



TINSEY
CLOVER

And the TREE of BALANCE



by Chelsea Walker Flagg

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As always, dedicated to my three daughters,
Quincy, Olive, and Pearl.
May you always summon the strength and power
to be so authentically you

CHAPTER ONE

Walking to the end of my brand-new tree house platform, I turn my left foot forward to face super straight, right along the edge. One foot. I stick one arm out for balance and pinch my earlobe with the hand of my other arm, just for double balance. I set my right foot in front of my left foot in a single line. Two feet.

My feet continue taking turns, one in front of the other, as I walk around the perimeter, crunching through the leaves. *Ugh*. I just swept my platform yesterday. Autumn is clearly not a time for keeping things tidy around here. Thirty-three, thirty-four. Yes! My calculations were correct. My platform is exactly thirty-four feet around. Forty-seven feet off the ground and thirty-four feet around. The perfect dimensions for a tree house. Capital “C” cool.

A chipmunk jumps off a nearby branch and lands with a clacking of nails on the platform. It scatters a new coat of leaves all over the place. Pesky critter. I try to shoo it away, but it's practically my same size and clearly isn't afraid of me. A loud sigh comes out of my mouth without me even trying, making my purple bangs blow up and off my forehead. I guess that's what I get for building something up in a tree.

I close my eyes, picture a broom in my mind, and snap my fingers. When I turned eleven, that became my elfin magic. The ability to make cleaning tools appear from out of nowhere. Odd, right? I thought it was lame at first, too. I've gotten used to it, though. And, I have to say, it's not half bad. It definitely helps to keep my tree house tidy.

Only, a broom doesn't appear. Nothing does. No dust of sparkles in the air, no cleaning tools at all. A gust of cold, winter wind rolls through instead. I wrap my hands around my arms and give them a good, warming rub. It feels far too early for such things as winter winds, but nature can be finicky sometimes, I guess. Maybe my hands are

too cold to properly snap right now?

I lift my fingers up to try again, but before I can, I see movement out of the corner of my eye. There's something wandering in the meadow, otherwise known as the engi. That's the benefit of being up high in a tree. I can see practically everything. A little gray blob is hobbling along much slower than it should be for being out in the wide-open meadow. What is it? It looks way too stout to be a fox. Plus, it's running on two legs, not four. Besides, I've never seen a fox with rosy cheeks and a long beard.

He's only one-hundred-and-fifty feet away from the Snugglepunk border now, based on my best guesstimate. I didn't know we were expecting any visitors today. Since our border just opened up three weeks ago, I'm still not used to seeing anyone other than trealfur elves wandering around these parts.

I snap off a dry stick and scrape it against the nearest branch. The sound makes my spine tingle all over. A bit of the bark peels off. I pick it up and squint one eye. The tottering man is only ninety

feet away now. Sixty feet in less than a minute. Factoring in the slight wind in the air, I cock my arm and chuck the piece of bark down at the moving target. It flies straight toward the man, then gets lost in his beard. I'll consider it a bullseye.

"What the...?" The man stops and looks straight up at me.

My stomach suddenly knots up. Why in the world did I just do that? I'm finding that sometimes eleven-year-old bodies do random things before really thinking it through. My parents would not be pleased with me. Still, I can't show this guy I didn't mean to throw a stick at him. I stand taller and put my hands on my hips. Putting your hands on your hips is always a sure sign of confidence.

"What do you want?" I shout down, not sure if he'll hear me.

"Yer queen!"

Yup, he can hear me.

What does he want with my mom?

"Well," I say, pushing my fists even firmer into my sides so he doesn't see my arms shaking. "You can't have her!"

The bearded man hobbles forward again, until he's practically standing right underneath my platform. He's probably twice my size. And much, much rounder than any trealfur elf I've ever seen. I wonder for a split second if he might just roll away if a gust of wind blew through the engi right now. Even if he did, he probably wouldn't get very far with that huge white beard of his. It covers everything from nose all the way down to his chest, so I can't tell what sort of mouth he has. Or chin. Or neck. What I do see are his shiny pink cheeks that look more like baby crab apples.

"I ain't gonna take yer queen," he says without his beard moving one bit. "I'm jus' here for the meetin'."

Meeting? What meeting? I give him another once over. Can I really trust this man with his unmoving beard?

"What are you?" I think I'm just wondering the words in my head, but it turns out my mouth actually has said them out loud.

"Whaddya think I am, missy?"

I have no idea.

“Can ya jus’ take me ta see yer queen, please?” he asks with a sigh. Even still, his beard doesn’t move a bit. “I promise ya, she invited me here.”

I guess I don’t have any reason to not trust this guy. I push my fists back onto my hips just to keep it clear to him that I’m strong and brave.

“Fine,” I say in my boldest voice.

I scramble the forty-seven feet down the trunk of my tree. Yup, he’s twice my size.

“Follow me,” I say.

“Thank ya, missy,” he says in a super grateful voice. “By the way, my name’s Winston P. Squiggles. I’m a yuleman.”