

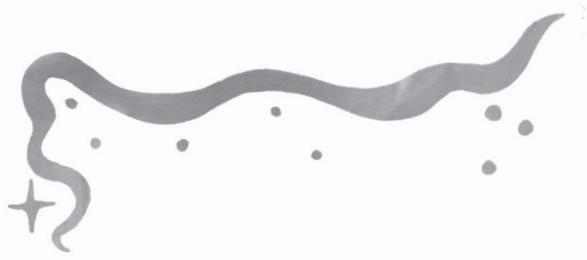


The
Castle
of
Tangled
Magic

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So dense the forest no light gleams
Where I, aglow with youthful dreams,
With rapturous hope and expectation,
Summon up with invocation
The spirits...



From *Ruslan & Ludmila*
by Alexander Pushkin,
translated by D.M. Thomas





PROLOGUE

Castle Mila rises from the shore of a lapping lake, as vast and bright as a sunrise. Built entirely from wood, and being five hundred years old, the castle is a little crooked with age. But the pine-log walls gleam like gold and the endless roof domes, which curve higher and higher into the sky, shimmer and sparkle like silver.

The topmost, and biggest, of the roof domes is as dazzling as the sun itself and the thin spire on top of it reaches all the way to the stars. I call this dome Sun Dome, and I've often wondered what lies inside it. Castle Mila is full of secrets. There are hidden doors, passageways behind walls and long-forgotten chambers. Though I've lived in the castle all my life, I can still get

lost and, with a thrill of delight, discover untouched rooms.

One of my favourite things to do is explore the castle, looking for ways into the roof domes. Each one contains a small, round attic, but the staircases that lead to them are all concealed. So far, I've found my way into fourteen of the thirty-three domes. Most have been empty, aside from dust and spiderwebs and a warm, tingling feeling that I always get in Castle Mila's hidden spaces. But a few have contained treasures: rolled-up maps and gilt-edged books; fine art brushes and half-full pots of coloured inks; carved wooden boxes filled with hand-blown glass beads, and other trinkets that must have belonged to my once-royal ancestors.

My family aren't royal any more, but Castle Mila is still our home. I was born in the warm and cosy kitchen on the ground floor, and learned to walk along the castle's long and winding corridors. Mama has sung me to sleep in my third-floor bedroom that overlooks the lake, and Papa has shown me where I can climb onto the roof safely, to watch hawks hunting

over the meadows and cranes dancing in the marshes.

Both my parents are carpenters, and they use one of the old ballrooms as a workshop. The floor and walls are covered with enormous pictures I've been drawing in there since I was old enough to hold a piece of chalk. Some of the other big rooms in the castle are used by the villagers who live nearby. My school puts on a show in the old theatre once a year. And the biggest room, the Great Hall, is used for almost every birthday, wedding and wake.

At these gatherings, I hear stories about the castle's history that are seasoned with myth and legend. There is a tale that Castle Mila was built by a lone carpenter, using one perfect axe. No nails were used, because the wooden pieces were cut to fit precisely together. And when the carpenter finished, the axe was thrown into the lake, which is why no other castle like it has ever been built. In the summer, I've spent whole days diving into the lake with my friends, looking for the axe. The search is fun, but I'm always slightly relieved when we don't find it, because there is another tale that I'd rather believe instead.

My grandmother, Babusya, says Castle Mila was built from magic, and that to understand why, I should talk to the spirits who live in and around our home. I've memorized her descriptions of house spirits, water spirits and tree spirits, and searched for them all my life. A few times I think I might have seen or felt *something*. But after thirteen years, I still have no proof these spirits exist.

I keep on exploring though. There is nothing like the excitement of finding hidden spaces and forgotten treasures. I'm determined to find my way into every inch of the castle and discover all of its secrets. Now more than ever, because I have a new baby sister.

Rosa is three weeks old and makes my heart swell with love every time I look at her. I haven't figured out how to be the best big sister for her yet, but I want to be strong and brave and good, and show her all the wonders in the world. So, if there *is* magic hiding somewhere in our home, then I'm going to find it, and share it with my sister.