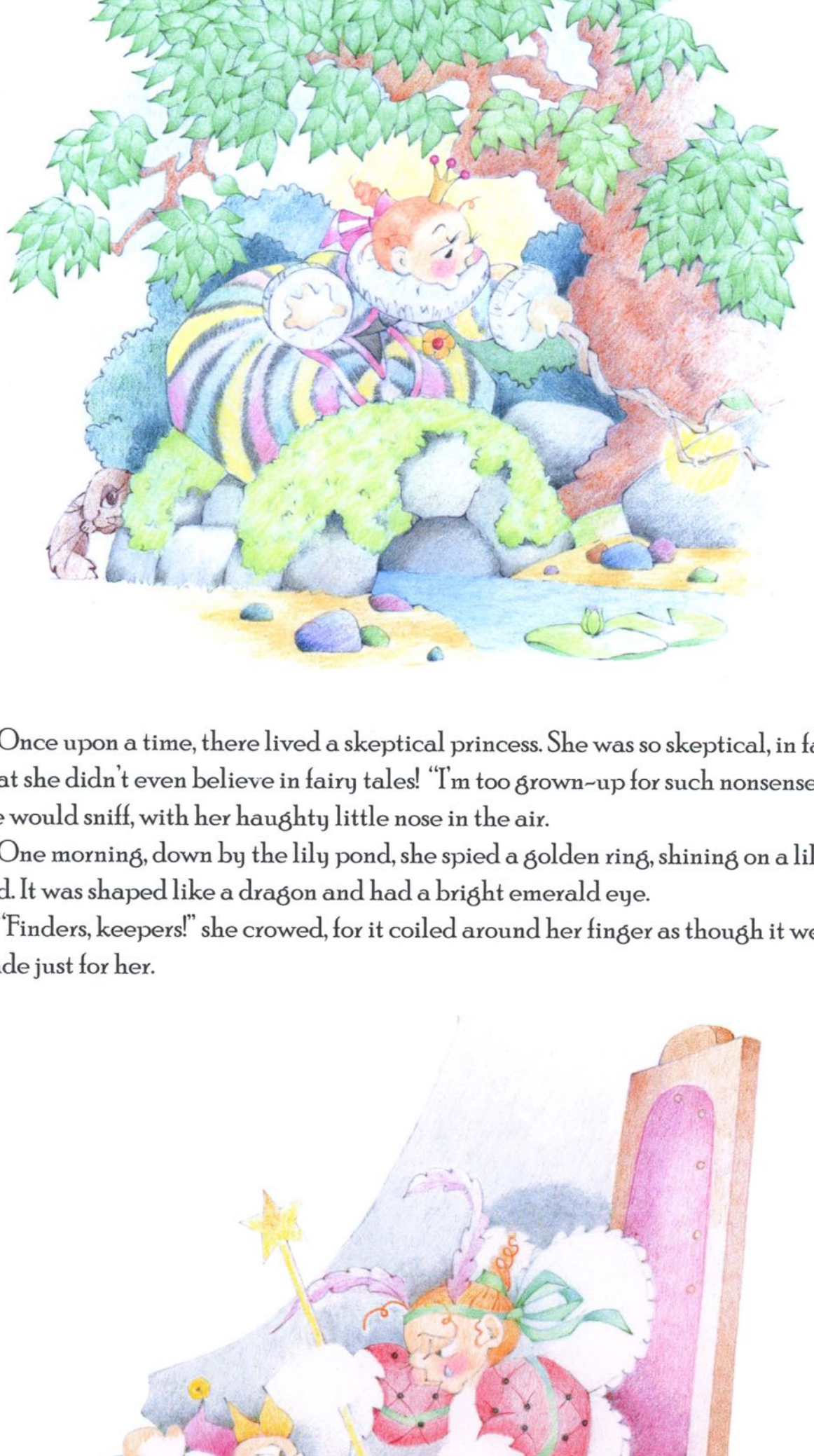


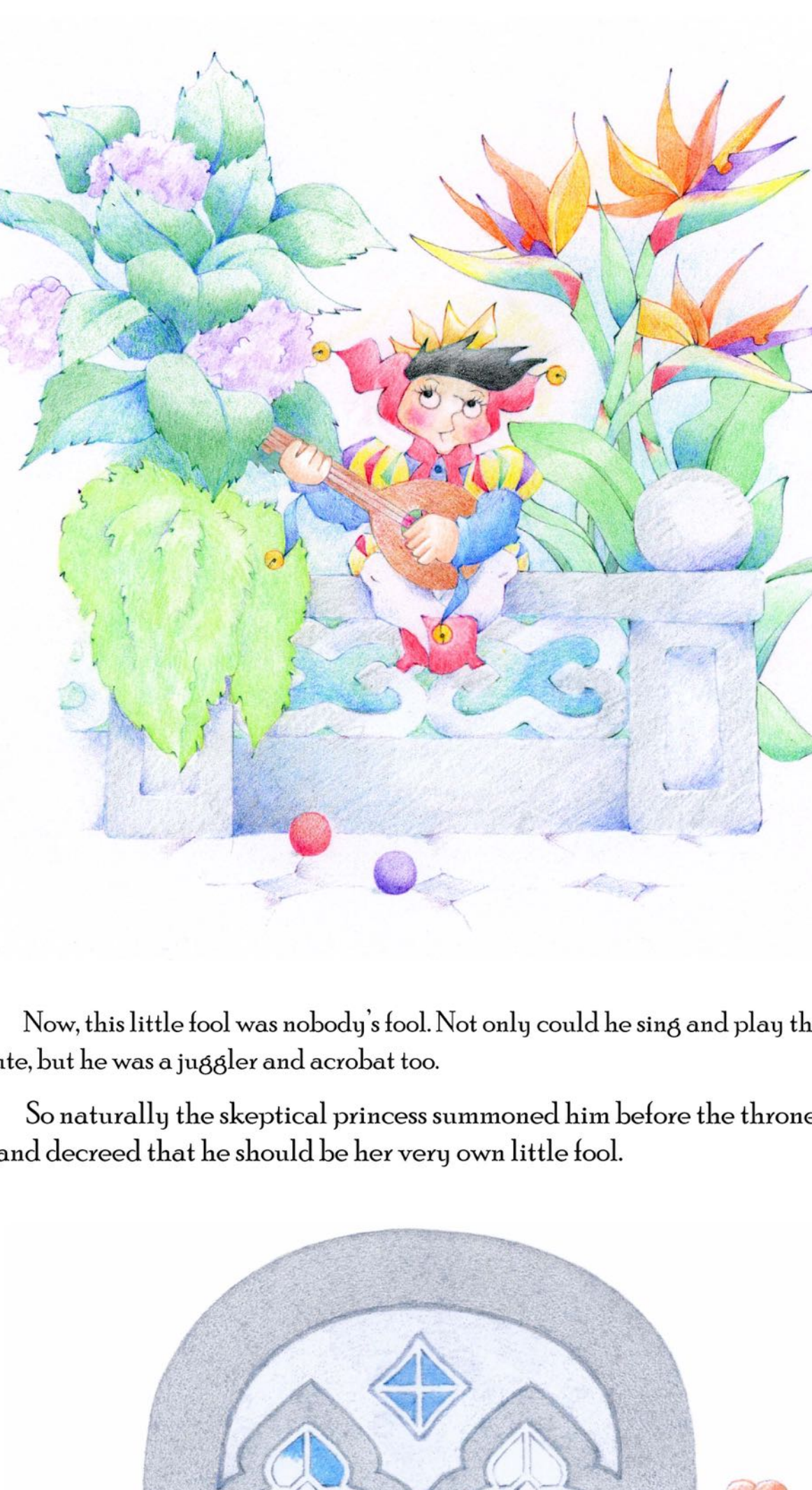
Sir Little Fool and the Skeptical Princess



Once upon a time, there lived a skeptical princess. She was so skeptical, in fact, that she didn't even believe in fairy tales! "I'm too grown-up for such nonsense," she would sniff, with her haughty little nose in the air.

One morning, down by the lily pond, she spotted a golden ring, shining on a lily pad. It was shaped like a dragon and had a bright emerald eye.

"Finders, keepers!" she crowed, for it coiled around her finger as though it were made just for her.



The very next afternoon, she was complaining rather peevisly that she wished she had someone to play with, when suddenly the dragon ring spun around her finger and its emerald eye began to glow.

Below her window, a little fool appeared, dressed in stripes and bells.

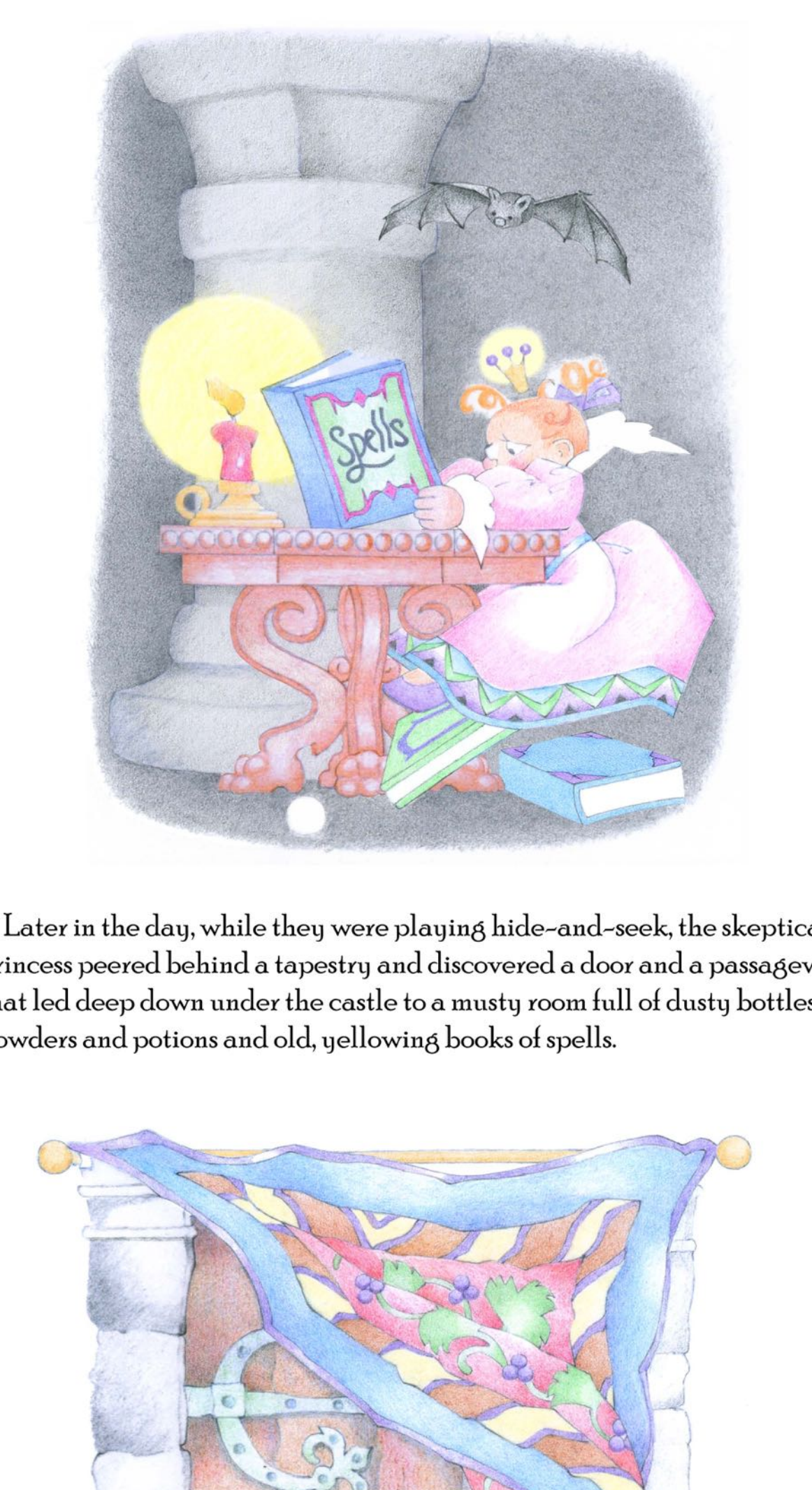


Now, this little fool was nobody's fool. Not only could he sing and play the lute, but he was a juggler and acrobat too.

So naturally the skeptical princess summoned him before the throne and decreed that he should be her very own little fool.



All went well—they went boating together and horseback riding, and played knights-and-dragons and hide-and-seek. They even had pillow fights.



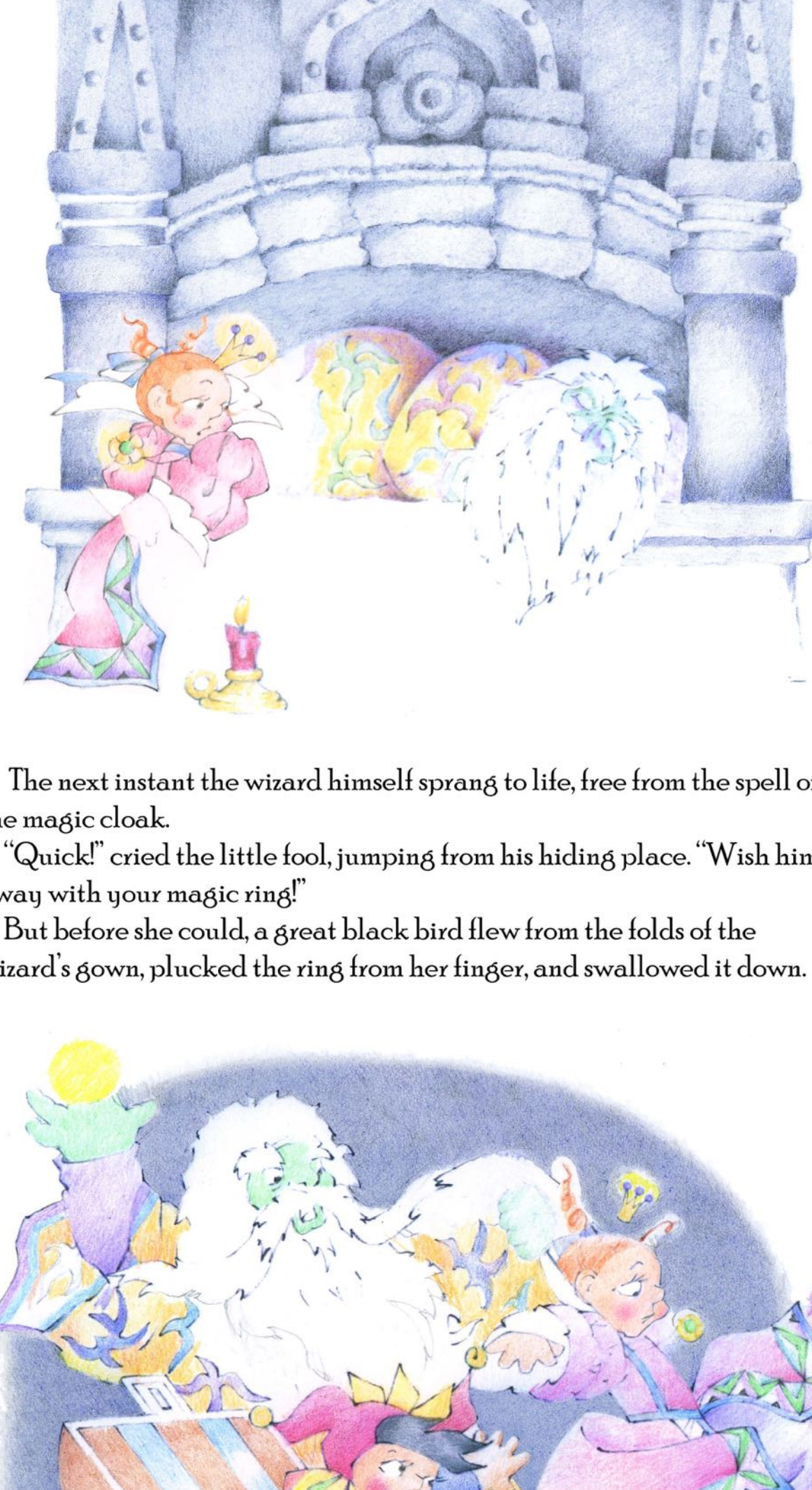
Then one evening, long past bedtime, he told her this story:

"Once upon a time, in this very castle, there lived a crabby old wizard. He was crabby, people said, because in all his long life he'd never had a wink of sleep—which was no small misfortune for the kingdom because the crabber he got, the more magical mischief he made.

"One summer night, in the midst of a blizzard he'd conjured up, a little weaver appeared, shivering on his doorstep.

"If you will give me shelter, your wizardship," he said with a bow. "I'll repay you with more than gratitude." And he spread before the wizard a beautiful cloak made of woven flowers.

The crabby old wizard, who hated uninvited guests, snatched up the cloak and pulled it over his shoulders, without so much as a thank-you. As he was considering whether to turn the little weaver into a toad or worse, a sweet fragrance made him drowsy, and he sank to the floor in a swoon.



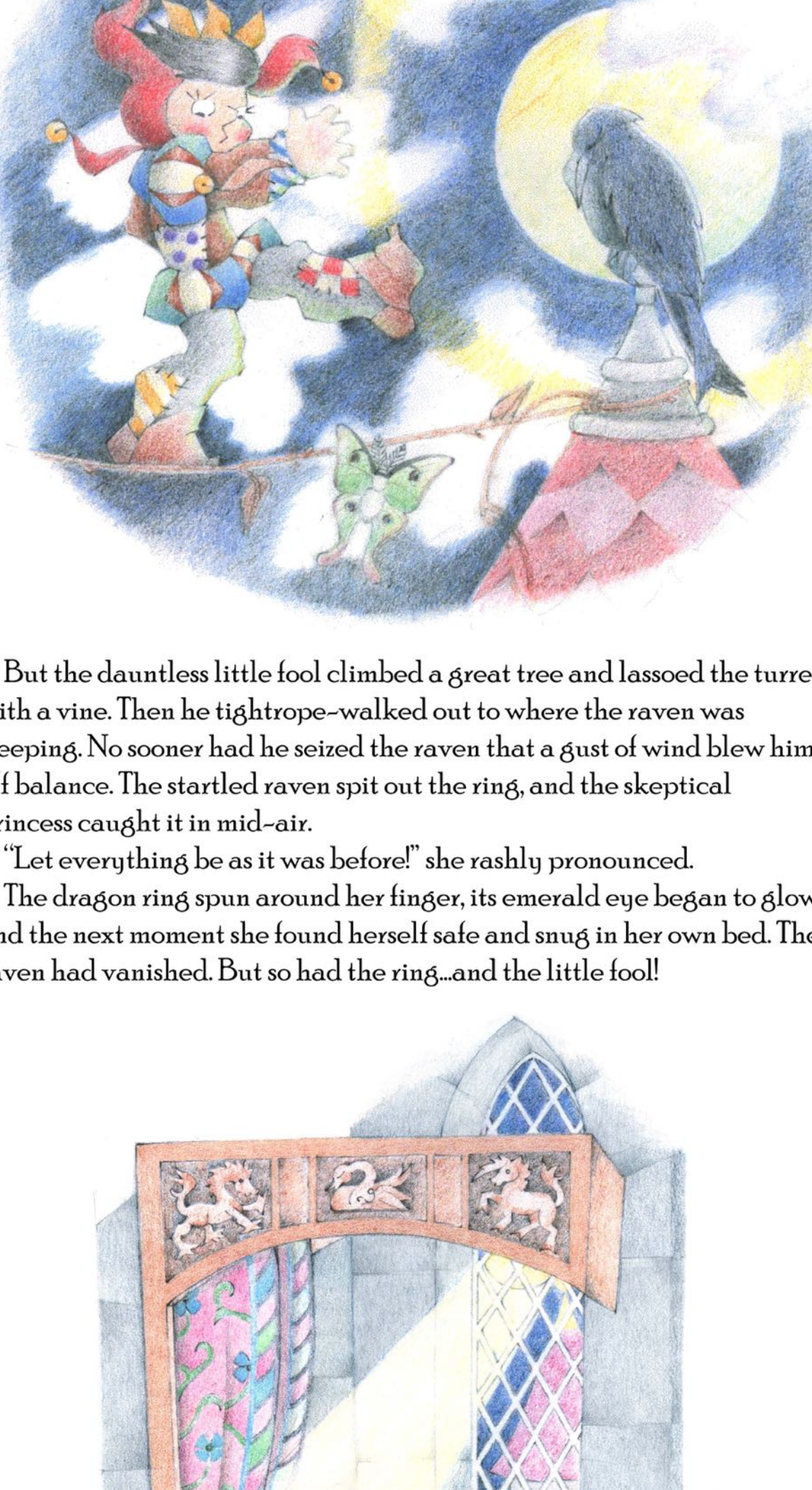
"When he didn't wake up after a week or a month, there was bewilderment throughout the kingdom.

"Why, the cloak is woven of magical dream flowers," explained the little weaver, "and the wizard will sleep as long as he wears it."

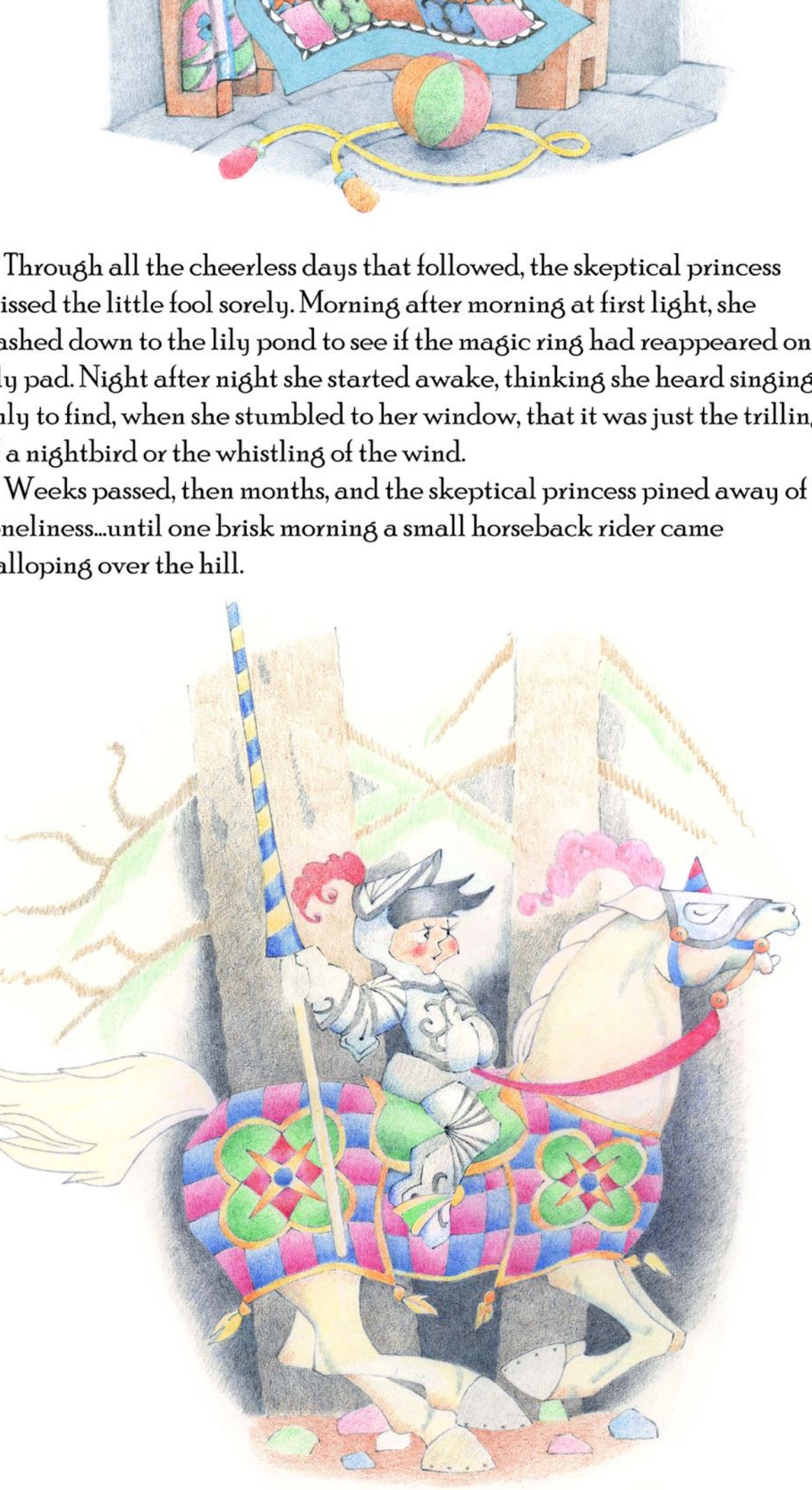
Then the people, rejoicing, decided there was nothing to be done but to declare the little weaver king and live happily ever after. And that is what they did, leaving the crabby old wizard to his well-deserved rest."

"Wizards!" scowled the skeptical princess when the story was over. "I may believe in magic rings, but wizards?—I'm too grown-up for such nonsense." And she frowned scornfully off to bed.

That night she dreamed she was in a dark, spooky room, trying to find a spell for banishing scary things, but by morning she'd forgotten all about it.



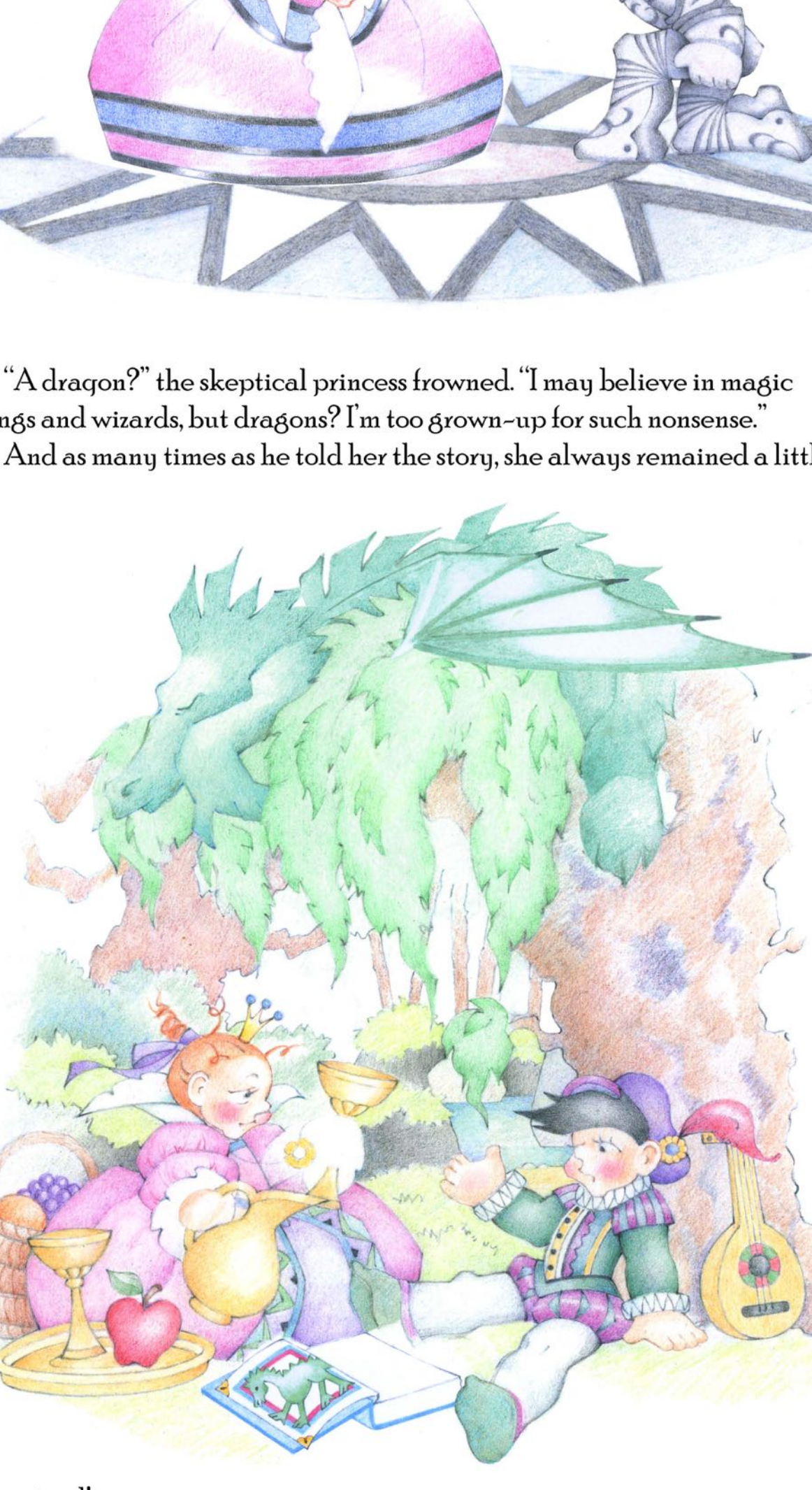
Later in the day, while they were playing hide-and-seek, the skeptical princess peered under a tapestry and discovered a door and a passageway that led deep down under the castle to a musty room full of dusty bottles of powders and potions and old, yellowing books of spells.



She gazed around, perplexed, until she saw a bulky shape under a flowery blanket.

"I've found you, little fool!" she sang out, pulling the covering away.

There on a narrow shelf lay a wizard, old man.



The next instant the wizard himself sprang to life, free from the spell of the magic cloak.

"Quick!" cried the little fool, jumping from his hiding place. "Wish him away with your magic ring!"

But before she could, a great black bird flew from the folds of the wizard's gown, plucked the ring from her finger, and swallowed it down.



Then the wizard, fuming and sputtering incantations, grabbed the princess by her collar and the fool by his cap and flung them high in the air.

The skeptical princess and the little fool plopped down magically in the far side of the castle gate. Unfortunately, they were now dressed in rags, and everything around them had changed.

"Of all the impertinence!" raved the skeptical princess.

"Now do you believe in wizards?" sighed the little fool.

All that day they chased the raven—and never caught more than a tail feather.

That night the clever bird perched on a castle turret far out of reach.

"It's hopeless!" wailed the skeptical princess.

But the dauntless little fool climbed a great tree and lassoed the turret with a vine. Then he tightrope-walked out to where the raven was sleeping. No sooner had he seized the raven that a gust of wind blew him off balance. The startled raven spit out the ring, and the skeptical princess caught it in mid-air.

"Let everything be as it was before!" she rashly pronounced.

The dragon ring spun around her finger, its emerald eye began to glow—and the next moment she found herself safe and snug in her own bed. The raven had vanished. But so had the ring...and the little fool!

Through all the cheerless days that followed, the skeptical princess missed the little fool sorely. Morning after morning at first light, she dashed down to the lily pond to see if the magic ring had reappeared on a lily pad. Night after night she started awake, thinking she heard singing, only to find, when she stumbled to her window, that it was just the trilling of a nightbird or the whistling of the wind.

Weeks passed, then months, and the skeptical princess pined away of loneliness...until one brisk morning a small horseback rider came galloping over the hill.

"Why, you're not the little fool," she fretted, blinking back tears as he kneeled before her.

"But I am!" he protested. "Only now you must call me 'Sir Little Fool,' for while I was away I tamed a dragon and saved a kingdom, so they made me a knight of the realm."

"A dragon?" the skeptical princess frowned. "I may believe in magic rings and wizards, but dragons? I'm too grown-up for such nonsense." And as many times as he told her the story, she always remained a little

skeptical!

The End