section joined in the excitement, adding an appropriate drumbeat.

Frozen with fear, Jacob didn't dare move. The storm had sucked the air right out of his lungs. He just stared straight ahead, mumbling a short prayer. When he heard the musicians scream, the drumbeat stopped and he saw several hairpieces flying by, while an overpowering booming voice above them began to howl with pleasure.

"Hagen must've been feeding on too many of his spirit-boosting pills again!" the queen roared in amusement.

Jacob suffered light-headedness and a queasy stomach; still Hagen's hollering and excitement grew with every spin. Jacob thought of slipping on a life vest, but at this velocity it was too dangerous to let go and reach down for one. He was thankful the pilot had recommended the safety belts earlier.

"Wow! What a ride! You sure know your stuff, Hagen!" the queen cried out, showering the elephant-shaped balloon with additional compliments. She reminded Jacob of a screaming kid on a heart-stopping ride at Disneyland.

Finally, the queen seemed to come to her senses. "Now don't get too carried away, my friend! I don't want you to launch us into space again! At least not until I'm ready!" she shouted, tossing her head with a high musical laugh.

Jacob didn't hear the queen's last remarks. He had enough to do fighting his own fear. And when he managed to look over the side for a split-second, only to get dizzy, he wasn't sure what he had seen. Was it the ocean below them? Probably not! It seemed impossible from their present location, since Hagen had been climbing most of the time. The queen had mentioned that Hagen had penetrated the seventh layer of clouds and was approaching new thick clouds. Or was it possible that Hagen had dropped down during the spin? Jacob didn't dare to double-check. It was too risky, and his stomach was too upset.

When Hagen finally stopped spinning, Jacob thanked his lucky stars for having survived that frightful ordeal. He felt his heart quieting down a bit and the tension in his muscles leaving him. Turning to the queen he asked, "What happened? What went wrong, your Majesty?"

"Why nothing went wrong boy! Leave it to Hagen! He knows what I like and he tries to please me...every time," the queen disclosed with a devilish glint in her eyes.





Before long, clouds were everywhere, inside the gondola and surrounding the balloon. Jacob couldn't see Hagen above them, or even the musicians in the gondola, except for one or two rubbing shoulders with him. For a split-second, as a few clouds below the balloon drifted slightly apart, he thought he caught a glimpse of land below him, but that was probably only wishful thinking, or his imagination again.

Whatever the situation, Jacob wasn't given a chance to find out, because Hagen didn't like his present foggy location and began to rise again, exciting the queen's senses all over again.

"Faster!" she shouted, a mad gleam in her eyes. "Faster Hagen! Oh, faster yet!"

"How fast are we going, your Majesty?" Jacob asked timidly, light-headed from the thin air.

"Not fast enough," the queen cried. "We won't make time this way!"

Brushing a hair strand out of his eyes, Jacob shouted back, "But we're rising again, your Majesty."

"Of course we are! Leave it to Hagen. He knows what he's doing!" the queen cried out.

Soon there was not a single cloud around them, just brilliant sunshine. What a fantastic-looking sky! It had taken on the color of the queen's hot pink veils...and even more amazing...so had her skin. All the clouds, remaining way below them had turned purple like her cape...and so had her hair and her eyes.

The queen was glowing, as if a new energy had filled her to capacity. "Breathtaking, isn't it?" she asked excitedly. But her question was only meant for Hagen's ears. Thrilled with him and their new location, she uttered, "We have finally arrived...far beyond the reach of the ordinary world! This is where we belong Hagen! I feel it in my bones!"

However, her new world lasted only seconds. Slowly the clouds below and the mysterious sky all around them began to fade and blend with more normal colors in the sky. And as the queen quieted down, the unique glow left her.

