



Findel and Pomido

The Rat and the Raven

Kevin Oscar White

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Foreword

In this third story of Findel and Pomido, our friends take you back in time. We unravel Mrs. Sprunge's past and uncover the dark plans of Racker the Rat and his accomplice, Raven the Raven.

Before we begin, let me share a little about my own history. As a boy growing up, I devoured countless stories and read countless comics and books. I also played games, sometimes for hours on end. I was often told off for it, but I don't regret a single second. It made my mind burst with imagination. Richly woven worlds drift through my thoughts, and I would absolutely love to share them with you.

To everyone who occasionally escapes into a fantasy world: thank you for giving my creations a chance. What's more, the stories of Findel and Pomido would never have come to life without the imaginative surroundings of FACTS. I am grateful to the organisation for everything.

Let's begin our new journey to Silvaña, because in *The Rat and the Raven*, magic and imagination still go hand in hand. I hope you enjoy reading! Together, we make this world just a little more magical!

Kevin

Chapter 1

Princess Naia

Naia? ‘Where are you?’ called a little boy of about seven. It was Prince Tristan, the son of King Reynard and Queen Mathilda. He was looking not only for his sister, but also for his very best playmate. Princess Naia could disappear into books for hours on end, barely noticing when someone called her. The little prince listened carefully for a reply, but heard nothing.

Tristan and Naia were very different from each other. Tristan loved playing outside, having races, and going on adventures in the castle gardens. Naia felt happiest with a book in her hands. Even so, they were inseparable. Whenever Naia wasn’t reading, she usually made up stories in which Tristan played the leading role.

Prince Tristan cupped his hands around his mouth like a loudspeaker and called even louder, ‘Naia? Are you in your room?’ Once again, there was no answer.

The prince sighed and ran up the castle’s grand marble staircase. It stood in the middle of the great hall and was covered with a red carpet. All the bedrooms were located on the upper

floor. The staff quarters were on the left, and those of the royal family were on the right.

Prince Tristan ran upstairs as fast as he could and turned into the right wing. He hurried to his sister's room. When he arrived, the door was slightly ajar. The prince knocked softly and peeked inside. He saw his sister sitting on her bed and immediately went in. Princess Naia had always said, 'If the door is open, you may come in.'

The princess sat cross-legged on her bed. A thick book lay on her lap, and she was reading it with the utmost concentration. More books lay scattered around her—some open, others piled up beside her pillow. Naia was reading so intently that the world around her seemed to disappear. She knew her brother had entered, but she did not move a muscle.

Prince Tristan walked quietly toward his sister with his lips pressed together, trying to stay silent for as long as possible. That was what they had agreed: 'When I'm reading, you mustn't disturb me.' He waited patiently for Princess Naia to look up and meet his gaze, but unfortunately, that did not happen. A little while later, he could hold back no longer and excitedly began asking a few questions.

'Sis? Do you want to play with me? I got a new spinning top and a game with wooden sticks!' he blurted out in one breath.

The princess still did not answer and continued staring at her book. Even when her brother came to stand right beside her, she

did not say a word. She raised one hand directly in front of Prince Tristan's face. In this way, she made it clear that he had to be quiet for a moment.

Prince Tristan saw her hand and immediately understood the gesture. She had told him this so many times whenever he wanted to play with her: 'I'll finish this page, and then you can ask me all your questions.'

Because it once again seemed to be taking just a little too long for Prince Tristan, he dared to try a second time. 'Sis, I...'

Princess Naia held her hand out more emphatically in front of his face and silenced him once again. It took her a moment to finish reading the entire page. Then she looked at her brother.

'Good morning, little brother. Tell me, what's new?'

'Hi, Sis. Do you want to play with me? I got some new toys,' Prince Tristan rattled off once more.

Princess Naia thought for a moment. 'Hmm, only if you can come up with a rhyme! Yes, I think that's a good idea!' She nodded enthusiastically and sat down on the edge of her bed.

Prince Tristan had suspected that she would set a condition involving a story or a book. In the past, he had often had to imitate the worlds from his sister's books. Princess Naia would read passages aloud, and together they would act them out from beginning to end. But he had never been asked to come up with a rhyme before. He had no idea what his sister expected of him.

'What is a rhyme? I don't know what that is,' he replied, furrowing his brows.

Princess Naia closed her book and showed him the cover. 'This is a book full of poems, rhymes, and other fun little texts. In a rhyme, the words at the ends of the sentences sound more or less alike.' She looked up for a moment, thought deeply, and said, 'Wait, I'll give you an example: My brother wants to play with me, which soon becomes a bore, you see. I'd rather read my book; great stories are always waiting just around the nook. That's a rhyme. Now it's your turn!'

Prince Tristan folded his arms across his chest. 'Hmm... I'll have to think about that for a moment.' He scratched his head and became lost in deep thought.

'I've got it!' he suddenly cried, jumping for joy. 'Listen: Dear sister, come and play with me, and you'll make me so happy!'

Princess Naia furrowed her brows and looked thoughtful. It was a short rhyme, but she found the attempt very sweet. A broad smile appeared on her face. She ruffled his hair and replied, 'Wonderful—the finest rhyme I've heard all day!'

Meanwhile, she thought that Tristan's rhyme was the first one she had heard that day, but she preferred not to say that out loud.

Princess Naia jumped off her bed and picked up a photograph lying on her bedside table. It showed her and her brother, who was pulling a funny face. She slipped the photograph between the

pages where she had stopped reading and pushed her book under her pillow. Then she went outside with her brother, and they spent hours playing together in the garden around the castle that morning.

Sometimes, when they paused to rest, Princess Naia found herself longing for her room. She imagined once again drifting away while indulging in her greatest passion: reading books, making up rhymes, reciting poems, and disappearing into imaginative worlds. Although Naia was still young, she already knew that books meant more to her than etiquette, state visits, and palace celebrations. In stories, she could decide for herself who she was. There, she did not have to be a princess, and nobody had to prepare her for a future that others had mapped out for her.

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'Mrs. Sprunge? Madam? They are waiting for you,' said the soft voice of a slender young girl. She gently touched the shoulders of an older lady sitting in the reception area of Jones & Jones Publishing.

Mrs. Sprunge was startled and gently shook her head when the girl touched her shoulder.

'Oh. My apologies. My thoughts wandered off. I was thinking about my childhood.'

'I noticed. It's quite all right,' the girl replied. 'Are you ready, Mrs. Sprunge? Mr. Jones is waiting for you. I think he's about to begin his introduction.'

'Yes, I'm ready. I'll come with you.'

Before following the girl, Mrs. Sprunge glanced at an old photograph she was holding. The passage of time had taken its toll on the picture; it had several creases and a tear that had been taped back together. The photograph showed two children: a boy pulling a funny face and a slightly older girl lovingly embracing him. The boy was Prince Tristan. The girl was Naia herself, although everyone knew her as Mrs. Sprunge—the loving grandmother who read stories aloud. Nobody knew that Naia was a princess. Only a small group of people knew that 'Mrs. Sprunge' was not her original name.

Carefully, Mrs. Sprunge slipped the photograph into her coat pocket and drank the last sip of her lukewarm tea. Then she looked into a mirror on the wall. She tidied her hair, rubbed the tiredness from her eyes, and stood up.

Numerous framed photographs of famous authors with Jeffrey Jones, the director of Jones & Jones Publishing, hung on the walls of the reception area. Each photograph bore the author's signature. There was also a cabinet filled with trophies awarded to the authors of immensely popular books. When a great many copies were sold, the author received a trophy. The gleaming cups and nameplates reminded Mrs. Sprunge of the changing room of a successful football team.

'Perhaps your books will end up on the wall and in the cabinet too,' the girl said proudly with a laugh.

'Perhaps they will. Who knows?' Mrs. Sprunge laughed back, shrugging her shoulders.

'A great many copies have already been sold, you know. More than the first two books combined. There might even be another trophy coming.'

'That's what I appreciate about Jeffrey. He does his best to get the books into people's hands. I'm tremendously grateful to him for that,' Mrs. Sprunge replied.

By then, they were walking with determined strides down a long corridor beside a large hall. Judging by the sound, a large raven was present, as there was a great deal of noise in the background.

Suddenly, they heard Jeffrey Jones's voice booming through the loudspeakers. He called on the audience to be quiet. As they drew closer to the stage, his voice grew louder. Mrs. Sprunge listened attentively to the announcement and saw Mr. Jones standing on the stage when she entered the hall.

Jeffrey Jones looked a little like a conductor. He wore a smart suit, a classic hat, and round spectacles. In one hand he held a microphone; in the other, the latest copy of Mrs. Sprunge's third book. With sweeping arm movements and precise steps, he paced back and forth across the stage.

'It is with great pride that we announce the author of this wonderful work.' Mr. Jones raised the book slightly higher in the air. Its cover showed a picture of a rat and a raven.

'Unusually, the author will read the entire book aloud, from beginning to end. Here at Jones & Jones, we consider that something very special. As you know, not many authors give readings like this—certainly not readings of an entire book. This author, Mrs. Sprunge, insisted on sharing every letter of the book with you, from the first to the last. Reading aloud is a true passion of hers.'

Mr. Jones looked toward the side of the stage to make sure Mrs. Sprunge was ready. Mrs. Sprunge nodded back in agreement. He then turned to those present.

'Ladies and gentlemen of the press, colleagues, and photographers: in the invitation, we asked you to bring your children along. We are delighted to see that you have come to our publishing house with your families. We hope that all of you will greatly enjoy this reading.'

Mr. Jones stepped aside, waved one arm toward the side of the stage, and called into his microphone, 'Jones & Jones Publishing proudly presents: Mrs. Sprunge!'

Loud applause rang through the hall. Mrs. Sprunge climbed a small set of steps and sat down in a leather chair. A copy of her latest book lay on a small table. She picked it up and tapped on a

microphone mounted on a stand. Jeffrey Jones brought the microphone a little closer until it was perfectly adjusted.

Mrs. Sprunge cleared her throat, and the sound echoed through the hall. She looked at her audience for a moment, smiled cautiously, and leaned back in the chair. She took the old photograph from her coat pocket and placed it between the book's first pages. Then she greeted everyone:

'Good afternoon, everyone. A very warm welcome to this reading. Today, I will be reading my third book in its entirety: Findel and Pomido – The Rat and the Raven. I hope you enjoy the story as much as I did when I wrote it.'

Another brief round of applause followed. Mrs. Sprunge opened her book, and silence fell over the hall.

Chapter 2

Racker the little rat prince

It was always dry there; the wind was warm every day, and the ground scorched your feet—that was the region of the Great Rocks. And nobody lived in that part of Silvaña. No birds or fireflies, no fish or toads, no foxes or beavers—absolutely no one. It was far too dry: there were no trees, plants, or flowers anywhere, and there was no water... or so it seemed... at least, not above ground. For beneath the soil of this sandy region, below the Great Rocks, lay a deeply hidden world.

If you stood close enough to a rock and looked beneath its curves, you would see an opening in the ground here and there. These were holes connected to one another. They formed the entrance to extensive underground chambers, some of which were so large that you could stand upright inside them. In other places, the burrows and tunnels were just large enough for a small animal, such as a rabbit or a mole.

This underground network was home to the largest group of animals in Silvaña: the rat colony of King Ramses and Queen Ramona. The Rat King and his wife lived in the middle of the colony, in an exceptionally large nest. It was deeply embedded

in the ground and consisted of several levels that extended far through the soil.

In one of the chambers of the royal rat nest, a little rat was sleeping. He lay curled up, holding his tail between his front teeth. It was Racker, the only son of King Ramses and Queen Ramona. Only one child had been born in the King and Queen's nest, so they surrounded Racker with great love. As the rat prince, he was destined to rule over the colony one day. For now, however, Racker preferred to feel like an ordinary rat. He wanted to dig, explore, and go on adventures with his best friend, Riley.

Queen Ramona scurried towards Racker's sleeping nest. She wore a gleaming ring around her neck—a ring that told every rat she was the queen. When she stood beside Racker, she opened her mouth. She had kept a few seeds and nuts in her cheeks and carefully placed them beside him. She tickled her son's nose with her whiskers to wake him.

'You're biting your tail again, sweetheart.' As she spoke, she placed her front paw on Racker's head. Carefully, the little rat prince opened his eyes, released his tail, and sat upright.

'You'll bite a piece off if you're not careful.'

Racker cautiously sniffed his mother's nose. 'Thank you for breakfast, Mum. I don't do it on purpose—putting my tail in my mouth,' Racker said, before beginning to nibble on a seed.

‘I know, I know...’ Queen Ramona replied. ‘Enjoy the seeds. The portion is a bit smaller today. Will you come and listen to your father later, when he addresses the colony?’

Racker nodded and ate a second seed.

‘Good. Your father and I are getting ready. We’ll see you later.’

Queen Ramona left and scurried along the wall of the underground chamber towards a higher section of the royal nest. At that moment, another rat crossed her path. The rat bowed respectfully as he passed the queen, then continued on towards Racker’s sleeping nest.

‘Hi, little prince,’ said the rat when he arrived.

When Racker heard the other rat’s voice, he suddenly sprang to his feet and ran towards him. ‘Riley!’ he cried.

Racker sniffed Riley’s nose enthusiastically. ‘Would you like a seed? I’ve got some grain too—Mum has just brought breakfast. Are you hungry?’ Racker asked in a rapid stream of questions.

Riley was not a member of the royal family, but to Racker he felt like a brother. He was the only rat Racker truly told everything to.

‘Hey, take it easy, Racker. I’ve already eaten,’ Riley replied. ‘Are you ready for today? The long tunnel already stretches a

long way. According to the diggers, it will only be a few more suns before we reach the edge of the Eryn Forest.'

Racker nodded and put a nut in his mouth.

'A little more digging every day, and soon we won't even need birds anymore.'

Racker nodded again and swallowed.

'Your father is going to talk about the long tunnel later, isn't he? I heard some other rats saying that.'

Racker nodded once more, enthusiastically. 'He wants to reassure the rats,' he replied, now that his mouth was finally empty. 'Father really does think it will only be a few more suns. Twenty more, he says, and then they'll dig a hole to the surface. They should come out among the grasses around the Eryn Forest.'

'Well, shall we go and take a quick look? We'll be back in time for the speech, won't we?' Riley asked.

Racker smiled and followed Riley, who had already begun running down through the levels of the royal nest.

'Wait for me!' Racker called.

Riley turned his head and laughed broadly. 'Ate too much! Faster! Come on!'

Together, the two rats raced through the colony's tunnels. They turned left, then right, until, after several bends and long

stretches, they found themselves in a large chamber where all the other tunnels converged.

‘This is where the long tunnel begins,’ said Racker, hurrying to Riley’s side, panting as he peered into a deep, black hole.

‘The very... long... tunnel,’ Riley replied. ‘Here and there, they push wooden sticks into the walls because the ground is becoming softer and muddier. That means there’s water nearby.’

Riley turned towards Racker and looked at him with curious eyes. ‘Is your father really sure that the long tunnel leads to the Eryn Forest and not to the Sea of Zephyra?’

‘Absolutely! My father has never been wrong.’

Racker did not believe this merely because his father was king. He believed it because he was afraid of what would happen if King Ramses was wrong. If his father could make mistakes, then the whole colony could also be in danger. And Racker did not yet want to think about the possibility that one day he might have to make such decisions himself.

‘The long tunnel leads to Eryn, where the nymphs live. By the way, have you ever seen a nymph, Riley?’ Racker asked, looking curiously at his best friend.

Riley shook his head.

‘Maybe they have long teeth and monstrous eyes.’ As he spoke, Racker stared wide-eyed at the entrance to the long tunnel.

‘Maybe they do...’ Riley replied. ‘But maybe they don’t either.’ He continued staring down the tunnel, narrowing his eyes in an attempt to see better in the darkness.

Every day, all the rats in the colony hoped that their digging would soon lead them to a forest or a field. The rat colony was suffering from a food shortage. If the rats found grassy soil, their underground tunnels would finally reach a fertile region. Then the colony’s hunger would be a thing of the past.

Many suns had already passed, and there was still no sign of grass. On the contrary: as they continued digging, the ground had always been bone-dry or as tough as clay. The day before, however, they had found muddy soil for the first time. As a result, the entire colony was waiting in suspense, because the king might announce that they had discovered a fertile place.

To their astonishment, Racker and Riley suddenly saw a rat rushing towards them from the long tunnel. When the rat reached them, he kept running and did not even look back. Racker and Riley had to jump aside to let him pass. The rat continued racing along at full speed, calling out as he went:

‘Not good, not good, NOT GOOD!’

Racker looked questioningly at Riley. ‘What could be wrong?’

Riley shrugged. 'Come on, let's go to the royal nest. It looked as though the builder had an urgent message.'

Racker and Riley set off immediately. As they drew closer to the royal nest, they found themselves among a large group of rats. They squeezed between the spectators in tiny steps. King Ramses was just preparing to address his people and begin his speech.

Chapter 3

A remarkable discovery

King Ramses stepped forward and climbed onto a section of the royal nest that protruded slightly from the cavern wall. The Rat King glanced around, straightened his ravenn, and began addressing the ravend.

‘Today, we will discuss the hunger that has plagued us for many suns, and we will talk about the work on the long tunnel.’ After these opening words, the rats cheered enthusiastically.

Queen Ramona stood a little farther behind the king and urged them to be quiet with one paw. The rats found it very difficult to contain their excitement, and the queen had to make the same gesture several times to calm them down. Only then could the king continue his speech.

‘As for our hunger: we have managed to persuade some birds to transport larger supplies of seeds and nuts. Not much more than what we already receive each day, but every little bit helps.’

Once again, the rats cheered for their king.

‘As for the work on the long tunnel: it is the tunnel builders’ judgment that it will take no more than twenty suns before we finally—’

Suddenly, a rat began shouting loudly from a corner of the underground chamber. It was the rat whom Racker and Riley had seen hurrying past when they were standing at the entrance to the long tunnel.

‘More water has been found, Sire!’ the rat called.

King Ramses shaded his eyes with one paw and peered into the depths, searching for the one who had interrupted his speech. When he saw who it was, the king had to catch his breath for a moment. It was one of his most loyal builders.

‘Builder Randall?’ King Ramses asked in alarm. ‘We have known for some time that there would be water in the soil. That is perfectly normal, by the way: we are approaching the grasses around the Eryn Forest. Here and there, the tunnels have already been supported with branches.’

King Ramses narrowed his eyes almost completely in an effort to see Builder Randall more clearly. He pricked up his ears and listened to what the rat had to say.

Builder Randall glanced nervously around him. He knew he still had more bad news to deliver. The builder cleared his throat and called out:

‘That isn’t all, Sire! We’re digging in the wrong direction.’

A collective cry of alarm rang out. Every rat held its breath. Never before had anyone dared to question the king about the plans for the long tunnel. Never before had anyone said out loud that the king was wrong.

Then, suddenly, it became quiet. Every little rat's head turned towards the king. Everyone waited tensely to hear how he would respond.

'In the wrong direction?' King Ramses asked, shocked by Builder Randall's accusation. 'How do you come to that conclusion? My plans have always been correct. To this day, the directions I have indicated have always turned out to be the right ones.'

Yet his posture clearly showed that he was nervous, as if the king feared that a secret might be revealed. King Ramses knew that the long tunnel had not changed direction by chance. He had once deliberately ordered them to dig southwards. Only he and Queen Ramona knew the reason. The king had hoped that no one would ever discover why.

Builder Randall did not answer the king's question. Instead, he raised one paw. Clutched between his toes was an object: a tiny seashell. When the other rats saw Builder Randall holding up the shell, a commotion broke out. Some of the rats began arguing among themselves.

'Could he be wrong this time? Maybe he's no longer the right rat for the throne? We need another king...' The sound of all

those voices grew louder and louder. There was even a mild panic, until one rat dared to shout above the rest. It was Racker.

‘My father has never been wrong!’ As he spoke, Racker stood up on his hind legs. Riley tugged at one of Racker’s front paws, trying to pull him back down to the ground. When Racker felt this, he shook himself free. ‘No, Riley. I won’t let them insult my father.’

Racker sprinted forward. The ravend moved aside to let the little rat prince pass. He climbed several levels of the royal nest and stood upright beside his father. The rats who saw this stared at Racker in astonishment. A rat normally walked on four legs, not two. Racker was trying to make himself appear more impressive that way.

‘Who makes sure that everyone has food?’ Racker called loudly throughout the cavern.

The rats’ voices gradually began to die down. King Ramses tried to restrain his son, but Racker was determined. A fierce anger began to flare inside him. He felt his heart beating faster and his jaws tightening. Whenever someone attacked his father, Racker felt as though he himself was being attacked. The king tried to stop Racker a second time, but he shook his father’s paw away.

‘Who has just made a new agreement and ensured that the birds will bring more supplies? My father!’ Racker shouted, pointing a paw towards King Ramses.

Racker wanted to raise even more arguments, but Queen Ramona interrupted him. ‘That’s enough, Racker!’ she called sternly. Racker’s ears flattened against his head, and he shrank back. The moment she shouted, her stern voice silenced him completely.

Racker stepped backwards and ran to his sleeping nest. Riley watched him go with concern. He knew that look in Racker’s eyes. His friend was no longer merely sad or frightened. For the first time, Riley saw how easily Racker’s love for his father could turn into anger towards anyone who contradicted him.

King Ramses stepped forward and addressed the colony once more. ‘We will investigate whether we are indeed digging in the wrong direction and take the necessary measures if required. I assure you, we are digging in the right direction.’

The king turned around, lowered his head, and sighed deeply. Once again, it seemed as though the king was not telling them everything. For some reason, he had no choice but to claim that everything was going well. The king then hurried to Racker’s sleeping nest.

All the other rats left the large chamber, but here and there, grumbling and murmuring could still be heard. The hunger that had plagued the colony for so long had left many rats’ nerves stretched to breaking point. Moreover, they were beginning to suspect that their king was mistaken, which could make the food shortage an even greater problem.