



The End of the Magical Kingdom  
"The Evil Princess"

**L. M. Warren**

The End of the Magical Kingdom: The Evil Princess

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Visit [www.TheMagicalKingdom.com](http://www.TheMagicalKingdom.com) for a preview for all three episodes of the series.

Cover by Sebastian Sabo

## In medias res

*Each one of them had their own “Happily Ever After.” Fairy tales always ended the same way: the dashing young prince vanquished the Evil Queen, got the girl and inherited the crown. The people of the land, now freed from oppression, partied for days. They sang songs, toasted to the new king and laughed in merriment as their lovable sidekicks cracked jokes. Fathers embraced sons in tears of joy and musical scores played, their chords of paradise reverberating in climax. It was a triumph of faith and living proof that Good can overpower the menacing force of Evil each and every time.*

The sky is black. There is no storm approaching, it is not yet night-fall and there is not a cloud in sight. But with every passing moment, a cloak of darkness covers more of the celestial sphere. Slowly but sweeping, the heavens are blanketed in sorrow, in doom, dripping over the world like ebony blood.

For now, they are drunk with rye and rhyme. Their candles, torches and lanterns burn, providing temporary luminaries that carry on the celebration. They don't even notice that natural light is gradually dimming into nothing and in place of it rises a shadowy and collapsing mass of a faint moon. The stars have even stopped twinkling, but wishes continue to be made on the shining reflections of gold and

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double-edged swords. Their royal shimmers distract them from the realization that nothing is left but black tidings.

The wine of denial hides the bitter taste. The odor of party sweat whiffs away the stench of fear. They feel comforted, protected and safe under the promise of Happily Ever After, the incorruptible law that says a pure heart is always rewarded.

But today, as they are forced to look above and then to their left, they will pray. They will pray for magic. Now, even as they celebrate yet another wedding, unspeakable terror comes from beyond the sky.

There—one thin princess stumbles forward, her frame perfectly starved, her feet wedged and bloodied into those tight heels. She walks clumsily, ready to walk the entire night if need be, eager to find a certain man that she might embrace him and put her mouth upon his mighty shoulder. The princess wears red; a satin bodice with pleated organza overlay, its trim and stretch fabric back shimmering with light, her top skirt of pleated peplum glowing like stardust. Her dazzling tiara and white cameo sparkle above her long flowing grey hair.

And her lovely face, her lovely rotted face, shivers with anticipation as flesh rips apart from her skull. Decaying muscle tissue drips out of every cavity. Her neatly curled hair diverts from the unfashionable maggots that dine on her disease. Age-old black tar spatters onto the ground leaking from Madame's gaping neck. Her rib cage bursts apart along with the waist-training corset until her intestines begin to cross-stitch with her lacey frills.

Even while spilling soil and gore, she stands with grace, with elegance, as if all eyes are still on her at the ball. She holds her arms with poise, like a lady of confidence and her wedding veil—soaked in black crimson—still clings to her fractured jaw. The fabric has wilted and the colors faded, but her face still holds every twinge of dejection and dolor that she died wearing.

Her stubborn attempts to stand on what's left of her legs create a dastardly sound, a sort of scraping rattle that becomes louder by the moment. Her bone hands trembling, her eyes boiling with red savagery, she focuses on the object of her affection.

Her mouth unnaturally widens and her perfectly even teeth bite down repeatedly in anticipation of a century-long awaited meal. Her lurching head doesn't turn but seems to hang to one direction, then another and then drops forward with no resistance. But her demonic red eyes never stop staring straight ahead. She dances dolefully towards her suitors—the beloved, the happily married and the pure of heart. Amid her sepulchral rasps of rapid gurgling, only a lone chant could be heard throughout the commotion.

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*Come  
Come out  
Come princess  
I cast this spell  
Come out of your tomb  
Better late than never  
Not so happily ever  
Take back what was taken from you*

Black cats, bats, rats, snakes, vultures and every other omen of bad luck scurries around in the madness, looking for a place to hide as the thickness of the overcast grows.

As the final layer of caliginous blanket falls in place, gently pushing away the last trace of an afternoon sunny sky, it seems as if two distinct worlds are placed beside each other. One quickly fading, with bright rays of hope and redemption, and the other blotted over with rebellion and violence.

However, for the next few moments and as their flame-lit lights lead the way, everything seems safe and peaceable. With heavy frolicking and a few winks, they are distracted from the impending force. A biting wintry breeze passes through, with only a sniff of excavated soil, as the festivities continue. Faith has never been stronger. Beauty has never been lovelier. Love has never felt more fervent.

They pay no attention to the whispers in the wind since their own jubilant voices mute the warnings. For now, they all feast, marry, laugh and sing. They enjoy their fleeting “happily ever after.”

# Chapter I

## Back When the World Made Sense

**F**rom the ghostly shades of sapphire blue that filled the room, to the ominous hum that seemed stuck inside the walls, to the creaks of unbalanced ivory furniture on spirit-stained floors, to the distinct phantom whiff of white chrysanthemums, an air of magic permeated the easternmost tower wing of Fen Mien I Palace.

The abysmal and almost crushing shades of blue inspired three young playmates to seek out a lamp, lending the room at least a flash of gorgeous white. Mary, the youngest at seven years of age, lit the lamp and set it down in the middle of the room, allowing a clear view of each other's faces.

Mary's face was the most docile: a big and klutzy smile with tiny eyebrows and wavy blond hair, with an expression that begged for approval. She looked over to her left to take in the faces of her two friends, their angles, cheeks and noses, she figured, so much more precious than her own.

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Perhaps “friend” was an insincere word. They were united only by the palace, only by royal blood and by their age group—young enough to be locked away in a tower while adults talked, or shrieked, about politics.

Blossom’s face danced in coquettish amusement, her thick lashes overpowering her unassuming nose and lips. At the respectable age of ten, she was the doyenne of the gathering. Her red and ferocious hair seemed perfectly controlled thanks to a chin-length bob with soft combed waves and a pink ribbon tied to a bow.

Blossom looked to her right, staring down nine-year-old Wendy, whose chiaroscuro face had an uncomfortable amount of edges, shades and depth that provoked other pretty girls. The fact that she was a plump princess didn’t help matters, nor did her black hair, ponytail or that conspicuously circular face.

Each wore distinctive colored pajamas—Mary cloaked in red, Blossom dolled in pink and Wendy in a sparkling diamond and silver combination—the three of them had only one trait in common.

Their eyes, their ginormous, soul-wrenching and hauntingly disproportionate eyes. Mary’s hazy blue eyes seemed to match the color of the room, but glowed faintly. Blossom’s brown eyes spun like stirring melted chocolate, her welcoming expression never ceasing to light up a room. Wendy’s eyes were grey and had an unusual crescent shape that made her look smirky. That, together with her multi-textured overly rendered and multi-dimensional pupils, further alienated her from normal princess profiles.

Blossom couldn’t keep from staring at Wendy’s strange face, while Mary couldn’t help but admire Blossom’s perfectly curving lashes.

“I brought characters,” reminded Wendy, grabbing her collection of dolls, dresses and dinosaurs. It was understood that the princesses always married the dinosaurs, since male prince dolls seemed so uninteresting by comparison. Besides, who wouldn’t want to attend a wedding of a princess and a T-Rex?

“Oh, how funny!” Blossom said, not too subtly indicating that she had already outgrew playtime. “I remember playing with these when I was a little kid.”

“You don’t anymore?” Mary asked sheepishly.

“No. A princess has responsibilities. I play with people now. Sometimes we pretend we’re fairy tale characters. Sometimes we write poetry or sing. Sometimes we just enjoy games together. It’s much more fun than playing with dead objects.” She looked over, making sure Wendy could see her gaze.

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Wendy, however, was oblivious to the point. She had already determined what dress the bride agreed to wear and what qualities she found most appealing about this particular dinosaur—monstrously powerful, constantly hungry and not very talkative at all.

Blossom grabbed a dinosaur, looking thoughtfully at it, while engaging Mary, the only one who seemed to understand her finer points. “Everything changes, Mary. Did you know that?”

“What do you mean?”

“It means that we’ve been doing this for so many years...but that it’s not going to last forever. Everything changes. Everything evolves.”

“What is ‘evolve?’”

“It’s what happens when something changes in form. Like, over millions of years, we changed from one species to another species.”

“Oh,” Mary answered unsurely.

“And one day, we’re going to grow up and be queens. Our people will change. Cadabra will change. There may even come a time when we don’t get to see each other anymore.”

“Oh,” Mary replied sourly. “But I’ll miss you. Both of you.”

Blossom half-smiled, rubbing the dinosaur against a princess doll.

“So maybe we should start making each day count.”

“I’ll miss you too, Wendy!” Mary said.

Wendy nodded, keeping her eyes fixed to her characters.

“Oh, I have an idea,” Blossom quickly followed. “How about instead of playing with these toys, we write a play? Or a book? We can come up with characters and a storyline?”

“But isn’t that really hard to do?” Mary asked.

“No, it isn’t,” Blossom assured her. “I’ll explain the rules and we just go from there. Okay, first. We all create a character. But we can’t force each other’s characters to do anything. We can only control our own characters.”

“Okay.”

“Wendy?” Blossom asked firmly. “Put your toys down and let’s think about this.”

Wendy glowered. “They’re not toys.”

“Oh? Then what are they?” Blossom answered with a double blink.

Wendy bit her lip in spite. “They’re people.”

“They’re what? You’re confusing me,” Blossom answered. “People are alive.”

“It’s no different if you have a toy or if you’re writing a play,” Wendy answered bitterly. “They don’t have bodies like we do. But they’re still imaginary people and they’re real.”

“Okay, fine. So your dinosaur is one of the play’s characters. But I don’t want a dinosaur. I am just creating a character out of my mind.”

Blossom closed her eyes and chanted.

“Okay, after careful meditation, I have decided to name my character Misses Sweet. What is your character’s name, Mary?”

“Ummm...” Mary struggled with the thought. “M...M...Meryl?”

“Okay, sort of based on yourself, I guess?”

“I guess, yeah...”

“How about you, Wendy?”

“It doesn’t *need* a name,” Wendy said. “It’s a dinosaur.”

Blossom stared in contempt. “If you’re too immature to think like an adult, then Mary and I can play alone.”

“Or maybe Mary and I can play dinosaurs and princesses and you can shut up about it,” Wendy replied.

Mary’s stomach fluttered and reached into her throat. Any sign of conflict seemed to make the poor girl physically ill. Perhaps with two strong opposite personalities like Blossom and Wendy the only recourse was distraction.

“Hey! My mom told me that there’s this new thing princesses are supposed to do. Want to know what it is?”

Blossom stopped glaring at Wendy and inquired half-heartedly, always interested in princess etiquette. “What?”

“Well, like you said, because our lives are going to change soon, we should try to make every day special. So we take a box and we each put something special that we have inside the box. Then we bury it for like, ten years.”

“Ten years?”

“Yes,” Mary said, “and then we open it when we’re queens. And we remember this day. And no matter what’s happening in ten years we can think back to this day and remember that we were all friends. We can call it Cadabra’s Box.”

“So...what do we put in the box?” Blossom asked, raising her ink-thin eyebrow.

“Whatever you want.”

“What are you going to put in it?”

“Umm...I guess I’ll put in a lock of my hair. And also...I think I’ll write a letter to myself.”

“A what?”

“A letter to myself. But it’s like ten years in the future. So ten years from now I’ll open the letter and talk to my future self. So it’s like time travel.”

“Hmmm,” Blossom replied, gradually smiling.

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“Okay, I want to write a letter to myself too. And I’ll put some candy in the box too.”

“Won’t it go bad in ten years?”

“Not this candy. This was special candy given to me by my mother. She said it tastes better when it’s aged.”

“Your mother was lying,” Wendy said, followed by a laugh.

“No, she wasn’t,” Blossom answered sternly. “You must also put something in the box, Wendy. If we’re doing it then you have to do it too.”

Wendy sighed. “Fine. I’ll put one of my dinosaurs and a tiny wizard’s wand in there.”

“Oh, you’re putting your toys in there?” Blossom asked coyly.

“They’re not toys,” Wendy said.

“Well, we both are going to write letters to ourselves. That means you have to do the same.”

“Why?”

“Because *we* are doing it,” Blossom counseled.

Wendy grumbled as Blossom put a pen and paper to Wendy’s face, waiting for her cooperation. “Fine.”

“Now to be fair, let’s keep what we’re writing a secret. That way we can be surprised.”

Each of the princesses took a pen and a sheet of paper and eyed it in curiosity. Where would they be in ten years? Would they be queens? Would they still be friends or would they be separated by years of politicking and civic duties? Each one started to write, cautiously at first, then freely, as if inspiration struck all three at the same time.

Things were rapidly changing and even the magical air of Fen Mien I Palace seemed thin to the girls, the longer they stayed in the tower and let go of the superstitions of haunted furniture. These were old Gothic walls that surrounded them in blue nightshade, the large windows and flying buttresses feeling like relics of the old world, with their outdated Gods, their archaic laws and their stories of mythic leaders.

One of these days, things would no longer be the same and they would each go their separate paths, destined to inherit a kingdom, each of them practically crafted to uphold the ideas and philosophies of their royal families.

The Magical Kingdom, as everybody once called it, was dead history and a reminder of the primitiveness of their ancestors. Only the very young and artless could ever embrace the idea that magic was no longer necessary to make the world better and that the Queen, the legendary Queen Fen Mien I, wasn’t the all important paragon of virtue

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worth fighting for, dying for and certainly not worth killing for. The elders, royal advisers and paranoid parents still believed in something divine, if not the myths, then the spirit of magic—magic as a uniting force, as a natural miracle, as a rallying voice of patriotism.

Their children, however, believed in nothing. Whatever tomorrow brought, would be the result of great effort, of progressive community thinking and the will of one good-hearted princess. In a post-magic world, there would be no need for miracles, faith or sorcery.

The lamp burned away light for hours until the sun shined brightly, freeing three dreamers of that ghastly shadowed blue moonlight, the color of magic.

## Chapter 2

# Pretty Speeches Change the World

*“Ten years ago, as a child, the world made sense to me. Everybody knew what they were talking about. Everything a grownup said was true, it was fact. I listened in awe, thinking everyone was so much more intelligent and book smart than I was.*

*Then, somewhere down the line, we all grew up. And then one day truth turned into belief. And I found out the biggest joke of all. That nobody actually knows what they’re talking about. Grownups were just big kids who knew a lot more words. Everyone just pretended that they had all the answers.*

*But even now as I realize this, I still find myself speechless. Afraid. Not having a clue as to what I should say or do. Part of me still feels like I should pay attention to how Great and Important People act.”*

Mary stared into the mirror on the wall. Her eyes retreated and her awkward smile stretched to an uncomfortable degree, as she reached the peak of her much anticipated Wedding Engagement speech.

“The point is, people are calling me a Future Queen. The Honorable Princess. Or the One True Hope for Two Kingdoms. But these are all just names. The truth is, I’m the one who is honored. Because you’ve chosen me as your son’s bride. And sometimes in life, I think, there are situations that just happen to us. They make regular people like you and I ‘great’, because of the good we can do for the rest of the world. The opportunity we have makes us great. Our opportunities can make a better Cadabra.”

The seventeen-year-old Princess Mary Melancholy could barely be called a debutante, let alone a future queen with appropriate golden locks. But there was little room for self-doubt now, as she was just minutes away from delivering her Royal Engagement speech to a full banquet hall, filled with royal couples, governors, journalists and respected orators.

“So you can call me a princess if you’d like,” she said, looking at the mirror in judgment and trailing off her memorized notes. “...But it’s a lie. I’m just like all of you.”

She furled her brow and spoke bluntly to the image staring back at her. “Actually, none of it’s true. There’s nothing special about me. Look at me. I’m nobody. I’m the world’s biggest loser and I have no idea what I’m doing up here. You’re all applauding me because I’m being forced to make out with a prince I haven’t even met. I mean, that’s what it is when you come down to it. And I know I’m just going to screw everything up. So tell me, mirror, who’s the biggest idiot of them all?”

“Mary? Hurry up! They’re ready for you,” an attendant’s voice said, waking Mary out of her self-loathing stupor.

She sighed. “I guess I should delete that last part...”

The curtains parted, each side perfectly balanced in color: one gold and one red, welcoming visitors inside the Crimson Palace. The headquarters of the Kingdom of Blood was specially decorated with beaming red wall paint and large murals of fire, apples and of course, impressionist-style florals, mostly roses and gladiolus. They called it the house that blood built and red interiors filled the banquet hall of the palace, even as attendees proudly wore their patriotic colors of carmine and vermilion.

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The Kingdom of Gold, its warriors, ministers and royal family, wore nothing but white wool and gold metal as was their custom. They covered themselves with golden armor, jewelry, rings and bracelets, as if to remind everyone who gazed upon them that only their kingdom possessed gold. Everyone else, including the Kingdom of Blood, decorated with bronze, copper and sometimes iron. Never gold—to do so would not only be ostentatious, it would mean infringement. In contrast, the Red Soldiers dressed in earthier colors: rabbit and fox fur, lamb and leather.

The honorary dinner banquet celebrating the Kingdom of Blood's Princess and her Royal Engagement seemed quaint, especially since Mary, in an act of ongoing timid rebelliousness, wore only blue. This occasion was indeed momentous, the celebration of a landmark achievement in non-aggression and so they constructed a new outfit made exclusively to commemorate the occasion:

The “Color of Peace Dress” featured a halter-like bodice with pleated material that connected behind Lady Mary's neck, along with a low-hanging V-neckline. The Lady of Two Kingdoms was a very pretty and fit girl that just fell short of community beautiful standards because her face communicated no attitude and no entitlement. Therefore, her famous Melancholy frowns inspired a Midnight Blue dress, leaving her arms and shoulders bare and her back barely covered in an upward seven string accent symbolizing the olive branch of peace—naturally in Gold colors because who else could afford to make peace?

A soft belt hugged her torso, tying at the side of her waist in a bow, while the skirt below pleated like mad, it being a rotating circle skirt that was manufactured to roll like a blooming hydrangea dark blue flower, giving guests fluctuating views of her calf, knee or thigh, depending on where Lady Mary happened to walk. Blue hyaline slippers adorned her feet while matching blue feather anklets helped to accentuate her blue dove transformation.

The Kingdom of Blood had just ended its age of rationing fabric, a casualty of war and thus excessive fabrics were newly in-fashion. Taffeta was the choice for Mary, its lush formality helping to increase the number of weddings taking place, while the big skirts helped to make baby bumps sexy and welcome a newfound respect for conformity. All the women of the Reds wore large skirts, as they were not so subtly designed to lure the attention of male hunters who were used to scouting for big, puffed up turkeys.

Mary actually had no say in the making of the dress, as this process involved tense negotiations between animal skin seamstresses of the Reds and synthetic designers of the Gold Kingdom, the lot of them

held in lockdown under threat of beheading until they designed the ideal Compromise Dress, it later being saluted by the Independently Wealthy Tradesmen Union as something “spectacularly generic that would offend so few, yet still elicit the most grandiose of pity.”

Only Mary’s birdcage veil hat broke from the relentlessly dark blue shades, giving her some splashes of ivory, as well as a gray flower sprinkled with white gold flakes and a giant spray of newly plucked light feathers that overshot her golden blond hair. Feathers, of course—the Red’s fashion fanatics insisted that there was hardly a reason to get out of bed unless something died.

As Mary approached the stage to a round of applause, she noticed her own “Red” people couldn’t help but form their own faction a comfortable distance away from the people who decked themselves in gold. For hours the palace had been subjected to music, dancing and the tributes by governors, complete with gifts of gold, myrrh and frankincense, as was the politically correct gift for royalty.

“Mary, Mary, Melancholy Mary,” said a short and stately looking man with a finely trimmed curling mustache. The old governor, dressed in gold, blabbed on in that same arrogant, overweening way all the Gold people talked. “It is because of your *melancholy*, your glorious *equanimity*, your even tempered *blasé* and your profound *centrism* that Cadabra does love you so much. In Mary, we have discovered an icon, a *metaphor*, for achieving peace among two warring kingdoms. What the world sees as a marriage alliance to put an end to an age-old war, we see as something far more romantic. We see a love story for the ages.”

After another round of clapping, the governor waved Mary up to the center platform, slightly elevated so as to hold the attention of the room. “Now I believe we’re all in for a treat because Princess Mary has prepared her own little speech for our enjoyment. So let’s give her our undivided attention.”

Mary looked over to her left and saw Amram and Jaquie of the House of Opula. They looked quite haughty as all those Golden families tended to look. Amram was tall and skinny and with distinguished grey hair, accompanied by thin eyeglasses that instantly upped his intellect. Jaquie was pretty with long brown hair, if well aged and slightly graying. She was also a curvy woman, as the Gold Family had no reason to starve.

Mary noticed that Amram and Jaquie both had yellowish-hazel eyes. All of the House of Opula did, as they considered it a sign of divine approval that even their eyes were made of gold. They both draped themselves in golden jewelry but while Amram wore blinding golden armor and necklaces, Jaquie, chose to wear a traditional Opula

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masterpiece, consisting of a décolletage and floor length hemline made from gold-infused charmeuse. Every ruffle and every beading was overlaid with small sculpted ingots. More importantly, the charmeuse was designed and woven by 100% Pure Virginal Daughters. It was a “thing” for the Kingdom of Gold, as their fashionable virgins were as highly praised and collected as Real Olive Oil and Regional Wine since the girls’ intimate sufferings helped produce the finest qualities in suppressively imagined fashion.

Mary reluctantly walked to the center and continued trading glances with the Golden Family. She took a deep breath and looked at her audience, then back to her royal guests.

“Wow. Oh wow. Yeah.”

The applause quieted into silent anticipation.

“Umm...” Mary said, trying to remove the jitters from her face. “So! This is *indeed* very awkward. I’ll try my best not to say anything really stupid!” she said with a smile.

Jaquie and Amram nodded with smirks on their faces as Mary laughed.

Mary panicked, quickly forgetting all of the hours of note memorizing she did in front of the mirror. For a moment, she even forgot if she was talking to a King or a General. “So...uh...it is really a privilege to be talking to the second-in-command ruler of the Golden People,” Mary said.

Amram and Jacquie were not amused and huffed, still waiting patiently for Mary to properly start her speech. The room went deadly silent.

“No, the first! The first! Of course, I knew that,” Mary squealed, gripping her wrists and giving a twitchy smile. “You’re King Opula. I knew that! Pleasure to meet your acquaintance. Or is it make your acquaintance? Um, yes, either way it’s pleasurable, really awesome.”

“My name is *King Amram, of the House of Opula, of the Kingdom of Gold,*” he said, crinkling his lip.

“Ah! Gotcha!” Mary double-pointed at Amram, a bit jocularly, increasing the social unease tenfold. “Right! Yes. Sorry. Hello, King Amram.”

Mary took a long inhale and tried to think back. She whispered a few notes to herself, in hopes of jogging her memory.

*CHILDHOOD. MARRIAGE.*

*GREATNESS. SITUATIONS IN LIFE.*

“Right. So okay...ten years ago I was a kid.”

She lost her train of thought and stared out at the confused room of onlookers.

“And uh...I grew up into an adult. Well, obviously. No stunted growth. Not a dwarf. And so glad about that. Uh...and now of course, we’re all really big kids. Okay, let me start over...I am undeserving of such attention. Really, really undeserving. And though I’m going to make out with your son...”

Jaquie and Amram stared in discontent.

“I mean marry! Marry! Going to be married.” She giggled madly, already dying from embarrassment. “I meant marry. Otherwise, that would sound creepy and weird, right?”

A couple people in the audience laughed while the rest held their breath in embarrassment.

“Yes, creepy and weird. Wow. I really didn’t think I could say anything more awkward and stupid than I already said.”

“And yet you proved yourself wrong,” Queen Jaquie replied, with almost a smile.

“Sorry,” Mary continued. “That so didn’t come out right. What I meant to say was...uh...I think in life, that there are...well, what you might call...situations? Where one is required to do things. And one might say, that...we, I mean, you, I mean, well, me in this case...”

One person coughed. It didn’t help much.

“And...me thinks...I mean, I think,” Mary said with a nervous shriek. “Sorry, I think I’m coming down with a slight brain aneurysm. Am I even speaking English right now? Hopefully? Sort of?”

Mary flinched rapidly and blushed, assuming correctly that her speech was already a disaster. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make fun of brain aneurysms. I just sort of felt...you know like my brain died. Would anyone notice if my brain stopped working and my mouth just kept talking and talking? Probably not!”

Mary laughed loudly, wrongly assuming if she cracked a joke it might lighten the mood. Alas, silence.

“Right. Let’s just move on from that. Well, my point is, I think we have to do our best in those situations. You know, the situations that come up in life. Because none of you are special. I’m not special. We’re all just...you know...uh...really un-special. What’s the word I’m looking for? The opposite of special? Uhh...yeah, not special. Because let’s face it, when someone says you’re special...they usually mean you’re *Very Special*. Like in the head. It’s kind of an insult.”

She laughed.

“Wow, I sound *Very Special* right now, don’t I? But the point is, those situations in life, well, we use those situations. In life. Um, so we can all, you know, make a better Cadabra?” She raised just her eyes in caution, looking around and keeping her face low.

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A few chuckles were outnumbered by a respectful ovation.

Jaquie felt a pang of pity for Mary and so kindly interrupted. “Are you nervous, Mary?” She laughed, a perfectly matching series of three successive “Hah!” sounds with moderate volume.

“A little,” Mary said with a pained teathy frown.

“Oh, we could hardly tell,” Amram muttered, staring down at his much more interesting cup of wine.

“Not to worry,” Jacquie said. “Arranged marriages are no one’s cup of tea. But I say this to you, as a woman.” She smiled. “You will have no complaints. Prince Aaron is very much the good looker. You are certainly not ‘marrying down’ in this family. On the contrary, pity my cousin Fionnghal who had no choice but to marry an ogre.”

“Wow. He was an ogre? Like a big green guy?” Mary asked in suspicion.

Jaquie stared a long moment and smiled. “No, darling. He was simply short, fat and ill-tempered.”

“Oh, right. Ogres aren’t real. It was a metaphor, right?”

Jaquie sent a look of trepidation back to Amram as a few in the room laughed, leading to a series of half-hearted and confused claps. Apparently the speech was over.

Queen Lilith, Mary’s gray-haired overdressed mother, rolled her eyes and sighed loudly as she guided Mary back to her seat. “I believe that went as well as anyone expected it go. The princess did finally stop talking and for that we are very grateful.”

Lilith seemed the only one capable of playing the Royal Game, she dressed formally in crimson red wool with a reddish-brown owl-feathered overcoat. Along with russet snakeskin pumps for shoes, she wore an iron and red gem-encrusted crown making it clear that the Reds were passionate about costuming, if not absurdly affluent about it.

“Remain standing, Mary,” Lilith reminder her, noticing she was heading back to her seat. “King Amram is formally addressing you.”

Amram walked up to the stage and looked over at a red-faced smiling Mary. He stared her down until she cowered, holding her hands tensely to her sides.

“Yes, I suppose I might as well,” Amram said, adjusting his glasses and taking out his carefully worded speech. “I thought it *prudent* to *orate* a few words regarding Mary’s engagement to my son. “Melancholy Mary, who I might add is a handsome woman to look at, but not pretentiously beautiful...”

Mary raised her brow, uncertain if that was an insult or a compliment.

“...Is the very soul of Cadabra. She is a role model for the youth.

She is a moderate-minded young woman. Her placid nature is something we admire in civilized society. Imagine actually conversing with a Red politician who hasn't beaten someone to death. It boggles the mind."

Amram paused for laughter and wagged his head, always proud of his smarmisms.

"And blue is such a *pulchritudinous* color, isn't it? One might even say, yes one might, that the color blue serves as a fitting compromise for our two very extreme Red and Gold kingdoms. And Mary Melancholy is a wonderful compromise."

The roomful of diners politely applauded. Mary squinted, thinking the Golden People all seemed a bit snotty. Technically, they were the House of Opula but everyone knew the mannerisms and affected speech of Amram's Royal Family quickly rubbed off on the wealthy laymen and "lower rich class."

"Instead of fighting our grandfather's *holy wars*," Amram continued, "It's about time we give up this preposterous feud. I can't even remember what Satyre's great grandfather was so upset about. Can any of you?" The attendees laughed. "There's no sense in digging up the past. There are no more skeletons in the closet. With this marriage alliance, we end the fighting once and for all."

Amram stepped aside as the crowd applauded him and he bowed in respect to a standing Mary, who bowed back to him. He nodded, to which Mary double bowed and then eyed him in panic, followed by a third bow. Finally, an annoyed Amram huffed and threw his hand up in the air, eager to leave and find his seat.

He stepped back, giving the floor to his wife Jaquie, who stood up and gave Mary something very close to a sincere smile. She smiled to the room who applauded her in kind.

"I just wanted to add, Mary, you are not just a princess any longer. You are also a future Queen of the Kingdom of Gold. Always remember that with your new role comes heavy responsibility. To the people of Cadabra, you represent something very special.

Progress. You will bring your people into a new age of sophistication. Intellect. You will win wars with your words, not weapons. Respect. You will learn about culture...not just your own, but to accept the cultures and habits of others. Grace. The longer you are in a position of authority, the more you realize that it's not about winning or losing, or good versus evil. It's about seeing the bigger picture.

We chose you, Mary, not because you were a Queen in the making. But because you were a 'Little Princess'. You can grow into the right kind of Queen Cadabra needs."

## The Evil Princess

The applause for the Gold Queen was a bit louder, she being the more eloquent of the Royal Couple, or at least the one who could feign some degree of admiration for her new daughter-in-law. Jaquie and Amram took their seats, as the Speaker of the House returned to the center.

Just as the speaker of the house began to take over, the attention of the room quickly diverted to the sounds of thunder. With a hailing of “His majesty has arrived!” and traditional trumpets announcing the presence of Royalty, the room stood at attention. Only Amram and Jaquie seemed unimpressed, rolling their eyes at the repeated voice of the court.

“King Satyre of the Kingdom of Blood.”

Like the bloody elephant in the throne room, Satyre, with his inelegant stomping, boorish coordination and rugged face demanded silence, if not applause or admiration. He was a burly man of unkempt brown hair with an angry face and heavy eyebrows. He didn’t think much of fashion and would find the idea of taking an entire book page to describe his wardrobe as mentally diseased. He wore a king’s carmine robe but his steps were so loud he may as well have worn bloody armor.

A few Gold Elite diners applaud, but quickly realized that they were making a scene. Silence was the preferred way to show respect in the Crimson Palace.

He stomped his way inside the banqueting hall of the Palace, his own Palace, as if a dissident. He bumped into one table and knocked over one plant, as he made his way over to the Royal Circle, his flaring eyes focusing on the “pretty-looking” guests. His loud sighs and grunts seemed almost like involuntary animalistic purring.

“What are all these people doing here?” he said with a scowl.

Lilith fumed, embarrassed beyond belief. “They are your guests! I told you to be ready before lunch. Mary’s Engagement Ceremony. Don’t you remember?”

“I thought we already did that,” he said, grabbing a turkey leg from the feast table and chomping.

“That was Mary’s Debutante Ball and that was a *year ago*.”

Mary smiled at the thought: Satyre somehow managed to take all the attention off her awful speech and absorb all the controversy just fine. At last, a person more capable of eliciting awkward energy than even the blue and socially awkward princess.

Satyre settled his ferocious, beast-like eyes on Amram and Jaquie and grunted Amram’s name.

“King Satyyre,” he said stretching his syllables as always, as the Royal Golden Family all did.

Jaquie couldn’t force a smile any longer. She stared at Satyre in horror, like a fair maiden might cautiously eye a gargoyle. He hadn’t dressed for an honorary banquet saluting his daughter, not with that wrinkled robe and bison-skinned warrior pants, but looked as if he just came back from a war, still holding someone’s head.

“Are you enjoying your stay here?” Satyre asked, each successive word more ornery than the last.

“The ambiance has certainly been peppy. Or at least it was...” Amram replied.

A thunderous voice and demonic expression replied. “*Peppy?* What is peppy? Sounds like something I piss out in the morning.”

Jaquie and Lilith covered their faces in shame, while Amram flinched but struggled to appear brave and unyielding.

“Are you even aware that there are other people here in this room?” Lilith said, quite miffed. “I hope you at least have the self-awareness not to strip down naked and shower right in front of everybody.”

“Now, now, Satyre,” Amram said with a hammy smile. “You wouldn’t want to appear inhospitable on your daughter’s very special day, would you? This is about our children. Not us.”

Satyre gargled a response while Amram invited some of the prominent journalists, artists and entertainers over. “Now then, let’s shake hands so that the artists will have something to report in the morning.”

Amram and Satyre shook hands stoically, prompting several artists to quickly draw what they saw, reporting in *real time* of this momentous occasion—the first time the two kings had ever shared the same room without the intention of mass murder.

“Great picture,” one reporter exclaimed. “How about a statement for the two kingdoms, advocating this wonderful victory of peace?”

“Baaaaah,” Satyre replied, looking and sounding downright goat-like in response.

“Baaah? Okay, we’ll improvise something.” The reporter nodded.

Satyre broke the handshake first and turned his eyes away from the Golden Couple, ready to set fire to or beat something...

Until he saw the shy face of his only daughter. As soon as their eyes met he halted in his rage and countenance softened, even while his voice, politely, boomed. “Mary come here,” he said, grabbing her by the arm and taking her to a safer place away from the royal families.

“I don’t know if anyone has told you. But these people are...”

## The Evil Princess

“I know, daddy,” Mary said. “My future in-laws. I kind of figured it out by now.”

“Well, it’s the price of peace.” Satyre stared down Amram and Jaquie from a distance and they returned the uncomfortable look. “Just give it a chance. You might like him.”

Amram walked over and trolled Satyre just a bit with a *friendly* arm slap. “On that subject, Mary, I don’t believe anyone’s told you yet. But starting with this alliance, you will no longer refer to Satyre’s land as the Kingdom of Blood. We believe it’s more diplomatic to call it the Kingdom of the Reds. Or the Red Kingdom.”

Satyre stared at Amram’s arm until he removed it, while Amram blathered on.

“This is the dawn of a new age. A new age of logic. No more holy wars. No more god-sanctioned fighting or ‘my church is better than your church’ nonsense.” Amram smiled, like smiling at a castle wall.

“Oh. But won’t changing the name be confusing?”

“Mary, don’t ask questions of royalty,” Lilith said.

“It’s all right, she’s a beginner.” Jaquie reassured Mary with a gentle wrist squeeze. “Because the intention is to make people forget about killing each other. We’re not just talking about us. We’re talking about all of Cadabra. And the word ‘blood’ is very aggressive. It makes people afraid. Vengeful. Unreasonable.”

“Ah,” Mary said. “Yeah, Red does sound less uh...violent. And the Princess of Blood sounds really gross.”

“And I do adore the color red,” Jaquie said with a wink. “Matches everything.”

“You can call it whatever the hell you want,” Satyre said tiredly. “Whatever all those pansies want to call it, so they don’t wet their panties. I’ll still call it Blood. It will always be Blood to me.”

“Well, *you* will not be giving any speeches!” Lilith snapped.

“Oh, heaven forbid!” Jaquie said with a snicker.

“It’s all in jest, of course. We all do love each other, don’t we, Satyre? One big happy family. Or perhaps, the way a family loves their strange and psychotic minotaur of an uncle,” Amram quipped.

Satyre had enough and mumbled an excuse for himself. “If you’ll excuse me. I have more important things to do.”

As he left them behind he couldn’t help but shove soldiers and tables out of his way, taking all the tension with him.

“Be careful with those tables,” Lilith said in caution. “They’re on loan.”

“You put them too close to the damned walkway, what do you expect?” Satyre hacked in response.

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

“For God’s sakes, Satyre, wait until you’re out of view of the guests before ripping your clothes off!”

“Baaaahh,” Satyre roared back, his shirt already torn from his hairy back, as he eyed some nearby gawkers like a whale might eye plankton.

“Well,” Lilith said, pleasantly horrified at her husband’s manners. “There is nothing as exquisitely refreshing as increasing one’s family. As we have proven here tonight.”

“Hmmm,” Amram retorted dryly. “Well, I suppose these are the ‘finer moments in life.’ I really am moved to crocodile tears.”

“Oh, you are so wickedly droll tonight,” Jaquie said with a snicker.

The two royal families went their separate ways, Satyre leaving the palace floor, Amram and Jaquie returning to their horse and carriage and Mary wandering away from the festive scene to a quiet spot outside. Lilith stayed behind entertaining the guests.

All things considered, Satyre had adjusted to civilized “Red” life remarkably well, failing only slightly epically in table manners...but thus far, never going back on his word to give up the Great War. He was a man of honor, if nothing else and grew tired of fighting his grandfather’s battles. Fighting over what? Some long forgotten insult that didn’t matter anymore.

Sure, they could call it whatever they wanted. But never forget the Blood, that was Satyre’s thought. He and his father and his father understood blood as the symbol of determination, of conquest and bravery. They worshiped blood as the life force of humanity, the sacredness of life and death before God. They even wore blood during holidays, embracing terms like “savages” and “barbarians” as cowardly words weaklings used to describe their superiors.

But with this marriage alliance the multigenerational conflict had ended and the era of magic was at last, officially, over. Satyre knew that it was time to let go of other people’s vengeance. If not for the sake of the innocent then for the sake of Mary, who might finally know a good life of wealth and comfort and not constant anxiety.

On the day of the Red Kingdom’s peaceful and diplomatic surrender to the financially prosperous Kingdom of Gold, he renounced his forefathers’ heavenly wars and did so much to the praise of the other kingdoms and provinces.

Amram’s ass-centric behavior notwithstanding, Satyre was the last of the Old Kings still swinging his sword at nothing.

Gratuitous Blood he finally called it. There really can be too much of a good thing.

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## Chapter 3

### Who I Must Be

*“They say everybody believes in something. Believing in something makes people brave. It makes people loyal. It turns good people into great people. It makes not-so-good people want to change and turn over a new leaf. Stripped of everything else, belief is the only thing a person has.*

*And then there’s me. I’ve never believed in anything. Maybe that’s why they call me Mary the Melancholy.”*

-Attributed to the Honorable Princess Mary Melancholy

**M**ary couldn’t wait to escape that ghastly event and ran away from the palace in teary-eyed embarrassment. Everything inside always looked so carnal, with those bloody curtains and grain-crazy artworks. The outside air refreshed her and as soon as she

left behind her blue hyaline shoes, she began to twirl and bask in the sun. Even as she breathed in the free air of spring and imagination, only stark colors of red and yellow grabbed her attention—the vibrant sun which shined so brightly it almost grinned and the roses, cannas, carnations that waved to her, dancing in the wind.

As she began walking the trimmed trail of One Hundred Gardens, a Red feature attraction, she began to hum in response to the rustling, chirping and waterfalls she heard in the background. A tune began to build and intensify as Mary spoke aloud, gaining a feel for a rhythm.

“That’s what melancholy means to people. A great celebration,” she said languidly. “Doesn’t even matter how much of an idiot Princess Mary sounds like when she gives speeches. Nobody cares what I have to say. They just make excuses for me and tell me to shut up. And nobody even remembers that melancholy used to be a bad thing. But it doesn’t matter...”

*Because I am who I know I must be  
Yes I am, whatever they want to see  
But what I am underneath isn't me...*

## SONG 1

### “WHO I MUST BE”

**They say nobody knows the future  
I don't know what's coming from what came  
But my life is going nowhere  
And what's worst I don't seem to care  
Of Mary's Melancholy's  
Fifteen minutes of fame**

**They say a princess shouldn't worry  
Cheer up girl, wipe the frown off your face  
Who you are don't take for granted  
Ungrateful brat, so unromantic  
I'm not doing anything  
But taking up some space**

**They say everyone believes in something  
Won't dare tell them how I really feel  
I'll try to make someone happy  
Live ever after so happy  
Somebody pinch and tell me  
This nightmare isn't real**

**They say tomorrow brings good fortune  
Assume your responsibility  
As inside I feel nothing  
Melancholy is I all can sing  
And the weather forecast says  
More blue clouds and black rain**

**One day if I met myself in the future  
What would I ask the me of today?  
Will I die for love or glory  
Is my life the same old story?  
Or will the future be like  
Just every other day  
Will my life be adequate  
And more or less okay?**

**And that's my life as far as I can see  
The trophy wife - Little Princess Mary  
For all I am is what they want me to be...**

Mary raised her arms and flexed every muscle in her body, delivering the crescendo. But the music died down and the cheery backdrop seemingly went dead with respect.

“Oh hey, mom,” Mary answered, trying to inconspicuously drop her arms and unclench her fists.

“Oh my,” Lilith said, quite scandalized by what she had witnessed and patting her heart. “How embarrassing for you. I didn’t expect to find you...*singing*? In public?”

“Ah, don’t mind me. I sing sometimes. Just once in a while. I’m really trying to quit.”

“Well, we talked about this,” Lilith said, battle-ramming Mary’s shy eyes. “Singing is not healthy for you. I’ve heard that singing to one’s self is highly addictive and does terrible things to your lungs. Besides, girls who sing tend to attract attention. Negative attention.”

“I know.”

“And look, you ruin your dress when you sing so loudly,” Lilith said with a fussy whine. “You shouldn’t flex your muscles or sweat so much when you’re wearing a tailor-made dress. It causes the dress to wrinkle and relocates your *girls*, which is such a bother to fix.”

“My...? Ahh. Gotcha.”

Lilith straightened Mary’s dress and poked a finger up her spine. “And stop slouching, for goodness’ sake. You should at least have the courtesy to sing in your pajamas, darling. Have you noticed that no

one actually sings in a custom-made dress? They gently sway on the dance floor. They wave. That's all. They don't even eat."

"Yeah, I guess so."

Lilith stared, unable to let go of the shocking moment. "Singing may also cause people to believe you're mentally challenged. And after that horrendous speech you just gave, let's not give them any more ammunition for that canon, shall we?"

"Yeah. I sort of screwed that up...screwed it up royally, you might say." Mary fake laughed until Lilith stared her down to a state of respectful silence.

"What I notice about you," Lilith replied, "is that you have a strange tendency to antagonize people. You try to say that you're stupid and don't know any better. But you intentionally say very provocative things and then seem surprised when people are offended."

"Maybe I'm just stupid. Maybe that's my big secret, mom."

"Nonsense," Lilith said. "It's that *thing*. You get that thing from your father. That thing he does and you do. People are having a normal, polite conversation and you have to ruin it for everyone.

"Yeah. I just shouldn't be giving speeches. I keep telling you..."

"It was possibly the worst speech ever given by any man, woman, politician, homeless person, or large-brained mammal, ever, in the history of creation."

"Yeah," Mary said, grabbing her blushing red cheeks with her hands and hiding her welling eyes. "I knew it was in the bottom five. I really tried. I'm just terrible at giving speeches. I sound so stupid."

"Well, try a little harder, darling, because peace isn't kept by trying. Wars are not prevented by '*good enough*'. I suggest you start improving yourself by ridding your mind of that childish, anti-social attitude that you and your father share."

Lilith shook her head and shuddered. "Every breath your father takes, every thought that occurs to him, every word that regurgitates from his mouth, it is with the intention of hurting other people. Every time the man belches it is with specific intent to hurt someone's feelings and temporarily rob them of their happiness."

"I agree. I'm totally not defending dad's burps. I'm really not, believe me."

"I'm simply reminding you not to do that thing you do and he does and end up like *him*. An angry old man who alienates people and doesn't even have the decency to dress in a suit and show up on time to his own daughter's engagement ceremony." He's the laughing stock of all Cadabra. You do realize that?"

## The Evil Princess

“Guess he just wasn’t in a celebrating mood,” Mary said, keeping her head low.

“Well, celebrating and feigning good will towards men is certainly preferable to waging war, isn’t it? And I for one would much rather make love than war. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Mary shrugged in response. “Well...”

“Well, I know *you* wouldn’t agree. And I know you don’t understand yet, child,” she said, sizing Mary up and pondering how awkward her wedding night would turn out.

“But someday, you will. Just to give you fair warning, the man hardly knows what he’s doing the first time, but eventually, after many years of practice and ‘bearing down’, it starts to feel good...”

“Yikes...” Mary said with a muffled voice. “That’s too many terrible visuals for one minute of time, mom...”

“Yes. Many people are unaware of the extent to which I have royally suffered.”

“So is this really what you came here to tell me?” Mary said, folding her arms.

“Don’t be cranky, darling. It makes you look childish.”

Lilith sighed with a pained but hardly begging face. “I am sorry that this has been thrust upon you. You’ve always been the perfect child. Never ill-behaved. You deserve perfection. But you’re not going to get it. In a perfect world, maybe you could marry some simple shepherd boy. Or a nice, sweet *farmer* or something.”

“Right, a farmer.”

“Or something.”

“Or not marry at all. You know, in a crazy world.”

Lilith stared uneasily.

“Kidding. It’s every girl’s dream to be married to a rich handsome prince, right?”

“Well, let’s put it this way. It’s fun to dream,” the matriarch said. “It’s normal to want romance at your age. But when you come home from a tough day aboard your 14-karat yacht to sleep in a golden captain’s bed, with down pillows, inside a golden palace surrounded by servants and seven course meals, instead of *starving to death, feasting on dung and fighting off hordes with a knife*, you find a way to be happy.”

“Can’t have both, right?” Mary hummed in resignation.

“No, sweetie. You can’t. Not outside of fairy tales. This is the reality. Over fifty years of war negotiations brought us to where we are now.” A look of nostalgia weathered her face. “Imagine that. The Kingdom of Gold and the Kingdom of Blood...for once, putting away their weapons. Living in peace. Imagine all the people who are going

to be spared from death not having to fight another ridiculous war. And you...you're the symbol of that peace. You represent all the progress we've made."

"I know."

"And sometimes we have to make sacrifices. We sacrifice in the present. But Heaven rewards us in the future."

"Right. Because Heaven and God. Circle of life. Faces in clouds. Got it."

"Don't be sarcastic. You don't wear it well," Lilith said with a cheery reminder.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize, it makes you sound weak."

"Yes, yes, yes."

Lilith rolled her eyes. "Repeating the same word over and over again is the worst sort of embarrassment. Do think before you speak, darling."

"Sorr...I mean...I concur."

"Good. Believe me, someday you will understand," Lilith said strongly. "When two groups of people come together and find common ground, two faiths come together. And that's when a miracle happens."

"Where did you hear that?"

"That's what we all believed. When I was a child and my mother was a child and her mother before her, that's what we were taught. The power of peace transforms us."

"Into like, an animal or something?" Mary said with a raise of her brow.

"No, child. It's a metaphor."

"Ah, gotcha. Not good with metaphors."

"Well, there is certainly nothing wrong with a girl studying similes and metaphors for the sake of eloquence."

"Good point. Makes sense..." Mary said, staring at the ground.

"And you shouldn't use so many fragment sentences when you reply to people. It makes men think you're uneducated."

"Never thought of that. I mean, I have never thought of that before. I just don't understand a lot of that...what we believe. It's confusing."

"Well, try though you might to disavow Queen Fen Mien, darling, you simply can't run away from it. Because without Providence, your life is utterly pointless."

"I guess we do agree on that."

"And you're not the drop dead gorgeous girl that a prince expects."

"Yeah, I know right?" Mary shot back her gentle acid.

## The Evil Princess

“I’ve definitely learned that I’m not special. Or beautiful. Or cute or likable. Thanks for reminding me all the time.”

“There’s no need to extra draw attention to yourself by insulting your virtues. It makes you seem vain.”

“I concur,” Mary said with a shrug.

“Here’s the point. You do have a heart that is larger than life. A healing soul, your grandmother called it. Don’t take your gift for granted.”

Mary nodded in acceptance. Likely, that compliment was the best her mother could do. She gazed down at two butterflies chasing each other, one blue and fast-moving, the other black and green. For a moment, she figured it wouldn’t be an altogether bad thing to trade places with a bug.

“So when do I get to meet Prince Aaron?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. You are scheduled to meet him in the Garden of Neyestan right passed the waterhole.”

“Oh no. I am so bad with directions,” Mary fretted. “Where is that?”

“You go beyond the One Hundred Gardens. Just past the fringes. It’s a lush green garden that seems to go on forever for miles to the north. It shouldn’t but a few skips away. If you take a horse, you will ride it in no time.”

“Okay, I think I know where you’re talking about,” Mary replied.

“They’re having a new dress specially made for your first meeting. As rumored it is a flower dress, so you do have to water it slightly before you meet him.”

“Ah. That’s nice. I’ll be sure to splash on makeup to distract from my average-ness,” Mary replied with a head thump.

“No,” Lilith corrected her, much to Mary’s wide-eyed interest. “Don’t look beautiful. Just be yourself.”

Mary thumped her head up and down again, looking back to those cute butterflies.

“Don’t dress to impress him. You must listen to him. You must speak your mind. Provided that your thoughts are intelligent and not bumbling. We talked about that.” Lilith smiled grandly. “He will love you for who you are *inside*.”

“Fine, fine.”

“Average is all the world wants anymore,” Lilith said firmly. “So you might as well put away dreams of being someone *special*.”

“My thoughts exactly...that was sort of the point of the speech I was going to give.”

“No, I didn’t get that impression at all, not from the speech you gave up there,” Lilith said. “The only point I could deduce was, ‘I’m Mary Melancholy and I am a jabbering fool. Please tolerate me because I’m a girl, tee-hee.’ Is that what you were going for? If so, it worked splendidly.”

“Got it,” Mary said, sending her eyes to the ground, too bereft in spirit to test the Queen’s sense of irony.

“This is an important period in history, child. And there is no time for *silly girls*, rest assured. Oh and be sure not to mention the Mienien Genocide of ‘23. The House of Opula has highly emotional viewpoints on that matter and we’re trying to stay neutral.”

“Well, I mean...” Mary shook her head. “I’m not an idiot. I really don’t think I would start a conversation by going, ‘Sooo, how about that crazy Mienien Genocide of ‘23? Wow, sure didn’t see that one coming!’”

“Don’t get snippy,” Lilith commanded. “There’s nothing funny about the Mienien Genocide of ‘23. There were so many deaths. Awful, hideous deaths.”

“I know. I mean, I know that now.”

“I simply said not to discuss it.”

“Weel!” Mary said, along with a nod, hoping one happy syllable would be an acceptable response.

“I’m sorry, was that a complete sentence or even a word?”

“No, it wasn’t,” Mary said in shame.

“Above all else, darling, keep an open mind,” Lilith said with weathered eyes and heavily lipsticked smile. “When you do...you’re never disappointed in what people have to offer you.”

*And whatever you do, always bring an extra set of notes,* Mary thought, speaking only with her frown.

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## Chapter 4

### Two Fortuitous Encounters

*“Greetings! I’m an Evil Witch and no explanation’s necessary! You already know what’s going to happen. Terrible, terrible things. My hobbies include cooking children, blaspheming God, sacrificing teenagers during black mass, masquerade orgies and stealing random things because I have no morals. Oh yes and all the other stereotypes, urban legends and murderous tales you’ve heard are absolutely true. My turn-ons include werewolves, vampires, demons and, oh yeah, Monarch Butterflies! Buwweeheeheeheehee!”*

-Attributed to an evil witch, living somewhere beyond the fringes of Cadabra

**M**ary found Prince Aaron’s request to meet him in a field vaguely romantic...at least she did, until realizing that that this simple stroll through the field amounted to hours and hours

of feet-massacring walking. First, she walked west, then east, then slightly north and all the way south, looking for this strange place that seemed to elude her.

It was kind of Mother Lilith to suggest that she “be herself” and not beautiful, since she wore lightweight blue walking boots and not those dreadful heels a princess ought to have worn. Mary’s new outfit said active, simple and marital bliss. How else does a girl flirt, after all, besides her adorable dress and body language?

“The Water Fountain Dress”, symbolizing Mary and Aaron’s godly betrothal, was another high-concept creation, devised by insane warrior poets of the Red Kingdom collaborating with 100% Pure Virginal Daughters from the Gold’s House of Fashion, who sought to create a dress that would change almost instantaneously from the time it was first put on until the minute it was taken off. The insane warrior poets, unlike the Pure Virginal Daughters, were never regionally certified—everyone just assumed they were crazy.

Cited to represent the fleeting “once in a lifetime” memories of courtship and marriage, the dress was made from Mary’s own bedroom blanket, pure cotton and weighted down with pellets, sewn into pressure point compartments around the Lady’s neck, shoulders, chest, stomach and knees, so that she would constantly feel as if she never get out of bed and were still dreaming.

The dress was also designed for the season, a reasonable 65 degrees at dusk and cautiously frozen until Mary began her journey to the Garden, so that the comfort and appearance of the dress wouldn’t peak until approximately twenty minutes after she put it on, just in time to meet Aaron’s face. Its polar fleece fabric naturally warming and insulating, she would be prepped to be at her maximum comfort level when first saying hello.

The dress itself was in thick ball gown style with a hem weeping to her feet. It consisted of two layers of luxury, the electric indigo inner fleece and the outer velvet layer of classic indigo, suiting her well since a handsome prince was to awaken her psychic spirituality, giving her the knowledge that would complete the transformation of Lady to Queen. Her sleeves were covered to her wrists, that her delicate heart on her sleeve never fall from Aaron’s loving grasp and her collared neckline plunged into her mid-chest, giving her dashing prince just a hint.

For a belt she wore a cord made up of dozens of white and beige seashells, stretching across her thin waist and halfway to the floor, ending in golden tassels. In her hair, she opted for a full wreath of blue star and blue wild indigo flower heads. The dress would likely get

## The Evil Princess

stained from the small journey ahead, but much to the preference of its designers, this was a creation that would self-destruct after one initial wearing.

As soon as Mary started to walk, the vibrancy of the dress shape began to change from bell to A-line and the ferocious colors started to fade into more peaceable tones. Within minutes, the dress had almost changed appearance, reminding Mary that a dress, like her own life, was organic, slowly wilting and ultimately doomed—by midnight of the new day it would shrivel into a hollow mess. That the dress would peak in color and bounce upon meeting Aaron was the symbolism intended, so that it could help teach Mary the concept of marital love.

Unfortunately, the novel idea of a “dying dress” didn’t help her melancholy one bit and upon leaving she sniffled over the idea of a mortally wounded dress she would never wear again.

The outfit did get a polite ovation from Mary’s onlookers, even earning praise from Lilith who agreed the dress could “...Probably seduce any man...if for no other reason than to see what all the damned racket is about.”

The grassy garden seemed to go on indefinitely, its foliage eventually turning into heavy, weeping tree leaves. Surely she was lost at this point and had been taking the same routes and paths twice or even three times.

As soon as Mary noticed a change in pattern dusk had overtaken the spring sky and she found herself wandering in an dark and untoward forest. The air seemed thinner and everywhere she looked, there seemed to be eyes watching, or scant movements here and there, all perpetuating the feeling of terror the environment seemed to crave.

She ran ahead, eager to escape the evil forest and find something in the territory of Red, Gold or even Pink civilization. All this greenery was foreign and the looming threat of nightfall disturbed her greatly.

There! For a moment she definitely saw something, not just another bustle or wind whip. There were at least three snakes, sitting in a row, organized, as if conspiring something. The moment she squinted her eyes to get a better look they scurried back into the bushes. Bushes that at least seemed mildly comforting, since they indicated some form of modern home, perhaps closer to a garden than a forest.

“Hello? Is anybody here?” Mary raised her voice only slightly, not daring to wake the beast of the forest.

She sighed and raised her brows in grief. Where was this great prince? Why would he let her wander alone into the middle of nowhere subjecting her to this horror? For a moment she second-guessed herself. *This was the Garden of Neyestan, right?*

She followed his instructions. The more she looked ahead, the more it seemed like a garden. There were ponds, bushes, even a few floral patches—although the roses seemed suspiciously dank and ill-colored.

But something was still very wrong. The bustling and whirring of natural animal life seemed to go silent and dark shrubbery began to reappear in the distance, eventually blocking off the setting sun.

“Oh jeepers,” Mary squeaked aloud. “I sure hope this isn’t an assassination attempt. Hello? Is someone there?”

She felt an unmistakable presence behind her. Whatever it was loomed closely and had something in mind for her. She quickly turned out and ducked.

Dozens of snakes scattered, jumping back into bushes and behind shrubs.

“Hello? No? Nobody?”

Suddenly, a tiny voice replied to her inquiry.

“Me. I’m here.”

Mary tensed up. It was surely the language of Cadabra, but it sounded a bit tiny. She turned her ear close to the ground and squinted.

“What? Did someone just say...”

As soon as she looked downward her eyes shot open.

A hideous rat looked back up at her. And smiled.

Mary screamed and flailed her arms, jumping back several feet and crawling away, staring it down with quivering eyes. “Get away from me! Get away!”

She stomped her foot at the rat in warning, sending the little creature into a panic.

“Yeah, you better run!” she yelled, stomping her way towards him and sending him cowering towards a tree. She summoned up the courage to stalk the little bugger, working her way towards the large trunk and eventually reaching for her shoe.

“Don’t bite me...just die...” she whispered, as she slowly removed her shoe ready for a deathblow. “And then everything will be okay...”

“But why would you want to kill me?” the tiny voice asked.

Mary’s face trembled. For a moment she thought she heard the little creature speak. “Oh my Dog. Did you just say something?”

“...”

Mary cautiously turned her ear towards the ground. Suddenly, a bat emerged from the branches, swatting her face furiously with its wings.

Mary’s “Aaaeeiii!” noise was about the most terrifying thing in the forest and she slapped her hands back at the bat, screaming for help.

## The Evil Princess

When she looked up nothing was there to help, except a foul-looking vulture, which swooped down, leering at her and cackling in judgment.

“Whaa-?”

Before Mary could even freak out at the sight of the vulture, six purple snakes appeared near her feet. They were crafty little devils and each simultaneously tied their tails and necks together, creating one long slimy trip wire. Mary screamed her adorable scream again and fell down on her stomach, just avoiding facial contact.

There was nothing left to do, so she screamed her head off as she turned to her side and backed away.

“Help! Help I’m being attacked! Help meee!” she cried, watching an ominous shadow come closer and increase drastically in size.

The snakes executed another maneuver, this time slithering over to her arms and legs and gripping her tight with their scaly bodies. The snaky fellows leveraged on to some nearby vines, ensuring she remained tightly bound to the floor.

“Hey! What are you...oh no...”

The shadowy figure emerged, eclipsing Mary’s worst fears. A witch appeared before her, looking down in haughty judgment at her captive. Everything about the horrible creature was dark, bleak and pale. Her face wasn’t too bad and looked surprisingly youthful and human, Mary conceded, but her spiraling witch hat was ghastly and the shredded ends of her dress, reaching to her ankles, were the stuff of nightmares.

She looked to be early-twenties and with an ethereal quality in her facial movements, as if every movement she made were smoothed over and blurred. Her eyes were hypnotically green and quite mad looking, with dot like irises. Her face, however, was pure and clean with red-violet lipstick and a hint of blush—scandalous for a witch to look like a princess. Her hair was obscenely black and thick, with devilish bangs on top.

Her witch outfit was predictably evil and nefarious, a mock turtleneck black bodice, sleeveless and with a keyhole that revealed far too much of her shameful, braless bust.

Green was the witch’s unsettling, hypnotic color, the evil thing tying a green colored ribbon around her hat, wearing green and black striped arm warmers and green and black striped socks that made her whole persona seem downright snakey. The green lace jabot formed a web around her neck that sunk into green frills and finally an emerald centerpiece in the chest, just inches away from the creature’s black heart. Her pointy and curving shoes were stark grey with a green bowtie and amazingly, not with a heel, as witches in their perpetual disgrace had no reason to be fashionable.

Even more disturbing than her black outfit were the glowing green eyes appearing behind her shoes. Everything about this creature was vile, except her face and the closer she invaded, the more Mary squirmed and shrieked for her life.

“A witch! Somebody help meeee! Stay back!”

“Stay back?” the witch asked, quite amused at the horrifying scene.

“Or else what? You’ll scream your little chickadee head off?”

Her voice was scratchy, urbane and yet vulgar. She sounded as if a drunken courtesan had mated with a kvetching patriarch and never learned the words *Quiet Time*.

“I’m warning you,” Mary said in desperation. “I am the Daughter of King Satyre of The Kingdom of Red...nooo the Kingdom of *Blood*,” she corrected firmly. “Do you know what that means? If you lay one finger on me he will have your head!”

“Big deal,” the witch ratted back with a diabolical smile. “When you cut my head off it just grows back.”

Mary bellowed at the thought, quite repulsed. “You stay away from me, Devil’s spawn!”

Mary’s torment only seemed to charm the snakes, who enjoyed terrorizing pretty girls by making hissing noises and intense, spinning eye contact.

The glowing eyes beneath the witch’s feet emerged, revealing itself as a cat—a black cat, with far too much merriment in its eyes to be trusted. The black cat wandered over to the bound princess and began rubbing up against her ankle.

“Eew!” she cried. “What-What is it doing?”

“Goodness gracious,” the witch replied. “Have you never seen a cat before? You know, for a Melancholy Princess, you are surprisingly loud and obnoxious.”

Mary’s terror turned to outrage. “What? Do you know who I am?”

“Duh, yeah,” she said with a jerky head bob. “There are only three princesses in Cadabra. And you’re definitely not the ‘Smart One.’ Or the ‘Pretty One.’”

“Oh, thanks! Now the ugly witch insults me.”

“Whoah, don’t get your panties in wad, girl. I was not insulting you. *You* picked a fight first. You were trying to kill my rat with your shoe.”

A horrified Mary whispered back, “You...you have a pet rat?”

“Yeah. Well, he’s not really a pet of mine. He’s not my slave. He’s just my friend.”

“Friend?”

“Yeah. We’re all friends. We’re like...what do you call it. A gang.”

## The Evil Princess

The witch cackled as the rat, vulture, bat, cat and the snake slithered towards Mary, soaking in the nightmarish glee, almost *smiling*, Mary observed.

The princess screamed bloody murder and squirmed harder. “Let me out of here!” Mary send another unfriendly gaze of warning. “Unless you want to start a war.”

The witch sighed, finally tilting her head in compromise. “Untie her, my valiant knights.”

The snakes cooperated and unbound Mary, allowing her to sit up and back far away into safety.

“Don’t come any closer.”

The black haired demonness sent back a bratty face. “Don’t flatter yourself, Little Miss Prissy. I am not the type to take you hostage. I don’t want reward money. And I hate politics. I hate the Kingdom of Gold and the Kingdom of Blood. As far as I’m concerned, you can all go suck an egg.”

The very thought confused Mary. Not the sucking an egg part, which was self-explanatory, but the very idea that anyone could *hate* the Kingdom of Blood.

“But...we’re the good guys,” she said, slowly rising to her feet. “Why would you hate us?”

“Uh gee, I don’t know. Maybe because you’re all a bunch of brawling thugs? That’s why.”

Mary’s jaw dropped. “Oh? Compared to who? The Kingdom of Gold? Those pretentious, holier than thou snobs? The ones who monopolize crops and force farmers to relocate? Those good guys?”

“Hey, sister,” the witch replied in angst, “Take your political talk elsewhere. I don’t care about The Kingdom of Gold, The Kingdom of Blood, or the Kingdom of Big Dinky Doo. I just want to be able to sit here in my garden, in peace, without some psycho princess coming in here and attacking my friends.”

“*I’m the psycho?*” Mary yelled, placing her hands on her hips. “You’re the one who hangs around rats and snakes and bats! And for your information, *witch*,” she said with fervor, “*You’re* the one who’s psycho. You’re not even supposed to be living in these parts.”

Mary eyed the creepy looking black cat who was preoccupied rubbing his face all over the princess’s feet. “The law says you have to live beyond the Borderlands, away from the graveyards, the briar patches and all neutral zones.”

“Yeah, yeah, big deal. No one cares about your stupid laws,” the evil thing said.

“Well, you should! They are for your own protection!”

“Oh?” the witch said, looking provoked and walking closer to an uppity Mary in defiance. “And what if I disobey your rules? What are you going to do? Stomp your feet and cry for daddy?”

Mary furled her brow. “How dare you...I am...”

She looked down and glared at the black cat who began nibbling on her toes.

“Your cat is biting me! Jeepers, what if he’s carrying the Black Plague?”

The witch laughed heartily. “You’re just saying that because he’s black,” she said, welcoming her feline friend back towards her feet.

“I am leaving! My advice is that you get out of here and go back to your designated area. If I see you again, I will *not* be so compassionate.”

“Wow, this is you compassionate?” the witch said. “So what does it look like when you get angry? Do you turn green and grow three times your size? And get those creepy veins in your forehead? Oh and grow tentacle arms?”

“Whatever, witch. I don’t need to be talking to you.”

Mary stomped away from the witch and her creepy animals, folding her arms and feeling quite exasperated at the terrible day.

“Ahhh, stuff it up your ear!” The witch said from a distance. “You may be cute on the outside, but inside you’re a miserable hag with warts, whiskers and a big mutant forehead!”

Mary looked back and saw the witch comforting the cat and the rat, using both of her hands. No gloves, no fabrics, just her hands. She shuddered.

The witch’s loud, grating voice continued on, not so subtly taunting Mary on her way out. “Poor, poor babies. Did that mean old princess scare you? Mommy will take care of you. Yeah. Yeah. That *psycho princess* won’t bother you anymore. No more. Yeah, she was a real psycho, demented, hormonal, zit-faced, bug-eyed princess, wasn’t she?”

Mary looked forward, irritated at the noise, but relieved to be stomping her way out of the garden and into greener pastures. Somehow the night seemed a little calmer after facing all that disaster, that near-death experience that she wouldn’t wish upon anyone else.

However, every step was excruciating. She walked and walked, wearing out her angry energy in a hurry, until she collapsed to one knee. Her lip quivered and she held back tears. Whatever happened, she needed a rest.

Just as Mary sat down and gave up all hope, the sound of chivalry approached. A handsome man rode up on a horse and carriage looking quite concerned. Mary made eye contact with the stranger, a man far too white and gold-looking to be a Good Samaritan.

## The Evil Princess

He was also a gorgeous man, twenty-two years primed, with short golden hair, thick eye brows and a clean-shaven face.

His fashion sense was also remarkable, he possibly being the only man Mary had ever seen who took his dress as seriously as her own mother. He wore a white wool shirt with purple wrist bands, along with an overcoat of white cashmere. Golden accessories littered his outfit, from his tassled shoulder pads, to a jacquard sash and to his shining cufflinks. Decorated with medals and wearing a heavy military belt, he looked like the honorable soldier, confident and rebellious, but with certain dopey ignorance in his eyes—an instantly charming quality in a kingdom full of fakes. Only the lad's pants were colored purple and made of fire-resistant mineral fiber, spun from slag, no doubt a military protection.

“Mary? Mary, is that you?” his voice resounded throughout the night, a strange mix of childish wonder and manly strength.

“Huh? Oh...*Oh!* Prince Aaron, is it? Hi, uh, yeah. I know who you are.”

“Hi.” Aaron smiled as he stepped off and settled his white stallion, but a bit uncertain about what he was witnessing. “Umm...I'm sorry. Am I too early because I thought you were...? Or no, no. Maybe I'm late? Maybe I got turned around and...”

“No, no! I was late. It's my fault. I just got lost.”

“Well, I've been looking for you for about two hours.”

“Oh no, I'm so sorry!”

“It's fine,” he said, shaking off his fatigue. “I just hope you're okay. A lady shouldn't have to walk all day long just to be meet her prince.”

“Well, I really had no other choice. I wondered why you didn't send a carriage. But then I figured, maybe it was like...a test or something?”

“A test?” he said, looking confused. “My Lady Mary, I just figured you bypass across the waterhole and come to the Garden of Neyestan as a leisurely stroll. It's practically just a few horse steps away from your palace.” He shrugged.

“What? No way!” Mary exclaimed. “I've been walking for hours!”

“Hours? Didn't you get my message? The Garden of Neyestan?”

“Yes! And that's where I went. Passed the Big Waterhole. The first garden I found.”

Aaron touched his temple and shut his eyes in embarrassment.

“Oh Lady Mary. I'm so sorry. No, no. That's not what I meant. I meant the first waterhole. A short distance from your palace. It's right on the Fringe area of the Red Kingdom.”

“The waterhole by my palace? You mean...the lily pond?”

Aaron smiled oafishly. "We've always just called them waterholes."

"Oh...Oh. Jeepers." Mary, held her head in frustration. "I am so stupid. Just knowing that could have saved me all this trouble."

Aaron tried hard not to laugh. "Where did you end up going?"

"Uhh...passed the garden, into the forest, near the mountains, kind of all over the place," Mary said in shame. "I ran into a witch. And that really stressed me out."

Aaron's eyes lit up. "Oh wow! Did you walk all the way to the Garden of *Nehustan*?" Aaron shook his head, feeling the danger even far removed from the scene. "Nehustan is NOT Neyestan. Nehustan is the *Snake Garden*."

Aaron raised his brow and Mary collapsed into giggles. "You would have had to have walked in a giant circle...or more like a giant number nine shape to reach the mountains and then arrive back at the Snake Garden." Aaron tried to stop smiling for the sake of the poor lost girl but couldn't help but eye Mary in snickering admiration.

"Ohhh my Dog! That explains everything. Wow. That was unbelievably dumb of me. I think I'm going to drown in the waterhole now. You got any rocks I can borrow?"

Aaron laughed with her, politely tapping her on the shoulder. "It's all right."

"It was really dumb, I know."

"No, no. Please stop saying that. It's...quite amazing, actually."

"Huh?"

Aaron smiled back, a calm gaze in his eyes. "That you were willing to walk so far and among such great danger, just to meet me. That's *amazing*."

A timid Mary tried to smile back.

"You displayed a lot of courage and initiative. I've never met a princess who was so...bold."

"Bold? Me?" she laughed. "I don't think bold is the word I would use..."

"I suspect we're going to be spending a lot of time together, Lady Mary," Aaron said strongly, before cowering away in shyness. A cute face that forgave his silly comment.

"Yeah. Arranged marriage and all."

He laughed and tilted his head up, chagrined and nodding. "Well, yes. You got me there."

"Sorry. I thought you were joking. Umm, yeah. The Marriage Treaty is kind of weird. At first it really bothered me. But I did some soul-searching...and now..." she smiled and concluded with a nod.

"What?"

## The Evil Princess

“Ah...it’s nothing.”

“No, tell me.”

“Ummm...don’t get a big head, okay?”

Aaron laughed. “I’ll try not to.”

“But, well...no girl expects the man she’s forced to marry is going to be handsome and rich...and nice.”

“Ah. And I suppose a princess only admires power?”

“No, no. That’s not it. It’s just...like you said, ‘amazing’ to find a prince nowadays that just wants to be nice. It’s never part of the job, you know?”

Aaron smiled back, just short of gushing, since that wasn’t becoming of a prince, or of any man who just met a pretty girl.

However, there was something truly inspiring about Mary and something noble about Aaron. As he helped her inside his carriage, manning the horse whom he introduced as “Boxer”, she felt safe.

“Well, if I can say something too...off the record, of course,” he said with a chuckle. “No big heads...”

“Of course. Holding onto my head!” Mary said, grabbing her head in jest.

“It’s always nice when the woman you’re betrothed to is smart. It’s a huge relief, actually,” he laughed.

“Aww, thanks.”

“I mean, every man appreciates beauty. And uh, well, obviously you are beautiful.”

“Oh, thank you.” she said.

“Well, yeah,” he said with a gulp. “I mean when I first saw you, it was like...” He laughed and made a mock gesture of wiping his forehead. “Whew! A relief? An arranged marriage and you figure you’re going to paired up with an ogre. But you are gorgeous.”

“Really? Me?” she asked politely beaming, but trying to hide it.

“Yes. But at the same time, beauty isn’t everything. Beauty doesn’t last forever. A graceful woman, a smart woman, really is something special.”

“Well, I’m glad I fooled you!” Mary said, followed by a nervous laugh.

“No, no, don’t put yourself down.” Aaron smiled.

“When your parents have been ‘searching for you for so many years, matchmaking, negotiating...and I have to memorize corny lines like ‘You’re a priceless treasure! You are the most perfect of all God’s creatures!’” He respired and laughed.

“I know!” Mary said affably, matching Aaron’s own natural excitement. “It’s like, you’re under so much pressure to make really

intelligent conversation. All of a sudden, it's like, "So what do you think of the Mienien Genocide of '23..."

Aaron listened and stretched his smile into a wince.

"Oh...I can't believe I said that. I totally said the only thing my mom told me not to say."

"Ah. It's all right. Just...you know, a bunch of people died," Aaron said, tilting his head.

"Yeah," Mary nodded respectfully. "Sad."

"Well, genocides usually are."

"True, true. Can't think of any funny genocides that happened in history."

"...Well, the Yeold Genocide of '14 was kind of funny."

"Really?" she asked in confusion.

"Yeah. The kingdom that lost the war had an economy almost exclusively based on pies and cake frosting. They had lost so much money in recession they resorted to using their desserts as weapons. 'A giant food fight', some insensitive reporters in the media labeled it..." Aaron said with a stern expression.

"Oh, I see," Mary said uncertainly. "But...doesn't genocide mean mass murder? How did they kill each other with...?"

"I'm pulling your leg, Mary."

"Oh..."

Aaron and Mary stared at each other a long moment before erupting into spurts of laughter.

"There was no Yeold Genocide of '14," a giggling Aaron said. "I just wanted to see if you'd try to bluff your way through it."

"Ohhh, another test!" Mary said merrily. "You and your tests!" She said, giving him a light and flirty slap to his forearm.

"Sometimes you just need a good laugh. It gives you back your broken heart," Aaron said with a smile. "The real Mienien Genocide of '23 was a terrible tragedy. But some of the survivors, to this day, still have a healthy sense of humor. It helps."

"I'm so sorry," Mary exclaimed. "I didn't mean any disrespect. You know, about the Mieniens. The tribe or the uh, city of Mieniens who were umm...yeah. Sorry, I just get really nervous and then my brain and mouth get crossed. I end up saying the thing I'm thinking and trying not to say and thinking the words I should be saying. Yeah, I think I'll just shut up now. Stop talking, Mary! You're making it worse!" Mary laughed nervously.

"It's all right," Aaron said with a smiling head shake. "I get it. You don't like politics. Actually, it's kind of nice to stop talking about politics for once. Put away the speeches, cut out all the politically

## The Evil Princess

correct crap. Just talk person to person.”

“Person to person, huh?”

“Yeah. Hey, why don’t you say something un-princess like?”

She laughed. “Un-princess like? Umm, I really got to pee.”

Aaron chortled. “There you go.”

“No wait, I’ll put it in Gold talk,” Mary laughed uninhibitedly. “I regret to inform you I am being unduly pressured to urinate,” Mary said with an affected voice.

Aaron laughed hard and stared at Mary, impressed at her audacity.

“Oh wow...that was so inappropriate...I’m so sorry!” Mary said, shaking her head in embarrassment.

“That was *Gold Talk*, wasn’t it?” Aaron said merrily, referring to the way outsiders always mocked the Gold Kingdom’s notorious hauteurl. “It’s only funny because it’s true.”

He whispered in jest, holding his hand close to his mouth. “That’s exactly what my mother says every time she has to go.”

Aaron brought Princess Mary back to the Crimson Palace and allowed her time to bathe and redress herself in a duplicate of the Water Fountain Dress, created at the request of Lilith for the somewhat likely event of Mary screwing up the first encounter. After dinner, Queen Lilith excused herself, that Mary and Aaron might spend some quality time together before Aaron bid goodnight.

“What are you thinking now?” Aaron asked, sitting back and relaxing at the banquet table.

“I was actually wondering if you’re a singer or non-singer. I have a singing habit. It’s getting worse. And it really bothers people sometimes.”

Aaron laughed. “Not to worry. We have designated singing and no singing sections in our palace.”

“Good deal.”

Aaron tilted his head in wonder. “Say...that witch didn’t hurt you, did she?”

Mary thought it over. “No.”

He eyed his fork. “Because it’s my responsibility from now on to make sure nothing ever happens to you.”

Mary smiled, accepting his chivalry. “Well...she didn’t hurt me. Maybe just bruised my pride.”

“I see. Well, you should pay her a second visit then. And let her know what’s what.”

“Oh yeah?”

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

“You’re my girl, Mary. And besides, witches have been told plainly they are not to inhabit any part of the forest or graveyards or briar patches. None of the Borderlands.”

“I know. That’s what I told her.”

“Well, if you want. You can tell her again. This time with my backing.”

“Good. I will.”

“Unless you want me to take care of it?”

Mary stared at his determined face for a moment and then objected. “No, I can handle it.”

“I’ll give you a witch kit for protection.”

“What is a witch kit?”

“Well, there are four different types of witches. Depending on what type she is, it’s either water, fire, exorcism or beheading.”

“Eew.”

Aaron shrugged, a bit proud of his war expertise. “So it’s just a starter kit of holy water, matches, spirit-repelling icons and charms and uh...well, a sword.” He smiled and lowered his eyes. “For obvious reasons.”

“Gross!” Mary replied.

“Don’t worry. Most witches are cowardly. They usually run away from you as soon as you show them the kit.”

Mary nodded in acceptance. How hard could it be? The witch didn’t scare easily that’s for sure, but she surely ought to have some fear of a Princess.

“Oh and this time, Mary. You go to her with a queen’s entourage. If you get my drift.”

Mary smiled, proud of her protector, this time more determined to stand up to the bully witch.

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## Chapter 5

### The Witch Hunter

*“At least we can all agree, from the farthest and most diverse kingdoms of Cadabra, that witches are savage and duplicitous creatures deserving nothing better than death. It is kind to offer them banishment from literate civilization. It is doubtful they have any supernatural abilities, from what science teaches us. However, witches have no allegiance to anyone but themselves. That alone makes them dangerous.”*

-Attributed to Queen Darwin IV

**M**ary traveled back to meet her at the Snake Garden the next morning, this time on a horse and this time accompanied with an entourage of Prince’s officials and guards. She imagined she looked quite intimidating this cheerful morning, accompanied by armored men and of course, a new royal dress specially made to

commemorate the engagement, or rather, the promise of an engagement to come.

Mary's new dress, "The Witch Hunter", was an exercise in confidence and designed exclusively by the Golden Elite's team of weeping virgins, who chose to leave the Red's mad poets out of the equation and create a wardrobe of blue ice, swift and cold justice, the likes of which should scare a witch into cooperating.

Mary's multi-layered outfit represented the spiritual armors she wore when facing adversity: crafty strategizing, the terror of her royal name, her efficacious managerial style and an unquestioning devotion to her kingdom and soon-to-be husband.

As if to say, *I really am a princess*, she wore a chemise undergarment first, which covered her calf-length drawers. Then, she squeezed into a life-threatening corset on top of that which firm back lacing and a front busk closure, which, given the discomfort no doubt lent a queen much of their ire. The Under Petticoat came next—actually three layers of starched petticoats, in order to build a heavier skirt and create a grand dame elephantine appearance.

The crinoline came next, helping to make hoops out of Mary's thin hips, then the Over Petticoat with an elaborately embroidered hem, featuring a series of holy Xs in preparation of a holy crusade. The final layer, Gothic Teal Terror, consisted of a three-tier pleated overskirt with a jacket-style front bodice with capped long sleeves. The Virgins even proclaimed the skirt "brilliant enough to either scare a witch or thoroughly arouse the Devil...but preferably the former," or so they said in jest.

While her undergarments were blue, she mixed teal and dark peacock satin with black silver and sparkling lace, taunting the witch's own colors. Her black sequin trim and black beaded fringes only emphasized just how committed she was to scaring away the intruder and standing up to Aaron's army as a fiercely independent woman.

Mary dismounted the horse as she approached the garden, sure enough the same spot where she had been terrorized by all those hideous animals, the least of which was not the witch herself. She breathed in deeply through her nose, summoning up the courage to face the King's Vizier, who seemed almost as intimidating as the witch.

He told her his name was Rivulet, the Head of the Prince's Court. Something about Rivulet seemed off and he made no effort to seem trustworthy, with his shifty eyes, unusually skinny head and with those very slow and deliberate phrasings that the House of Opula loved. He wore nothing of interest, only white wool, gold and little imagination, as all the men wore.

## The Evil Princess

“Shall we burn this place to the ground, Your Highness?”

“Not yet. Give me a moment alone with her.”

Rivulet waited with his entourage, allowing Mary to gather her bearings and walk forward into the empty garden. No one was in sight, but this certainly felt like the creepy ambiance she remembered. She took a deep gulp as she spotted a small cave just a few steps beyond the west end of the garden, probably big enough for a cove.

Rivulet’s oddly shaped head was still in sight, so there was little threat of danger. She decided to enter the cave and test her own sense of power.

She cleared her throat for the benefit of the cave’s inhabitants. No one answered and so she walked forward, taking a look inside. There were definite signs of life, with drawings of witch family, a cabinet of potions, a series of tacked magic spells and some sort of evil inspiration board with drawings of terrible smiles and slanted eyes.

Mary spoke firmly. “I thought I made it clear that you were supposed to clear out of here? Yes, witch, I’m talking to you.”

The witch emerged from blackness, rubbing her eyes and slowly pacing forward. Apparently, Mary awoke her from a deep sleep. Not only the eyes told her that but the very revealing and inappropriate leaf nightgown confirmed her suspicion.

“Oh...there you are,” Mary said, doing a double take on that strange, skimpy outfit that didn’t leave much of the witch’s bouncy bosom to the imagination.

The young hag had no sense of irony but a lack of resources and so literally pieced together her sleeping outfit from discarded green leaves using pine and wood resins. First, she glued a bunch of leaves together to form a thong shape, followed by a thinner line of single file leaves acting as a generous waistband for her plus-size hips and another fig cord for her spooky bubble butt. The leaves covering her bosom plunged low and trailed down halter-top style and reaching about halfway down her abdomen, ending at her scandalously exposed belly button. The vine leaf asymmetrical shoulder strap was a nice touch and the suit was definitely recyclable, if nothing else.

“You seem under-dressed. Did I wake you?”

“Yeah...” she said, holding her hair and forehead as if hung over. “I was astral traveling to the Lost Land of Niya. You know how much of a hangover I get when I’m yanked out of First Class Third Heaven?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mary said coldly. “But I am here to officially ban you from this premises. You are a witch and by law your presence is not allowed. You have two weeks to vacate the premises.”

“What?”

Mary handed her a royal decree scroll. “Read this.”

The witch took the scroll and read it, still holding her head. Mary meanwhile was mesmerized by the witch’s leaf outfit. It looked more like some sort of witch lingerie than the royal pajamas she was accustomed to wearing. “What in the world are you wearing?”

“What?” she replied. “My underwear. You barge in here unannounced like a big fat battleship and surprise, I didn’t get all dressed up for you.”

“I am not fat!” Mary exclaimed, that being the one definite thing she could say for herself. “I am wearing like, a dozen petticoats!”

Mary cringed when the black cat once again wandered over and began rubbing up against her.

“Okay, okay, okay” the witch said, flipping through the scroll and then handing it back. “Finished.”

“So? Are you going to leave willingly?”

The black haired creep met Mary’s eyes to deliver the news. “Uh, short answer: NO. Long answer: Shove this stupid decree where the sun don’t shine and when you’re finished doing that, suck an egg while stuffing your crappy *attitude* up your ear. Good day, Lady Mary of the House of Major Stick Up Your Butt.”

Mary’s jaw dropped again. “I can’t believe what I am hearing! Don’t you know that I have power over your life and death? I am engaged to Prince Aaron of the House of Opula. With one word, the king’s guard outside will set fire to everything.”

“You think I’m afraid of you? Or of them? Or of Aaron? Puh-leeze,” the witch cachinnated. “You’re far too cutesy and prissy to intimidate me, Little Miss Blue.”

Mary flinched, unsure of what to do now, since the witch obviously didn’t fear anything, let alone a princess with low self-esteem.

“Well...well...well!” was all she could manage.

“Well, well, well. I think I’ll call you Candy-Cane from now on,” the evil one taunted. Little Miss Candy Cane. How do you like that? Now’s the part where you break out your witch kit and try to scare me. But I’ll save you the time,” she said with a pointed finger. “Those witch kits don’t work. You pull it out I’m just going to laugh. So I suggest you save us both time and embarrassment and you go tell Little Prince Hollow Head that I *refuse to move*.”

The witch folded her arms but Mary remained silent. “This has been my family’s cave for two generations,” she said.

## The Evil Princess

“If your two kingdoms have a problem with stuff that doesn’t concern them, then maybe they just take themselves way too seriously.”

“But this is not your territory!”

“Do you own it?”

“The Kingdom of Blood has a legitimate claim to it. So yes, you could say that I will own it.”

“And do you live here? Do you even care what happens here? Do you know the animals who live here?” the witch inquired.

“The animals? Oh, I suppose you know the animals?”

“*Yeah*, I do. So Little Miss Candy Cane, get over yourself and stop being a demented, hormonal psycho *bitch*.”

“What did you call me?” Mary asked, her innocent face scandalized by the feral thoughts.

“Do you really want me to say it again?”

“No, the first thing. Candy-Cane? Why am I a Candy Cane?”

“Oh,” the witch said with a grin. “That’s my nickname for you. I just figure it fits since you’re from the Kingdom of Blood which is red, but you’re engaged to the Gold Kingdom, who wears white. So it’s basically just a reference to the huge stick up your butt.”

Mary shuddered in outrage. “Such vulgarities!”

“Oh yeah, right,” the witch said with a squint of her cunning eyes. “Such barbaric behavior, so unbecoming of royalty!” The witch leaned in closer into Mary’s space and spoke frankly. “Look, Princess. I don’t buy this act. My theory is that you’re a confused little girl being forced to marry a man she doesn’t love. All in the name of politics, not peace. So she’s angry at the world and angry at herself, that she doesn’t stand up and change things.”

Mary listened in silent resignation, but a stiff upper lip.

“And so she’s going to take it out on every witch, cat and rat that she meets. Because that’s all queens and princesses do, right? They eat, sleep, breed and bully other people.”

“Don’t call me Candy Cane,” Mary warned. “I don’t like that expression.”

“Oh? How about the other expression? The demented, hormonal psycho bitch part?” the witch said with a sinister grin.

Mary ignored her and chose to continue her less than grand inquisition. “So...you claim to know every animal in the garden? You know their story? I suppose they’re all your friends?”

“Not all of them. Some are just my acquaintances. The bear and I don’t always get along. Dingos are kind of rude. Snakes are just sick little perverts in general,” she said, shaking her head in serpentine judgment. “But some of them, yeah, they are my friends.”

“Well, where I come from animals serve only one purpose. To feed us,” Mary said matter-of-factly. “They don’t feel any pain. They don’t have any thoughts. Are witches too poverty-stricken or proud to eat meat?”

“This witch is. I eat plants. Grains. Fruits. And don’t forget, *spices*, which are the secret ingredient that brings it all to life. So to speak.”

“You don’t eat meat?” Mary asked in disbelief.

“Never. My parents didn’t and her parents didn’t.”

The very thought offended the princess. “So how did you not, you know, die?”

“Because Candy-Cane, we ate healthy food. If all you eat is meat every day of your life you’re going to do damage to your heart. Not to mention your breath will smell like pig’s butt. But more importantly, I don’t eat animals because most of them are my friends.”

Mary looked miffed as she self-consciously held her hand over her mouth, wondering of the state of her own breath. “Oh and I suppose you know all of this because you talk to animals.”

“Sometimes,” she replied honestly.

“That’s ridiculous,” Mary replied, superstitiously flinching at the idea that it could be the truth. “Animals can’t talk.”

“All animals talk,” the demonness said. They have a secret language they use to communicate with each other. But when they talk to humans, you can hear them. Listen.”

The cat meowed loudly and stared at Mary in wide-eyed attention.

Mary felt slightly chilled at the intensely staring cat. “What-What is it saying?”

The cat meowed again, this time in an inquisitive tone, or so Mary gathered, since it continued to stare at her wanting an answer.

“I admit sometimes I don’t know,” the witch said, “But I know a little magic. So when I really don’t know I just kind of cheat and cast a little spell...”

With no warning, the witch took her hand—surprisingly not withered but with very smooth and healthy skin—and sprinkled glowing dust on the cat.

“*Abra Catadabra Feline Benign Guinness Tennis Dogs Bollocks Cogs Frolics!*” she chanted.

The cat meowed loudly until his guttural natural voice lowered in pitch, simulating a familiar style. “*Meeeeeooohhh, I do say, I really am looking forward to mealtime. Aren’t you?*”

Mary jumped back, eyes flinching and clasping the stone wall.

“You’re talking!”

## The Evil Princess

“Well, of course, my dear,” the cat replied, taking on the voice of a distinguished gentleman, very appropriate to royalty, actually. “Are you listening for once?”

“I...I didn't know cats could talk,” Mary replied.

“Oh. You mean the whole speaking English thing.” The cat stretched his face into something very much like a smile, which further terrified Mary. “We can't.”

Mary's panic soared and she backed away, gaping at the talking cat.

The feline feigned concern. “Does that bother you?”

“I...I...I don't know! I think I'll be leaving now?”

Before Mary could sneak away, the vulture from the earlier incident reared his very ugly head and rasped. However, his rasp soon changed into something more common and cocky. “Eeey, Princess. Who said anything about you leaving?” the bird with an attitude curiously remarked. “I know you're just going to run home and guzzle up some of my turkey cousins!”

Mary turned around and screamed backing away from the vulture and holding her two index fingers together.

“I think she's scared of us, she's giving us the Holy X. I guess she's not used to her meals talking back!” the grinning vulture said.

“Ohh, who can blame her?” the cat said, deferring judgment of a woman he just met but instantly loved. “She has lived a rather sheltered life, hasn't she? I do believe this is her first exposure to any-thing outside of her Royal Family lifestyle.”

The bat also began to speak, though he took on a deep and brooding voice, hollering his thoughts like a barking grizzly crossed with an old ranch hand.

“*Your reign of evil is over, Clown Princess Mary!* I am the Night. I am the avenging angel who will take you down. I am the hero this cave deserves and the one it needs.”

The bat wrapped his wings around its tiny body, but did so very well, in true superheroic fashion.

The snake also hissed out a few words, having a distinctly smooth and saccharine timber in his voice. “What do you say, Lady M? How about you try putting *me* in your mouth?” He finished his foreboding threat with a pair of slanting, haunting yellow eyes.

“No! No!”

Just as Mary began to reach a new peak of bewilderment, she looked down and saw that dreadful rat again, its little snout enunciating words.

“...Heeeey sexy.”

Mary yowled and threw her arms in the air, dropping the royal decree scroll. She flashdanced her way to the entrance and screamed all the way back to her party, her terrified voice growing faint—and sounding funnier by the second.

The witch chuckled. “Really guys? The first time a girl ever hears an animal talk and you got to be so doggone creepy about it?”

“Well, I felt she was being rather antagonistic, wouldn’t you say?” said the cat.

The vulture was also unapologetic. “Do you really think she would have freaked out any less if we said, ‘Hello! Would you like a glass of red wine?’”

The bat was especially harsh on the girl. “I know her type. She is a cowardly, superstitious spoiled princess. She will never change.”

“Yeah, her type and our type will never get along,” the snake said with a head swirl.

“Well guys, it’s not like you ever gave her a chance.” the witch said with an out-of-nowhere pout.

“What do you mean?”

“I dunno. I’m just saying...I was trying to talk to her. I was trying to make a new friend. And you scared her away. Snakey, you were the worst.”

The snake jolted his head back and answered defensively. “Well, what I said was true! Do you know that humans make carrying cases out of my lizard cousins?”

“Yeah. I just think it wouldn’t be such a terrible thing to make a few human friends now and then,” the witch said, sitting down on her wicker chair and holding her chin.

The animals stared a long and quiet moment. Followed by teasing, whooping and yes, catcalling.

“What?” she asked, tongue in cheek and raising her eyebrows.

“Ohhhh, I see what happened. We chased away your special ‘human friend.’”

You were just reeling in them humans, weren’t ya? Don’t hate the playa. Hate the game,” the snake said with a wink.

“Mercy, heavens!” the cat exclaimed, “I truly do apologize if we put a damper on your friendly human dinner plans, my love. We really should learn boundaries. Perhaps you ought to leave a sign on the cave entrance suggesting that we, ah, ‘Don’t come a knockin?’”

The witch grinned and blushed a little, getting out of her chair and wandering away from them. “Now you guys are just being mean.”

## The Evil Princess

The bat was feeling less whimsical about the precarious situation. "I don't trust her," he said with a scowl. "I think she knows something she's not telling us. There's something else."

"Guys, don't get all weird on me," the pale woman said with a nervous shrug. "I wasn't talking about you know, romance or anything. That would be weird. Right? Yeah, just weird."

"Oh we know, luv," the cat assured her. "We just know how you humans love to make friends and hug each other and touch each other. Your human bodies require so much unconditional love. It is something cats and humans have in common. Hmm," he said, as he rubbing up against her very human leg.

"Yeah. But I don't think she and I can ever be human friends..."

"Why not?"

"We are...um..." she replied quizzically. "Different?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know..." But the animals listened in clueless wonder. A few of them tightened their eyes and looked at each other to see if they were missing something.

"I'm confused," the vulture said, speaking on behalf of the animal counsel. "If two humans want to be friends, why is it weird? You can be friends with vultures, snakes, cats...even filthy disgusting rats."

"I object to your use of the word *disgusting*," the rat reminded the vulture. "I find it offensive."

"Okay, just filthy," the vulture said in compromise.

"I can live with that," the rat said.

"Well, I do know that some species are very, how shall we say, indiscriminating?" the cat remarked. "Take snakes, for instance. They love everybody. And they want to eat everybody and everything. They are very, very *lonely*, if you get my drift."

"Hey, I resent that stereotype!" the snake said.

"Even if it's true, I resent it!" another snake said.

"I resent it because it's not true!" added another snake.

"I just resent everything because I'm a snake!" exclaimed the next.

"Guys, guys, relax!" the witch tittered. "You don't understand. It's not that hard to make a human friend. But it's more difficult to make a...a 'soul mate' friend."

"A soul mate?" the cat asked. "You mean...a very close friend. Like you and I are soul mates?"

"Uhhh...something like that. All I'm saying is that she's a princess. And I'm a witch. We can't be friends. We're too different. I guess some people just have to learn to be lonely. You know?"

The witch said a mouthful and retreated back down to her chair, looking a bit dejected. She grabbed her broom and clutched onto it, avoiding the looks of pity coming from her very platonic friends.

“Sometimes you just have to wait. You learn to listen to nothing and enjoy it. Sometimes...sometimes...”

The air cleared and suddenly everything seemed brighter and the sounds of nature began to tide and ebb like incidental music.

*“Obhhhh It’s been so long since...since...”*

## **“WHEN YOU SPEAK I LISTEN”**

*When you speak I listen*

*When you’re silent I wait*

“Hey! Wait a second!”

The cadences quickly stopped and the witch dropped her swaying arms. “What?”

“Are you trying to sing? Hey, you told me you were quitting that stuff, girl!” the rat said derisively pointing his little rat claw in disapproval.

“No breaking out into song!” the vulture concurred. “Come on, you have a three-month streak going!”

“I wasn’t going to sing! I promise,” the witch replied, folding her arms.

“Be honest with me,” the rat said. “Have you been singing outside the cave when we’re all asleep?”

The witch unfolded her arms and hid her shamed face in her hands. “Just once or twice.”

“Girl, you know singing to yourself is addictive,” the vulture said. “Prolonged exposure to second hand melodies can cause depression and insanity!”

“And it does terrible things to your lungs,” warned the cat.

She rolled her eyes and the animals booed and literally hissed at the confession.

“You are such an addict,” the bat concluded in judgment.

“Junkie! Singing junkie!” the snake said.

“Give me the sheet music right now!” the vulture demanded, even as the surreal and flighty ambiance died down.

## The Evil Princess

While the witch and her animal troupe discussed addiction and the calming but ultimately damaging effect singing without an orchestra had on the human psyche, Aaron escorted a pouting and quiet Mary on the carriage ride home, back to the Crimson Palace.

“Did everything go okay with the ‘guest?’” Aaron asked cautiously.

“Oh. The witch.”

Aaron nodded with a smile. “Was she cooperative?”

“Uh...yeah sort of,” Mary said diffidently. “I told her what’s what. I laid down the law. You know. Queen-like stuff. I really scared her. She ran through the cave looking like a...complete idiot.”

Mary nodded in self-loathing.

“Ah, good,” he replied with uncertainty. “Well, by law, you have to make sure that she really has vacated the Borderlands within two weeks. Otherwise, someone could say you are helping an enemy of the state.”

“Oh jeepers.” Mary slouched in her carriage seat and grabbed her ears in regret. “I have to go back again? I kind of left her on bad terms...if you know what I mean.”

“No, it’s okay,” Aaron said strongly. “I’ll go on your behalf. I’ll take care of it.”

Mary felt relieved. However, as she pondered it over, the thought of Aaron confronting the witch seemed worrisome. The visuals, the anticipation, she found it all unnerving. The more she thought about it, the more this became her own personal quest for dignity.

“You know what? Maybe I should just go back and see for myself.”

“Why?”

“Because...I don’t want to be one of those wives who makes her husband do everything for her. I have to face my fears, you know.”

“Oh, I see. I respect that.” The future king nodded happily. “Just take my guards with you to be safe. Chances are, she’ll be long gone. She already knows we’re coming after her. I don’t think she wants another confrontation.”

“Yeah, I mean it would just be more awkward than scary. I don’t think she wants to hurt me or anything like that.”

“What is her name?”

That sentence, that very thought, hit Mary like a slap to the face.

“What?”

“The Witch. Does she have a name? Maybe I’ve heard of her.”

One long pause later, Mary was in deep and flinching thought.

“Oh wow...I...guess I’ve never asked her name.”

Aaron grinned and then lowered his eyes in disbelief.

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

“So you just called her ‘witch’? I guess your relationship never started off on the right foot, did it?”

“No...now that you mention it. Ughh.”

Mary held her hand over her head, replaying the last two encounters in her mind and for once, feeling something more than personal violation. The more she thought it over, the more terrible it looked, it seemed, it played out.

“I’m such an idiot. You should know that about me. If we’re going to date and have lots of children, you should know I’m an idiot,” she said with a forced smile.

“Oh come on now,” Aaron said with a broad smile and a straight glance forward. “You’re new at this diplomacy game. I understand. I’ll tell you what. Give her two more weeks. She might be long gone by then. Or, if she’s still there, you try to make peace with her. Call her by her name. Tell her that you’re trying to help her stay alive, that you’re not going to turn her in, as long as she vacates. You see, in the most polite way possible...you’re telling her to scram.”

Aaron and Mary laughed at the foolishness of it all, the farce that was her “diplomacy.” However, Mary dreaded the third encounter, not only because of the witch’s mean streak and those creepy talking animals, but also because of those blasted green eyes. Every time the witch stared back at her, her mad green eyes made contact and they unsettled Mary like nothing ever before.

Alas, she figured, if she was to be a queen some day, she would have to stare at all sorts of people with strange eyes, strange shapes and hideous voices. Not that the witch’s voice was hideous—it actually sounded the opposite of the stereotype. She had always heard witches, at least the ones in theater, as shrill and frantically speaking beings. This witch spoke differently. She almost talked like a human being. Maybe this problem could have a peaceable solution after all, she thought and so the great diplomatic experiment continued.

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## Chapter 6

### Hero Interrupted

*“When one commits a random act of heroism, one wonders what debt has been requested through such an act. Committing unlawful and highly suspect acts of kindness, without thoroughly explaining the contractual obligations that follow, is the quintessence of rude behavior.”*

-Attributed to Queen Jaquie

**T**wo weeks passed quickly, as they usually do when one is stressed, and Mary made her way back to the Snake Garden with a mission on her mind. True to word, the Royal Guard of Prince Aaron accompanied her on this occasion and once again the ornery thin-headed man Rivulet accompanied her, his shifty eyes and devilish goatee never looking more inappropriate than at this moment.

Mary's stomach was stretching up into her throat and it was not an emotion she hid well. Her carefully selected dress seemed to suggest the triumph of bashfulness over fear.

Mary decided that the warrior witch hunter look wasn't quite right, especially for a lonely young hag she had, well, "bullied" for lack of a kinder term. The witch wasn't totally undeserving of censure, least of all for that highly improper leaf gown, but she did deserve a second chance. Everyone does, Mary figured.

This time when Mary left her palace to find the witch, she decided to bond with her fellow female, wearing something smaller or even verecund, hence the creation of "The Blue Angel", an astounding mistake. The Virgins of the Gold Kingdom weren't quite sure what female bonding entailed, they being ever so catty with each other because of a lack of male presence in their lonesome lives, so they designed a stunning hourglass silhouette with a strapless sheath and a mermaid-like sack bottom, well representing the skeletons, secrets and solitude waiting underneath Lady Mary's undergarments.

The royal blue dress accentuated the princess's curves beyond what Mary was comfortable with and so she requested a celeste-colored capelet, constructed from the top down in silk knitting yarn with in a simple feather and fan pattern, but with a ruffled bottom edge and a lace neckline. It was wide enough to hide most of her indecency but also lent her a wondrous glow and a scintillating glimpse into what lay beneath, given yarn's see-through quality.

Mary also had her hair gelled for standing up volume and cut just enough to create shelf bangs. She threw in extra eye shadow with liner to make her eyes even bigger, which would hopefully endear another female to her, empathizing with her. In her hair, she wore a single pseudanthium golden yellow flower, which almost matched the size of her petite head. Mary seemed happy with the dress and the matching turquoise sandals, taking the virgins' warning that "This might be a bit *too persuasive...*" as a strong vote of confidence.

"Soooo," Rivulet said with a gentle tease. "It appears there might be someone in the cave. Are you going to face your fears and rise to the occasion this time, Your Highness?"

"Yes," she answered assertively.

Rivulet couldn't wipe the grin off his face. "Or do you need *us* to take care of this for you?"

"No, not at all. I am more than capable of handling this myself."

"Of course you are," the man said with slink of his eyes.

"As a matter of fact, I am dismissing you. I can ride a horse home by myself."

## The Evil Princess

“I’m afraid leaving you unsupervised is not ‘royal procedure,’” he reminded the suddenly snippy princess.

“I want privacy for this. I think the witch and I have formed a sort of...mutual bond of respect? I don’t want all these guards and soldiers to freak her out.”

Rivulet’s smile seemed painfully stretched and unsatisfied. “So what. It’s just a witch. Let’s burn her and go home early. They’re roasting a nice fat pig tonight I hear.”

Mary flinched at the thought. “I can handle this myself. Two kingdoms have already settled their differences without war. I owe it to the people to find a peaceful solution.”

“All right, Your Highness,” Rivulet sighed. “Do as you please. We will be up there, by the lake, watering down our horses. And our restless young men too.”

That last comment seemed cheeky and Mary noticed that many of the men were chuckling as they watched her, taking their horses over for a rest. Clearly, no one respected Mary and least of all the foul-mouthed creature inside the cave.

Mary journeyed slowly away from the prince’s guard and towards the cave. She played the part of strong and fearless, but struggled to keep from jumping at every turn. One particular noise spooked her, a crinkling sound as if some presence were alarmed and eyeing her in aggression. Then she saw the horror: only a cockroach who waved its antennae in curiosity. Thankfully, it did not speak.

She relaxed her shoulders and continued to press ahead. She entered quietly, hoping the witch had already “scrammed” days ago. Nobody seemed to be rustling about inside. There was no evidence of furniture or utensils, at least in the front corridor. There wasn’t even the faintest of sounds. Had she gotten her wish?

Still, something didn’t feel right. For a moment, she stared into the darkness hole of the cave, unsatisfied. Maybe she wanted one more word with the witch. Perhaps she was ready to apologize. Or could it be she wanted comeuppance, that she wanted the witch to humble herself and plead for her life?

She looked back into the blackness one more time, or maybe two more times, but decided to exit. It certainly appeared that the witch had vacated and that was certainly good enough for a report.

When Mary walked outside the cave and back into the forest, she saw a group of white-dressed soldiers standing around in patience and holding their weapons closely. The soldiers seemed to be smiling and yet their movements were not jovial or relaxed. Something definitely felt wrong.

“Guard? I thought I told you to...”

Suddenly, a foreigner’s face gazed in her direction. His face was harsh and his eyes were menacing. Worse yet, his complexion was alien. They all looked that way, stereographically shaped and shaded. Richer colors, haunting deep skin blemishes, thicker cheeks and deeper wrinkles—wrinkles on their weathered and fully rendered faces. Their eyes were also double the size of most of the people she had seen emerging from the Golden Family and her own Kingdom of Blood. Their hair was the most hideous sight; darker in tone but minutely detailed in ways that men’s hair ought not be. They wore white and were impersonating the prince’s guard, but their vertical half masks quickly revealed them to be of another allegiance.

“*Told us what, your majesty?*” the syrupy voice asked, coming from the grinning mouth of their ringleader.

“Who...who are you?” A gulping Mary began walking backwards.

“Oh haven’t you heard?” the strange-looking man stated, walking aggressively to remain close. “There are more powers that be in this great land of ours than your Two Kingdoms.”

Mary walked backwards for a few more steps before deciding to turn around and run. But it was too late, as the guards quickly surrounded her and began encompassing her in a shrinking, circular fashion.

“We are The Revolution. I am Dark Wraith, the Executive Chief. We have no kings or queens. We fight for the people. The people outside of royalty.”

Mary looked around at inevitable doom as the man continued spouting his biography.

“Revolutionary warriors who are tired of your kingdoms pillaging the land and leaving all the rest of humanity to die. We are Blackness, we are Chaos.”

The princess tilted her head and begged apology with her wide and teary, but-still-much-smaller eyes than these new multi-dimensional people.

“It’s a small world, Princess, when you finally leave the protection of your golden-red palaces behind and mingle with the commoners.”

“Please...what-what do you want from me?”

“What makes you think we want something?” he asked, slanting those eyes to scary and unnatural dimensions. “Maybe we will just *take something*. Maybe we just want to start another war by delivering your broken body to your father.”

Mary blinked rapidly and fought off a pang of dread.

“Guards? Rivulet? *Anyone?*”

## The Evil Princess

Mary backed away but only came closer to the revolutionaries closing in from behind.

“No one is going to help you,” he growled. “You’ve made a bed of nails...now you’re going to lie in it.”

There was something else in his voice, yet another alien characteristic of this strange band of people. Even while his temperament glowered and his eyes promised pain, his voice seemed almost playful. He hadn’t struck her yet. If he was such a beast of a man, why did he stall? It almost seemed as if The Revolution hadn’t thought this sinister plan through.

Still, as the soldiers grabbed their weapons and walked closer inch by inch, Mary decided not to risk beheading.

“Help me! Someone help meeeee!” she screamed into the night.

Her dramatic performance certainly didn’t go unnoticed. Back inside the cave, the witch and her black cat looked on, watching the scene unfold through a purple handheld magic mirror. They saw everything, from the moment these revolutionaries first appeared, down to Mary’s half-hearted attempt to force a third confrontation with her nemesis.

“Oh luv, don’t torment the poor girl any longer,” the cat chided her. “You know you’re going to help her. No matter what a big bad witch you are, I know you’re an old softie for a damsel in distress.”

The witch rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I probably will.”

The bat seemed less convinced of the moral obligation. “I say no. You don’t have to kill her. But you don’t have to save her either.”

“Oh Batsy, you are so bleak all the time!” she said with a wink.

By now Mary was praying to the sky, a strange maneuver she had never tried before, except only when confronted by certain death. It’s what her parents did, when faced with life-threatening danger. She wished for anything or anybody from anywhere to save her from a ghastly fate.

The cat walked outside the cave, in clear view of a confused Mary. The snake, rat, vulture and bat followed. Instead of making noise or objecting, they simply helped themselves to a better viewing angle of what was to take place. It seemed almost like a front row seat to tonight’s entertainment.

“Did I miss anything yet?” the cat whispered to his friends.

“No, it’s just starting.”

Within an instant, Mary and her captives were startled by a blood curdling demonic laugh. The EEEs of the witch's laugh were deafening, definitely a taunt to superior men who no longer feared the legend of the witch.

The voices of the soldiers panicked.

"What the-? What was that? That sounded like a...a w-w-witch?"

Only Dark Wraith seemed unprovoked at the sound, figuring it to be a sound effect or some other magician's trick.

"Witches? Don't be a fool. There is no such thing as a witch. It's a distraction."

"But I heard..."

Dark Wraith glowered in warning. "What are you afraid of? A woman in a black hat? Or her black hair? What do you think is going to happen, thunder and lightning—"

Ironic that he should say when he did, since a bolt of lightning struck just thirty horse steps from the cave, followed by the inevitable roar of thunder. On only a partly cloudy day, leaving the most superstitious guards with only one thought.

"It's a witch! A *real witch!*"

As the words left his quivering lips, the witch appeared above them, floating in the sky and twirling her legs as if swimming in air.

*"God save us! There she is! Retreat! Retreat! She's going to kill everybody!"*

Several double takes later, the witch still floated idly, at least five cubits up away from sword striking range. The closer they looked at her, the more intimidating she appeared. Her pupils expanded to demonic proportions leaving only thick black irises staring back. Her hair shifted and waved in the sky, despite there being no strong winds or storm in the otherwise peaceful night.

"Why are you afraid?" the Dark Wraith raged. "Last I heard, men *burn* witches. They don't run away in fear."

Just as he completed his threat, his body sprung up high into the air, rotating to an upside down position. He braced himself and with good reason. With a mere flick of her index finger, he was thrown harshly into the stone wall of the witch's cave. He landed rock-hard on the ground, taking the weight of the fall on his back, sparing his face.

The other revolutionaries backed away in terror.

When the witch spoke, a guttural rasp was heard coming from the sky—coming from the ground and spreading like aural wildfire. When words shot out of her mouth, a hundred other men and women spoke in unison and echoes came forth from the ground.

"YOU HAVE AWAKENED ME FROM A DEEP SLEEP AND NOW I MUST...FEED ON YOUR SOULS."

## The Evil Princess

*“Dear god, no! Run! Run, dammit run! She’s going to eat us! Reetreat!”*

Only one soldier had the courage to speak to her, to “it”, though he clutched his shield and his sword tightly, covering his face.

“We have no quarrel with you, witch! Let us return to our way and we will leave you be.”

“YOU HAVE WHAT I WANT. MY SISTERS AND I HAVE A SPECIAL INTEREST IN CAPTURING THIS ‘PRINCESS.’”

“But she is of no use to you!”

THEN WE’RE GOING TO HAVE TO AGREE TO DISAGREE. AREN’T WE, ASS-MONKEY?”

The witch’s final comment seemed unusually vulgar and childish for a demonic creature. Still, the soldiers wasted no time in scurrying away as the witch floated over to their fallen leader. She looked back at the group of soldiers, making sure they saw the grand climax.

She landed down at Dark Wraith’s fallen body. In a careless moment she leaned down and grabbed him by the throat. She lifted him to his knees, then his feet, then straight up above her into the air. She held him by one hand and chanted quietly, reciting a body-metamorphosis magic spell.

*Hmmm, nothing happened,* her confused face seemed to say. Apparently the Wraith and his people had invested in some sort of anti-witch cream or maybe an oral tablet. Regardless, his nearly lifeless body had been defeated and he only occasionally twitched. Still, she owed her theater guests a little more showmanship, so she let go of his throat and kept him suspended in the air, causing the remaining soldiers to shriek in ungodly terror.

She turned around back to her animals and waved her hands in applause. “Look ma, no hands!” she said in her natural voice.

The vulture laughed loudest. “I love when she breaks the fourth wall!”

Speaking of which, the wall did indeed break as parts of the cave wall began to shake and break away from the foundation, causing large rocks to come tumbling down after the frightened soldiers.

“Retreeeat!” they yelled among themselves, tripping over each other and the rolling stones, prostrating for mercy.

“Fine, witch. Take her. But know that in doing so you have angered the Revolution,” warned the last soldier, who admittedly seemed braver than the others. “We will remember this.”

“Oh look at me, I’m trembling with fear. I offended the Evolution!” she quipped, twirling her index finger until a dust cloud formed.

“No, the Revolution!”

“The Evolution? What are you going to do, evolve on me?”

“The Revolution, with an R!”

The witch watched in amusement as the cloud became a small cyclone and spun the soldier away, quickly catching up to his fellow cowards.

The witch looked around for Mary but she remained out of sight.

“Guess Candy Cane took off,” she remarked hoping the prissy princess could hear her.

Mary hadn’t run away but waited cautiously behind a nearby bush, watching the violent display unfold in awe and disbelief. She had always heard rumors of witches existing in the forests of Cadabra, namely that stories of their superpowers were embellished and that they were usually more annoying than deadly.

Mary’s eyes retreated as those hypnotic witchy green eyes made contact, her chest heaving hard from the fight and the thrill of being saved. But, by all forest creatures big and small, a witch?

“Oh there you are,” the witch said, quickly folding her arms. “You can come out now. They’re gone.”

Mary panted and squeezed her own neck in trepidation. She looked at the witch again, a bit differently. This time in amazement. All those powers she manifested, were in her defense. She protected the royal family better than all of Aaron’s guards.

“You all right? Hey, calm down, princess. Between the two of us you look possessed.”

“You...you saved me,” Mary gasped.

“Aww shucks,” the witch said with a wide and joyous grin. “I didn’t do anything special, little lady. Oh wait...*I did!* I totally saved your life.”

The witch giggled at her own cockiness, a less “evil” laugh and something like that of an ordinary human being. “I’m just awesome that way. No seriously, you owe me one forever.”

“But why...what...what do you want?” Mary asked in baby-faced suspicion, her voice raising a whole octave, anticipating what this hideous creature might ask for—to bargain with the devil himself?

“Huh? Oh, Mary. Get over yourself,” the black-topped woman responded. “I don’t want anything. It was the right thing to do. You would have done the same for me, yeah?” Every other word she spoke, she seemed less like a witch and more like her mother or friend. A human face that she suddenly could relate to, certainly more so than those freaky rainbow-colored revolutionaries.

Mary never answered the witch and seemed to stare in shame, questioning whether she would have ever saved a witch from certain and deserved death.

## The Evil Princess

“Well...I’d like to think you would, anyway,” the witch shrugged.

The animals whispered amongst themselves as the two women performed a live drama for their viewing amusement. “Oh this is where it gets interesting,” the vulture said excitedly, chomping down on some crunchy yellow flowers.

“Shhh! Down in front!” the Bat screamed.

“I love suspense! I love the drama!” the cat said purring himself into a titter.

“Guys, hush!” the witch whispered.

Mary heard everything and asked her new almost-human acquaintance just what she was witnessing. “Are...are they talking? Again?”

“It’s just a one-time spell but it lasts about a day. They like talking to me. But it’s sort of like catnip. You let them talk too much and they become spoiled brats.”

“Did she just insult us?” the rat asked.

“Boooo!” the vulture agreed.

“I don’t like it when the performer insults her audience,” the rat said with a firm nod.

“Hssss!” the snake added, quite literally.

Mary nodded in wild-eyed disbelief. “Yeah...look, I gotta go.”

“Awwright,” the witch shrugged, looking to the moon and acting like it was no big deal. “Maybe I’ll see you around sometime. You know, the next time you come barging in here and demanding I leave this land forever. You’re so charming when you’re threatening to burn my house down, you know.”

Mary had turned around to walk away but the comment stung and so she whipped around and met the woman’s eyes. “Yeah, well. We’re even now.”

Mary turned back around and prepared to walk away with some dignity left intact.

Something seemed off about the incident, however. She kept replaying the events in her head and the more she thought it over, the less heroic the witch’s actions seemed.

She turned around yet again and faced her “savior.”

“Hey...how did you know I was being attacked anyway?”

“What?”

“How did you know when to come rescue me? You waited until the very last second. Were you, like, *watching* me?”

“Oh. Uh...”

The witch looked bashfully back at her animals who only grinned mischievously in response.

“...”

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

Mary figured it out and had a full-body shudder at the creepy thought. “Wow. Oh my *Dog*. You were just...*watching me?*”

She stared at the witch and gave her a real “ick” face like only a real princess could give. The black-haired meanie had no response and gestured emptily hoping for some healing words. Alas...

“Okaaaaay now I am really creeped out! Staaaalker!” Mary taunted her, shaking her head in sarcasm and fleeing out of the cave.

“This is gratitude for you?” the witch yelled after her. “I save your life and now I’m creepy? I’m a weirdo?”

“I tell you, women today don’t appreciate chivalry the way they used to,” the cat pontificated.

“You said it, brother!” The witch high-fived his paw.

“Shhh! Some of us are still watching the drama!” the bat warned.

“And now the animals are talking again,” Mary laughed nervously. “Talking animals, soldiers kidnapping me, super powers and now I have a stalker. A witch stalker. I think I better go now and drink a bottle of wine...or six.”

The witch seemed annoyed by the point. “Fine, fine. Get out of here,” she said with a dismissive flick of her wrist. “And don’t let the door hit your cute little bum on the way out.”

“There isn’t a door, stupid. This is a cave!” Mary said victoriously, finally getting back some of that dignity. She stomped away, as is the royal trait, leaving the witch and her animals behind in the cold creepy coven they called a home.

“Well, she’s got you there. You live in a cave. You don’t have a door,” the vulture said, scoring points for the spoiled princess.

“Oh hush you! I’m going to install a door on my cave just so I can use that expression all the time.”

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## Chapter 7

### An Uneasy Truce

*“It’s amazing how much time has been wasted tiptoeing around the sensitivities of others. Imagine how productive it would have been to simply commit genocide more often and stay ahead of schedule...I indeed was a very mean baby, why do you ask?”*

-Attributed to Rivulet, the Head of the Prince’s Court

Rivulet’s odd sense of humor aside, Prince Aaron found nothing funny about the incident and fumed as soon as Mary broke the news. His energy soared and his eyes flared with madness. He paced around the room gripping his sword tightly, ready to take someone’s head off.

“I’m sorry. It was all my fault,” Mary said in apology.

“No, darling, it wasn’t,” her mother wheezed, rolling her eyes. “It’s just who you are. You know that.”

“The *insolence*. The *gall*! The nerve of that sick...demented...freak of nature.”

Aaron raged to the point that he turned red with anger, a fitting tribute to his violent soon-to-be in-laws.

“She was only trying to help, Aaron,” Mary assured him, finally feeling some pity for the witch. A heroic witch, yes, if still creepy and weird.

Aaron stared at her for a long, tense moment.

“I mean...Your Grace.”

Aaron’s eyes shot to the side and he crowed in embarrassment. “Mary, My Lady. You don’t have to call me Your Grace. Besides, I am not talking about the witch. I mean this rebel army who threatened your life.”

“Oh.”

“His name is Dark Wraith,” Aaron fumed in anger. “He has been sending me letters threatening my family for months. I never thought he would dare to start a war. But if he wants a war, so help me, I will give him a war. I will wipe his people out from this world.”

“Now, now,” Lilith said calmly. “Let’s not jump ahead of ourselves. What matters is that she is alive. Disaster was averted.”

“Disaster?” Aaron clarified, clenching his fists. “Dark Wraith and his men haven’t begun to understand the meaning of *disaster*. I will destroy every single one of them in that tribe of savages.”

“Calm down, my prince. It’s all my fault. I sent the guard away. I know, I shouldn’t have,” Mary said softly, trying to keep the peace.

“It doesn’t matter. Rivulet is my First Guard and Knight. He knows better than to ever leave you alone—ever. He will answer to me for this.”

“That is true,” Lilith said, not too subtly joining in the criticism of that strange looking, pencil-necked fellow. “No one should ever leave a member of a House unattended by that great of a distance. Lord forbid what my husband would have done had a tragedy happened. I am tired of war. I know you are too, Your Grace.”

“I am just...so grateful that you’re alive. To think I could have lost you.” Aaron’s eyes met Mary and they shared a thankful smile. “I owe that witch a debt of gratitude,” he concluded with humble eyes.

“Oh. Yeah. Great.” Mary seemed irked at the idea of praising her nemesis. Again. For embarrassing her, again.

“He does,” Lilith agreed. “She saved your life. And didn’t ask for anything in return.”

“We would certainly not have done the same for her,” the prince admitted. “I don’t know what she was trying to prove.”

## The Evil Princess

“Me either. Seemed very weird,” Mary said, remembering the whole stalker-hero complex thing.

“Yes. But a good deed never goes unrewarded. That is *my* decree.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I will pay her a visit.”

“Why?” Mary inquired, a bit unwary of the idea.

“It is a matter of honor.”

“Please don’t kill her,” Mary said, surprised as everyone else at her sudden compassion for this snarky stranger. “As weird as the whole thing was, she did save my life. I guess this proves not all witches are terrible people...or whatever.”

“I’m not going to hurt her,” Aaron assured his future queen. “Maybe we can talk this problem out and we can all get what we want.”

“I doubt it,” Mary whispered faintly, hoping not to be heard.

“Just be careful,” Lilith demanded. “I have heard of good witches. But then again, I’ve also heard of evil witches pretending to be good.”

The idea of Aaron fearing anything made the strong young prince chuckle. “Don’t worry about me, Queen Lilith.”

Prince Aaron excused himself from the ladies as he left to speak with his guard and probably spend the rest of the day drawing up plans to attack The Revolution province.

“Just like your father,” Lilith said with a droll smile. “A very military mind, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes. He cares for me a lot.”

“Give him time, child. I think you will come to think very highly of Prince Aaron.”

“I already do.”

Indeed, what soul in Cadabra hadn’t heard of the legend of the Kind Prince Aaron of Opula? Who didn’t love him, who didn’t yearn to be his princess, who among men didn’t wish to fight by his side and brush elbows with greatness?

Well, at least a few were not impressed. Speaking of the animals in the forest who glared at the invading Prince Aaron in contempt. Aaron took note of their grim and judgmental snouts, harsh beaks and condemning scales, as he walked carefully onward, marching through the forest eager to meet the noble-hearted witch. Possibly the only noble-hearted witch he had ever heard of throughout Cadabra. He had stationed his horse a few steps back, closer to the forest, as he ventured out to enter the cave that Mary assured him contained certain magic.

Noises abounded as Aaron made his way closer and every time he looked out, little bodies would scamper away and hide. The vulture, rat and snake kept a good eye on him though, as no one trusted a non-witch human around these parts.

“Listen. My name is Prince Aaron. I come in peace.”

He spoke strongly as he approached the cave and peered his head into the blackness inside.

He put his sword back in his back shoulder sheath to show a demonstration of peace. “This isn’t a trap. I am aware that you are trespassing on this land. But I am also aware that you...you did a good deed for me last night. I just want to talk.”

“FAMOUS LAST WORDS,” the demonic voice mocked.

Aaron sensed a presence behind him and slowly turned around. As he did he sprung back a step in surprise, seeing an upside down witch floating in mid air and sizing him up in unfriendly suspicion.

Her long black hair seemed perfectly controlled and furled downward, even while she hanged bat-like and yet was suspended by nothing. She didn’t care to give him a smile, as if to emphasize his kind was not welcomed here. He wondered if Mary’s reception was as cool as his.

“Hello. I am Prince-”

“I know who you are,” she said, speaking in her natural voice, though not any less cloyed at the prince’s appearance. “I know why you’ve sent your princess to me. You’re trying to make me leave a land you do not own and for no particular reason except to enforce the law.”

Aaron sighed. “Look, I don’t know why that law was written. Apparently, some king centuries ago had a problem with witches. You have proven to me that your kind isn’t all that bad. I am here to make amends.”

“Then are you going to let me stay?”

Aaron smiled in frustration. “I can’t *change* the law.”

The witch twirled her finger and rotated to a proper floating position, meeting him face to face—though she chose to remain sitting on nothing.

“Then why are you here?”

Just as Aaron tried to answer politely, the witch’s eyes went red. Aaron balked but finished his sentence. “Because. I believe no good deed should ever go unrewarded. I brought you a gift. I hope that you will take it and start a good life for yourself, living where you belong.”

Aaron dropped a bag of gold.

“I don’t want your money.”

The thought confused his majesty who had to ask the obvious.

## The Evil Princess

“Why? So you can stay here in a cave? Is that your pride talking?”

“Because I have no use for your things.”

“And things, I have a plenty. My parents are the richest people in four kingdoms. Probably the world over. You would be a fool not to have me on your side.”

“And what does it all mean, huh? To be a rich man. A rich prince. Is that what makes you, YOU, Aaron? Your parent’s wealth?”

While Aaron and the witch were trading soulful stares, the cat found something far more interesting than human drama. He clawed open the bag of gold and dug through the spoils, taking out large, shiny gold pieces which sent his furry face into a gaze. He meowed in celebration, somehow proving Aaron’s point, much to the disfavor of the witch.

“Well, he certainly likes it!”

“I don’t,” the witch answered. “I can tell just from meeting you this once, you don’t care about money either. Why are you marrying Princess Melancholy? Are her bland blue dresses just driving you crazy with passion? Is her brilliant conversation of ‘Umm’ and ‘Ooh’ really the intellectual fulfillment you need?”

Aaron laughed merrily but the witch only stared back coldly.

“I might ask you the same question, Witch.”

“What?”

“What interest is my marriage to the likes of you?”

“None,” she said with a frothy glance. “I was just making creepy conversation. Because you know, witches are supposed to be creepy. That’s all we really do, you know. Is cook children, cast spells and say creepy things.”

“What is your name?” he asked boldly. Her icy face caused him pause. “I mean...may I ask your name? My Lady?”

“My Lady?” the witch cackled as hard as her stereotype. “Boy, aren’t you a charming lad. Haven’t been called ‘My Lady’ in a long time.”

“Forgive my future wife for neglecting to ever ask your name. The name of a good *woman* who did a good deed. And to whom I am in debt.” The prince beamed, trying to avoid the “smug” face, since that’s the last thing a bitter hag—although not a half bad looking one—needed for more ammunition.

The prince *was* charmed by this witch, this woman capable of overpowering a small army and a woman capable of standing her ground to a king and queen-in-training.

“Oh,” said the witch with a proud but quiet shrug. “My name is Salem.”

*Salem*, he nodded. A name that seemed both strong and tragic.

A bit of a lonely name, just as “Salem the Witch” in person seemed to project persecution and vengeance and heartbreak. Behind her cocky voice and caustic smile hid a very lonely girl, with nary a friend in the world. Almost immediately, the air seemed thicker and the tension lifted. It was so uncommon that any decent person call a witch by her real name. It almost seemed quaint to him that he had been calling Salem “witch” for so long.

“Thank you, Salem,” Aaron replied peacefully.

The prince grabbed his gold and readied to leave, though the regretful cat meowed in protest, quickly looking back up at Salem and back at the prince. He sure wanted that gold.

“I won’t force you to leave,” Aaron continued. “I will advise you to leave, because I cannot call off my soldiers from doing their jobs. Or from other vagrants and barbarians who hate witches. Am I supposed to bribe them with more money than what the state is paying for your head?”

“I think we understand each other perfectly,” Salem the Witch suspired, stroking her hair, giving an impression of flirty surrender to the strong but gentle man.

“Good.”

“I *understand* you’re a coward,” she reiterated, protruding her face and straightening her shoulders, losing all friendly expression. She stared fiercely as if she were holding a sword. “And you understand too. You understand that I could beat the living tar out of you if we ever fought one on one. Make you beg for mercy. Make you squeal like a pig. Tear you a new hole and put some nice girly jewelry inside of it. Understand the lingo?”

The thought should have insulted a king-to-be. Instead, Aaron laughed and laughed gasping for air at the very thought. He felt down-right flattered and swooned a bit that a woman might challenge him to a fight.

“Or wait, lemme put it in Gold Talk. *I fear I am going to have to attempt in this very moment to, as one might say, put the lower extremity of my leg into that orifice otherwise known as your derriere. So yeah, we’ll call it a draw,*” she said raising her fingers in mock quotes.

“You?” he laughed again. “*Beat me?* You have a bizarre sense of humor, I must say.”

Salem, that dark-haired cutie, raised her brow. This could go on for a while. But she had no interest in flirting.

On the other hand, she was always ready for a fight.

## The Evil Princess

Maybe that's why Aaron gradually lost his smile, shook his head and made his peace.

He bowed graciously and walked away from trouble, assuring her of his thanks. He left her with another thought, a kind one and yet one that seemed loaded with *understanding*. "I promise you, you will *never* hear from either of us again."

"Good," she said blankly, letting the chivalrous fellow see himself out.

As soon as Aaron left, she relaxed her countenance and lay down on three perfectly situated floating stones, the pieces serving well as a mobile bench. So mobile in fact that the bench didn't need legs or a back or any of those other normal features.

Despite a rather interesting encounter with the Prince of the Gold Kingdom, she seemed disheartened. The cat instantly sensed her mood and purred softly, putting his paw on her leg gently, without a scratch, as if to say *I'm here for you*.

All of the animals did—the bat swooped over and landed on her right shoulder, looking down at her with the same determination as that of an avenging angel of night. The vulture landed on her left shoulder and hacked, as those disgusting birds do, which wasn't quite as poignant as a meow. The rat squeaked his concerns, snuggling by her feet, while the snake hissed in sorrow, slithering up her leg.

"What's the matter guys? Huh?" she asked, quickly realizing the communication gap held back a soulful talk.

The animals only made noise but Salem knew they had plenty to say if only she spoke the language. So she grabbed a handful of green stardust and sprinkled it all over them.

"Oh my, two doses in one week," the cat said excitedly. "My, my, we are sure partying hard!"

"Yeah, well, maybe I just don't want to be alone right now."

"Ahh," the vulture demurred. "This princess friend really has your hat in a twist, doesn't she?"

"It's not just her," she answered wistfully. "It's just...you know, my lack of human friends. Mom and dad always warned me about making more people friends."

Salem put her hands behind her head and leaned back and took a big inhale of her imaginary cigar. When she exhaled a huge mist of green shot out in loops. Whatever the magical woman did at any moment was interesting, this the animals knew.

"They said a life lived all alone can be frustrating. Depressing. Long and boring."

She pointed at a pillow situated in the other room and dragged via telekinesis to comfort her weary head. The animals had seen her

powers before, but whenever she showed off, it always symbolized a night of brooding. No one particularly liked Salem when she brooded, least of all the rat, who had been kicked a few times for squeaking too loud at an angry woman.

“It is what we are. We’re not like the Red people, or the Gold people, are we?” the snake asked honestly. “We’re from two different worlds or kingdoms, you might say.”

“I guess not,” She said stroking the snake’s head and then gently choking his neck, which was a kind gesture in snake chat.

“I know what will cheer you up. You should pursue a serious relationship with a snake, Salem.”

“Oh?” she asked with a simper.

“Yes, definitely. You know what they say: once you go Snake you never recoil.” The snake laughed, sort of, but when snakes laughed it sounded awful—like girling snot.

“Oh get out of here, you humanizer, you. I know better than to ever trust a snake. All you can think about is seducing humans!” Salem snapped with a mischievous point of her finger.

“Who told you that? That’s serpent profiling!”

“Sorry, I just don’t feel that way about you. You’re stuck in the snake-zone!” she warned him, never naïve enough to fall for such a play. “Besides I’ve heard about your problems with, ahhhurrhmm, *reptile dysfunction*.”

“Whaaaaat? That’s a lie!”

“How do you like them apples, talking serpent?”

The animals teased her and she teased back—just like any old wistful night. They always ended this way, in calm nostalgia. It sure beat angst, depression and scream-laughing into the night, as all witches tried at least once. The animals would comfort her and she would snap out of the funk, for their sake, or for no other reason than to escape the silence of an empty cave devoid of humanity, full of magic, but missing anything close to love.

“How would you all like me to fix you my very special, world famous legume burgers?” she asked.

“Oh, I’d like that very much! And perhaps a side of catnip, just a little dab, just a trifle?” the cat asked excitedly.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh yes, I would enjoy that profusely,” he said with a lick of his lips. Dinner was always amazing. Every night seemed better and more well-cooked than the night before.

“I feel I have been quite temperamental and moody without it,” the cat pleaded.

## The Evil Princess

“All righty. You know the first rule. Out of the cave when momma cooks.”

The animals scattered out of the cave, giving the chef some space. Oftentimes, Salem talked, mused, or heaven forbid, even sang when cooking. This disturbed the animals, because why talk to nothing when they were so willing to converse? They never really understood what Salem meant when she lamented about having no human friends. All the humans they met seemed rude and pretentious. Salem never felt like a “human” to the gang. She was one of them, an animal with slightly more abilities and charm.

The reason she demanded silence during cooking time was because she enjoyed chatting to nobody in particular. She would oftentimes soliloquize about life, her day and her unfulfilled dreams in between sprinkles, stirs, mashes and mixes.

First, she meditated quietly. As the moments went on and life seemed progressively desolate, the volume raised. She was there, alone again naturally, in the kitchen with no one but seven critters to keep her company.

She felt something missing, something else besides the whole “being an evil witch living alone in madness” sort of thing. Whatever hatred she reserved for Gold or Red people seemed hypocritical, since she did enjoy herself immensely whenever company would drop by.

The sobering thought that all of this unhappiness was her own fault seemed especially stringent. Did she indeed drive everyone out of her life? Was she the clichéd black heart who chased away her own kind and repulsed all the bourgeois of moral society?

“That’s just Salem,” she finally said aloud, beating her internal thoughts to it—might as well say what everyone knows. “Black heart, black hair and a hundred different spells to kill the pain.”

She tossed her hat down to the ground and talked to her invisible confidant.

“And every year, our big evil family gets a little smaller and smaller, doesn’t it?”

She floated over to the study area of the cave, made only of one of old rusty wooden shelf with a handful of books scattered about it, each one looked more tattered and haunted than the last. The top book interested her the most and as she pulled it out a book of scrolls fell out. These were not magical incantations but the magic of a faraway world that never stopped existing thanks to some finely detailed portrait drawings.

Even the two eastern and western kingdoms hadn’t mastered the technology of the southern Diamond Empire and least of all the outer

boundaries. These portraits of Salem's family were all she had, her only link to memories of yesterday, that world she would never see again.

The gypsy artist drew her father in charcoal, the heavy black lines well representing his austere spirituality and hypnotic eyes. She drew her mother in watercolor, the smoothness and melting colors being a perfect reflection of gentle acceptance. Then she drew her sister, opting for ink red, an appropriate choice for the soulless ginger of the family. Then she drew her brother with pastels, the combination of deep colors and detailed angles capturing the essence of his gregarious and often misunderstood personality. Salem herself was drawn in graphite lead, the dark shades and weak gray colors interpreting her inner pain, the inevitability of a magical world slowly ending.

The first page featured the whole family on one long scroll. The second page jettisoned the father, leaving only a bittersweet Mother Witch and her emotionally vacant children. The third page only featured the siblings, the younger sister and older brother hugging in desperation, as Salem isolated herself farther to the left, her graphite pencil shading increasing in dismal pressure. The next page saw a scandalized pair of sisters, now missing a brother and holding each other close.

The last page only highlighted Salem, a lugubrious looking witch holding her cat and staring ahead and the artist, nothing left to lose, nothing but a handful of fur to hold onto. The world had ended. Whatever once was, existed in this scroll, this frozen moment in time.

"I wish we never lost touch, Ma," Salem spoke aloud, supplicating her spirit—or indeed, any spirit that lingered behind. "I wish you would send me a psychic vision sometime, Dad."

Salem put the book back on the shelf and dragged herself over to the kitchen. At least she didn't have to dirty her hands like most cooks. Telekinetic dishwashing, stirring and chopping was a great convenience. As she directed an orchestra of a self-cooking meal and spoons and pans hovered in the air, she thought of a cool idea.

"I guess that's why they call it the 'Other Side.' There is no coming back to this side of the wall. All I have left is what you told me all those years ago."

Suddenly, the spoons and forks began to come together arranging patterns and creating shades of gray, drawing the faces of her lost family members.

**SONG 2**

**“WHEN YOU SPEAK I LISTEN”**

It's been so long since I heard your voice  
But I remember you  
(Words of you)

And with yet another passing year  
The melody escapes  
(And your face)

How much longer until I forget  
And you become a thought  
(Passing thought)

If you're alive tell me where you are  
Why can't you hear my name  
(Waiting game)

When you speak I listen  
When you're silent I wait  
But how can I wait forever  
For a sign  
A little star  
Before it's much too late?

Maybe you're a million miles from here  
You're traveling at the speed of light  
You told me not to give up my hope  
You promised it would all turn out right

When you speak I listen  
When you're silent I wait  
But how can I wait forever  
For a sign  
A little star  
Before it's much too late?

Maybe someday you'll send a message  
That gets here in a million years  
A pity that I'll be dead by then  
A wandering spirit with lucid tears

The implication of their faces didn't seem to appease her. She wanted to see them in vivid color, she longed to see them in person, if not flesh and blood. So she began chanting and twirling her hands and fingers like she were kneading the underworld's dough. The pans and spoons were placed on the fire. This freed the open kitchen space for a new show, this one a firework display, made possible by stardust and black mist that she summoned.

A lightshow appeared and abstract shapes that resembled faces splashed around the cave. While at first abstracts, Salem's deep concentration allowed the little sparks and flares to work as ink. In a few moments, she was able to draw translucent images of her mother's face, then her father's. It looked like a ghostly family reunion, with the phantoms dancing, singing and making the same ecstatic faces that they always made around supertime.

The contagious hullabaloo even got Salem dancing and spinning with the nearest broomstick. At first she danced while holding the broomstick, treating it as a following partner.

But it wasn't long before the broomstick stood up and started dancing itself, bouncing its wooden shaft back and forth and moshing its head full of bristles. However, Salem's happy dance eased her into closing eyes and therefore missing the most interesting revelation. The broom began to change form and morph its parts into something far more elaborate than an abstract.

The broom spread its parts and light emanated forth, until a simulated Princess Mary stood before her, dancing and smiling, with a dreamy-eyed expression.

When Salem opened her eyes she almost yelped. The ghostly image of Mary, looking more colorful and concrete with each awkward moment passing, stayed behind even when Salem turned off the magic show with a snap of her finger.

The lights dissipated and all the dancing objects fell to the ground. But Mary stayed behind, still in vivid detail and sent Salem some coquettish blinks and funny faces.

"*Whoah*," Salem remarked, grabbing her forehead in worry.

"Uh..." She laughed nervously. The Simulated Mary was all smiles, all long, dreamy gazes into Salem's eyes. The dark-haired stalker, with a heart it seemed, suddenly lost her confidence and turned red with embarrassment. Particularly so when Simulated Mary, wearing that drool-inducing sheath-mermaid combo dress with that teasing yarn top, began blowing kisses at her. Not very subtle at all. One could only wonder what the animals would think if they stumbled upon this very revealing magic spell.

## The Evil Princess

“I uh...forgot how to turn this thing off. Abra Cadabra, huckus tuckus, hocus pocus diddily docus.” She waved her hand but in vain. “Ah geez, was it over and diagonally or one wave down and another wave up?” She frantically waved her hands again but Mary kept smiling and blinking her eyes in that kittenish way a certain someone found irresistible.

Just then, at the worst possible time, the animals came back inside, their tummies growling. And not so coincidentally, Salem’s tummy was all flutters too.

“My stomach says let’s get ready to ruuumbble!” the cat sang as he entered the cave.

But the sight of a Simulated Mary, raising both arms and rolling her hands through her golden locks in a very feminine way caught everyone by surprise.

The animals gasped, Salem had been caught magic-handed, like the curious witch who had been caught stealing cookies. Stealing double chocolate cookies, the worst kind one could steal!

“Diddily iddly, crammo bammo, olly olly oxen free, shazaam, boop boob bee boo doo!” she spoke desperately, hoping to stuff it all back into the magic closet before the animals realized what they were seeing.

Alas, too late, as a silly-looking Mary faded away only after the group asked a collective, “*What are you doing?*”

“Shall we talk about the elephant in the room or deny what we saw?” the snake surmised.

“Elephant?” the rat cheered proudly. “Where? Let me at ‘em! I ain’t afraid of no elephant.”

The bat wasn’t one to cower from the truth. “We all saw it, Salem. You’re conspiring with the enemy.”

The cat, however, construed the odd event as something else entirely. “No, no I don’t think conspiring is the word, Batsy.”

“Ah, geez, now I’m blushing,” Salem said, her pasty face turning a strange shade of pink. “I swear guys, I was just channel flipping through psychic visions, that’s all.”

“Whoah whoah whoah! We must discuss this,” the vulture assured her. “Why are you obsessing over this Princess?”

“Uhh...can we please talk about something else? How about I give you double the helping of dinner and catnip today as a compromise?”

The cat’s eyes lit up and suddenly the gossip seemed trivial. “All right, I say we talk about something else!” he suggested to his friends.

“No, no,” the vulture replied firmly. “I have to hear this.”

“Yes, spill. We want all the gory details,” the snake declared, always interested in gory details and just like a snake to say that.

“Tell us, Salem,” the rat wondered. “Did something happen with the princess?”

The cat seemed bothered by all the attention. After all, Salem offered a meal-in-compromise and they hadn’t discussed or negotiated as a consensus. “Er...can we discuss this after our meal? Perhaps?”

Salem knew the cat had been outvoted and sighed, ready to spill. “Well guys...it goes like this.”

The cat pouted, quite annoyed and starving. “Oh very well. Make this quick though. I fear...I am malnourished.”

“I can’t stop thinking about her,” she confessed, hiding her eyes in judgment. “Every time she goes away, I feel sad in my heart. Maybe I can’t explain it to you. But...I want to see more of her. I want her to be my friend. No, not just a friend. I want to...you know...”

The animals stared back wide-eyed and totally clueless. They looked at each other to see if anyone got that reference.

“I want to...uh...you know. Kiss her?”

It seemed anti-climactic. The animals looked at each other in mild surprise. They understood the attraction, but not quite Salem’s stubbornly human view of love.

The cat smiled and raised his eyes, thinking back to the distant past.

“You mean the very special way of kissing. Why it reminds me of the way I once romanced many young felines back in my day.” He laugh-purred loudly and turned his paw in kitty pride. “Oh how extravagant were those nightly prowls. Our erotic adventures in the alley were untamed, so brazen with lust...”

The rat nodded and looked back to Salem. “Ohhh you mean like *that*. Yeah I’ve had that one special girlfriend...and another girlfriend and another girlfriend and another girlfriend...”

“Wait a minute, Salem. You mean that thing called love?” the vulture asked.

“How could it be that thing called love? It’s not love when the other person doesn’t feel the same way.”

Salem sat down, dejected and pushing her slouching back against the cave wall.

“Oh.”

“No, no. I dig it. I understand what you’re saying,” the snake said with an evil little venom-flashing smile.

“It’s like in hibernation season, when we male snakes emit female pheromones so we can lure away the other males away from the female we want to make it with. And then we trick them into following us into forming this mass mating BALL of snake on snake free love, baby.”

## The Evil Princess

Salem irked her head back. “No. No Snakey, that is not *at all* what I’m talking about. And you snakes are disgusting perverts, you know that?”

She ignored the laughter and snake bashing. “But the truth is we’re too different to be together.”

“Why?”

“Because, silly. You know.”

The animals gave her another foggy look.

“Because,” Salem said, bobbing her head and then tilting it to the side. “You know...” But nothing. “She’s a princess!” she clarified. “And I’m a witch? Hello?”

Salem sat back up and paced around, enjoying the idea, even while feeling the inevitable defeat. “Good and evil don’t go together. The very idea of me, in that way, you know, like with a prince. A dashing heroic prince who she actually wants to kiss and marry. And then me. Naah, she’ll probably laugh her little head off at the thought.”

“Oh,” was all that one animal of the group said. They stared back in silence, certainly not as smart as their human friend and unable to argue her with any intelligent thought.

The cat shrugged and spoke carefully. “So...about this meal we’ve been discussing. I wonder...”

“Catty!” the vulture reproved. “Can’t you see she’s suffering in silence? Unrequited love is tragic. It’s harsh!”

“Love isn’t real if it’s unrequited, Buzzy. It’s just a thought. A dream. A stupid little fantasy that’ll never come true.”

Why bother shedding a tear, the pretty witch thought. No use crying over spilt love. No use chasing after love-bows. “Hey you know what? I agree with Catty, let’s just eat already.”

The cat smiled so merrily, his faith in life rewarded.

The bat however, was unsatisfied and downright angry about it. “NO.”

The cat frowned, sensing another long monologue to come.

“You’re wrong, Salem,” the bat yelled, building to a fiery point. “*Love is real.* I know. I too have once loved and lost.”

The rat raised his brow in jest. Of all people, the angry creepy bat was a lover?

“Are you for real?” he squeaked. “Or are you just batshit crazy?”

“It’s true,” corrected the stoic flying mouse. “I lost my first love in a fire. But I never once doubted our love was real. Her death haunts me to this very day. And every night I see her, still smiling at me, still hollering my name in her last dying breath.”

The bat’s grimness caught the other animals off guard.

“...Damn,” the rat said, now quite possibly traumatized by Batsy’s story.

“Salem...Love is still real, even if it’s one-sided. What you feel is real. There is only one way to turn your stupid little fantasy into real love. And that’s to swallow your pride and talk to her,” the Bat concluded, holding his wings together and cloaking himself in the cold, harsh night.

“Whaaat?” Salem screeched back.

“She’s not married yet, is she?”

“Well, no...”

“So you still have a chance to tell her what you feel.”

“What? *What?* Are you crazy?”

“NO. I’m not crazy. And I have all the documented records to prove I’m not crazy.”

Salem squinted in confusion. “Since when do bats keep records? I mean how do you even do that?”

“You probably don’t want to know.”

“Eew! You mean all those mountains of bat poop?”

“Those are libraries, dammit!” the bat argued in defense.

“Now I’m depressed, confused and thoroughly disgusted at your lifestyle, Batsy.”

“No wait, I get what Bat is saying,” the vulture said with a nod. “He’s saying that if you don’t take a chance and talk to the girl, that your love will *never* be real. Things will stay the same forever. But if you do go and talk to her, then there’s a chance that maybe she feels the same way about you?”

“Feelings schmeelings! Maybe she just wants to get it on with a witch,” the snake mocked.

“Naah, you’re just goofing on me. All of you.”

Only the rat seemed to be less optimistic than the others. “Excuse me? Love? Is that what we’re talking about? Am I the only *mammal* here that sees something terribly wrong with this scenario?”

“Stop using the M-word,” snake hissed.

“Isn’t there something here we’re all missing?” the rat said, pointing to Salem who looked hurt and particularly lovesick in the gorgeous moonlight peering in from outside the cave.

“Something that’s ridiculously obvious? And something I shouldn’t have to even say?”

“No, what?”

“Like you don’t know! Don’t play coy with me! You know what I’m talking about,” the rat said, folding his little paws, at least as far as they could reach.

## The Evil Princess

“Yeah, what are you talking about, Ratty?”

The cat made a bold suggestion. “I have an idea...let’s continue this over dinner!”

The rat finally exploded into obviousness. “*Because! She is evil! Eevil!* Evil witches don’t get together with princesses!”

“Ah, good point,” the vulture agreed.

“It’s a simple matter of good vs. evil. Love is supposed to be for good people and good people. And then evil people and evil people. But never shall the two mix together.”

“Well, that’s true,” the snake conceded. “We are all sort of evil.”

“I know I am,” the vulture declared.

“And me,” the rat agreed. “How about you Catty?”

The cat stared defiantly. “What am I? *I’m Hungry.*”

“And between the lot of you, I am the *Most Evil* of them all,” the bat said, gloating a bit with his evil looking dots-for-eyes and tall shadow. “But what I do know...”

“Hey,” the feisty rat interrupted. “How come you are the most evil? You’re not more evil than I am.”

“Yes, yes, I am.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am. But there’s one thing I do know. Salem...”

“Huh?” a baffled Salem answered.

“We all have a choice. To be good or be evil. To try or to fail. To win or lose. There is only fire and ice, Salem. There is no in between. Nobody likes lukewarm milk. We either want cold chocolate milk or hot chocolate. Nobody likes lukewarm milk. If there’s one thing I can’t freakin’ stand it’s warm milk!” the bat raged.

“Here, here. And on that note, let’s eat!” the cat begged.

“Salem, don’t be warm milk. Or so help me, I will puke you out of my mouth!”

Salem broke her thoughtful glance and laughed but Bat was preaching to his flock, so why cut him off.

“You humans are stronger and smarter than any of us. And yet you’re afraid of the dumbest things. The Salem I know, the Salem we grew up with, was never afraid of anything,” the bat concluded.

“That’s sweet, Batsy,” she said with a loving smile.

“It’s true, luv,” the cat added, he being the only one old enough to remember Baby Salem. “When you were a little girl, you never showed the slightest bit of fear, no matter how much danger you were in. Your mother called you The Little Firecracker. A young girl who wasn’t afraid of kings or princes. OR princesses.”

“Yeah, I know. How silly of me.”

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

“Maybe it’s time to prove yourself again. Another challenge to overcome,” the bat said.

“I dunno...what would I even say if I got the chance?”

“*It doesn’t matter!*” the bat cried, getting into Salem’s face and spitting. “You are going to talk to her. You are going to tell her you like her. Do you understand? You owe me that!”

“Okay, fine, geez! No need to spray me with your gross bat saliva.”

“Good. Now fix my dinner, human.”

“Yes, sir!” Salem whimpered playfully. “Goodness gracious, don’t yell at me anymore.”

“Oh joy!” a certain feline cried in victory.

“Aren’t you cranky, Batsy,” the vulture said, keeping a safe distance.

But within seconds, the bat turned around and screamed holy terror. “I haven’t eaten all day! That’s why I’m cranky!”

Salem giggle-snorted at her animals’ camaraderie, as charming and grating as her late parents quarreling, she thought.

Only the rat stayed behind the rest of the pack. He seemed as perturbed as his human friend.

“Awww, Ratty. What do you think of all that? Is the idea of me crushing on a princess just as disturbing for you as it is for me?”

The rat frowned, looking away and then back to her with heavy eyes. “But...you’re evil. And she’s good.”

“I know.”

“You’re too evil for her,” the rat pouted. “You deserve someone better.”

“Awww. Like who?”

“Like a warlock or a demon. Someone hideously evil and just inconceivably cruel.”

“You’re right, Ratty. I should have much lower standards and zero self-esteem, shouldn’t I?”

“Much, much lower. Like in the sewer.”

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## The Evil Princess

HEYA!

Still unconvinced that witches are a threat to Cadabra's security?

Then it's about time you educate yourself as to the dangers of Cadabra island. The last thing you want to do is be seduced by a witch!

We suggest you visit [www.TheMagicalKingdom.com](http://www.TheMagicalKingdom.com) and learn from a professional Tour Guide just who is good, who is evil and who is just so plain rotten they've spoiled.

The End of the Magical Kingdom