

The End of the Magical Kingdom

Book I

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 ribcage 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

From 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.

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 teething 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 looking. 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.”

“Wee!” 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! Bwweeheeheeheehee!”*

-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 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 got out of bed and was 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 a 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 “Aaaeeeiii!” 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 tripwire. 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 a 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 sent 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 demoness 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 *bate* 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 eyebrows 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 wristbands, 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 be 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 hauteu. “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 with firm back lacing and a front busk closure, which given the discomfort, no doubt lent a queen much of her 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 a 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?”

“*Yep*, 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 demoness 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 anything 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.

“...Heeey 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.

“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 someday, 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 within 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 volume and cut just enough to create shelf bangs. She threw in extra eyeshadow 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 was 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 dark 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 backward.

“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 backward 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. All happen 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 among 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 gave 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 sighed, 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 girgling 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.*”

“Whaaaat? 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 that 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 was 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.

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

“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 spilled 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,” the 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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## Chapter 8

### All the Evil Colors

*“Evil is such a dull word, isn’t it? When one says that one is Evil, it defies logic and shows not even an intermediate understanding of human motivation. When one says that one is Poor, in contrast, that’s a very a clear depiction of one’s hazardous intentions.”*

-Attributed to King Amram

**L**ower standards and low self-esteem were precisely why the Red Kingdom fought so valiantly. In the eyes of Satyre and his father and his father, the Kingdom of Gold had nurtured the Red people’s poverty and disgrace over years of backhanded deals and political conspiracies. Once a united people, the two sides distinguished themselves from each other, not only choosing a color—that peripheral salute to patriotism—but also adopting the morals and lifestyle that the two colors represented.

Satyre's people were austere. They worked hard and toiled, dealing with their enemies harshly, while protecting their families with vigor and vim. The Kingdom of Gold hardly worked, but made deals, frequently enlisting volunteers from the Diamond Empire and the Commonwealth of the Pink Sky, or even the outcasts beyond the borders who swore no allegiance and had no morals.

The Gold Kingdom had the artists, the thinkers and the master planners, the elite. Quite frankly, they couldn't understand why the Kingdom of Blood seemed so angry with the status quo, or why they insisted upon ceasing all trade agreements and negotiations. If these men were not motivated by money and mutual profit, what else on earth could be their reasoning?

Amram shuddered at the thought that Satyre's men served "God" and that their austerity and self-chosen poverty made them closer to "God." For this motivation made them unpredictable. While Amram and Jaquie weren't young enough to be cynics or disbelievers, they would never claim to be politically directed by an unforeseen power, for such irrationality would surely be a laughing stock to the kingdoms north and south of them. For all they knew, God could have been Queen Fen Mien I, or the mysterious and intangible being that created Queen Fen Mien I. They really didn't care. Whatever God was, surely he or she was majestic and wealthy and not in love with the dirt, filth and blood.

One of Amram's first demands for peaceful surrender, in exchange of providing the Kingdoms of the Reds with financial support, was that Satyre stop calling his army the Kingdom of Blood and instead the more rational Kingdom of the Reds, at least publicly. To Amram and all of Cadabra, this seemed like progress and only helped endear Satyre, the age-old outcast, to the children of Cadabra, the ones intent on achieving peace and security minus the myths that led to war.

Even the way Satyre chewed his meat was terrifying.

Satyre eyeballed his wife and daughter as he chewed slowly, deliberately and downright bestially, as if he killed the damned thing for them and was making sure they knew just how dead the damned thing was.

Years of marriage prevented Queen Lilith from noticing Satyre's odd eating habits, but the sight always perturbed Mary, who was just now realizing the personable qualities of the roasted pig being served. Its eyes were glassy from all the death, but there still remained an extraordinary look of contentment written on its face. It had lived a good life, albeit a short one. Perhaps the pig had the opportunity to grow up, to show honor to its parents and to find a mate.

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Maybe the creature made a name for itself on the farm, leaving behind a legacy of good Pig behavior as a model to follow.

Mary's uneasy staring at the pig face only piqued her parents' curiosity.

"What's wrong, My Lady?" Prince Aaron asked, he being the distinguished guest of honor for this family celebration. "Is the meal unsuitable for you?"

"Uh...it's fine. I'm just not hungry."

"Why not?" Satyre demanded.

"I don't know."

"Let me guess...Melancholy again," the king said with an angry furl of his brow. Whatever this melancholia disease was, he was ready to stomp it to death.

"Oh leave her alone," Lilith chided. "She has to retain her girlish figure, after all. Princesses who don't watch what they eat tend to spoil and become lumpy. That's the last thing Mary needs, in addition to all of her other hiccups."

"Nonsense," Satyre exclaimed chomping down a particularly thick piece of pork. "Real women eat. Real women have an appetite. And they have curves." He smiled a wicked streak in dinner guest Prince Aaron's direction, his typically course face for once turning red with laughter. "That's what real men like in bed. Something to *grab hold of*. Isn't that right, boy? HAR HAR HAR."

Aaron nervously smiled, the sound of Satyre's piratey laugh sounding more like a trumpet than a human voice.

Lilith rolled her eyes and hummed. "I'm not sure if I'm flattered or mortified at that comment.

"Well...I..."

Everyone at the family stared intently, very interested to know of Aaron's views on meaty-figured women.

"I better take a vow of silence on that one."

Mary giggled for the first time that night, sending Aaron a happy glance, rewarding him for doing the unthinkable and getting her father to crack a smile, rather than a skull.

"On the subject of loaded comments," Aaron said, prudently changing the conversation. "What have you decided about witches, King Satyre? Did you read the draft of the new decree I sent over?"

"They know the law, Aaron," Satyre huffed, losing his smile and going back to shredding his meal apart. "If they stay outside of neutral boundaries we have no quarrel with them."

"Well, yes. But their argument is that they were there first...for centuries. And we forced them out of their home, despite the fact that

no one actually owns the Borderlands. Isn't that right, Mary?"

"Satyre and Lilith looked surprised and glanced at their suddenly administratively-thinking daughter.

"Yes. It doesn't matter how we feel about witches. We're supposed to be setting an example for the other kingdoms. A new era of peace. Of generosity. Right?"

"Yes..." Satyre answered in caution. "But if we give everyone every bleeding thing they want, we give away our power. I won't have my kingdom turning into a laughing stock. Certainly not under the nose of the House of Opula. I'm sure your King feels the same way, Aaron."

"I'm sure he does. Yes."

He shrugged at Mary. How far did she expect this request to go, that a single witch's well-being should be more important than the will of two kings?

"Well...it would be nice to try and make a compromise. Both Aaron and I feel strongly about it."

Lilith squinted her eyes, confused at the idea. She understood it perfectly and could even grasp the rhetoric behind it. But where this was all coming from, the motivation of a suddenly altruistic daughter, remained a mystery.

Aaron shrugged. "I suggest we placate the witch and her sisters as much as possible."

"Whatever for? Magical powers or not, witches are no threat to us."

"Agreed," Aaron said, steepling his fingers. "But let's say this. What if we were to spread the rumor to the House of Opula and the Golden Kingdom and to our north and south neighbors that we have a Good Witch on our side? That we have full access to her magic?"

Satyre looked intrigued, as he stopped chomping and stared at Aaron.

"My family would find it intriguing, as I know my father has dabbled into black magic and esoteric arts before," Aaron assured him. "More importantly, it would scare the other kingdoms beyond the border into fearing us. They are all highly superstitious of witches. They think witches are ten times more powerful than they really are."

Satyre took a long, salivating moment to think it over.

"I know the Pinkians would be spooked by the idea," Aaron said matter-of-factly to Lilith. "They're so consumed with their science textbooks they would find the idea of a real life witch terrifying."

"I thought they celebrated the Blood Moon," Lilith said.

"Isn't that a superstition?"

"Not exactly. It's called a scientific prediction. But here's what I'm suggesting. They're so rigid, they're going to quake with fear when they

## The Evil Princess

hear the news. Who knows, we could even scare all of our neighbors into complete subservience.”

“I suppose there’s no harm in discussing matters with them,” Satyre announced. Just don’t give them everything they want. Even witches must learn to respect the law.”

“Actually, I was thinking that Lady Mary could pay the witch a visit herself,” Aaron said to Mary and Lilith’s surprise.

“Me? Why?”

“You’ve already gone to see her a few times. You seemed to have developed a kinship of sorts. I, on the other hand, seem to provoke her. I think my prominence and money upset her. I think she relates to Mary more than I.”

“The witch isn’t dangerous, is she?” Lilith asked, clutching napkin and covering her mouth.

“No, I don’t think she is. She’s just...a bit creepy, is all,” Mary admitted.

Aaron leaned back in his chair and created an offer in compromise for the family’s consideration. “So just tell her that our kingdom would like to restore an amicable relationship with her and her sisters. And that we are willing to consider, not ‘give’ mind you, but consider a compromise so that we can all live in peace.”

“I think she wants to be left alone. To live where she pleases.”

“Out of the question,” Satyre barked. “She knows she’s in the Borderlands.”

“What other sort of compensation can we give her? She’s rejected money. She’s rejected everything I’ve offered.”

Satyre tightened his face. The thought provoked him, perhaps even tickled him.

“She rejected gold?”

“Yes and lots of it.”

The world’s loudest “Hmmm” followed.

“So maybe-”

“Ask her what part of the land she thinks her family owns. Make no commitments. Just find out where her family resides. We’ll think of a compromise later.”

“Be careful, Mary,” Lilith said with a trenchant and almost shaming gaze. “Witches may not always be violent...but they are far from safe company.”

The new peace mission foisted upon Princess Mary felt uncomfortable. Previously, she visited “the witch” by accident, then over a personal vendetta and then in a spirit of apology, followed by shuddering disgust, upon learning just what an unwholesomely *attracted*

witch she really was. Mary had vaguely known of that sort of attraction, that witches were always obsessed with princes and princesses. Some sort of creepy, “corrupt all the good people” thing that Evil People believed. Witches were chronically miserable and their only joy in life was berating and destroying the otherwise happy lives of royalty, at least that’s what everyone said about witches.

So maybe Salem was one of the decent witches struggling against her urges to destroy all the pretty people. That was at least admirable. Mary chose to wear a less suggestive dress this time, “The Determent Dress”, perhaps figuring Salem was envying her very expensive princess clothing and felt an overwhelming urge to take it off—and claim it as her own! This, Mary figured, seemed logical and so she opted for a similar turquoise scheme but with a satin sheath evening gown that was slightly less ostentatious. Her virginal fashion designers again created a sleeveless gown, but this time with a bodice that had a plunging neckline in back and high neckline in front, starting at her clavicles.

The skirt reached down to her high heel mesh gold shoes but was slit to the thigh, a modest improvement the virgins thought might deter the witch from “stealing Lady’s underwear for purely material reasons.” By now the virgins were laughing at Mary’s obliviousness, but such an innocuous princess asking a favor is a hard offer to refuse. The dress had plenty of gold to accompany the turquoise color, from golden colored elbow length gloves to a thick golden laurels necklace featuring outlines leaves, as Mary wanted to remind Salem that she was still on official business of the Golden Elite. Unfortunately, all of these subtle reminders didn’t exactly help the mission of trying to remove all ostentatiousness from her appearance and along with her intentionally oversized top hat with a giant bow and obnoxious teardrop gold pearl earrings, she still seemed more like a princess taunting an outsider than an apologist.

Mary knew she would have to approach this situation tactfully and so watched Salem for a few long moments, from a safe hiding place behind the bushes and a few horse steps away from the cave. Salem was wearing that very peculiar leaf lingerie again and in the compromising position of bending over and picking up acorns.

“Ohh for goodness sakes!” Salem chided her furry friend. “Ratty, why do your chipmunk cousins always have to leave these acorns on my cave step?”

“I told you, it’s a peace offering,” he whined. “For some reason, they have the impression that you’re offering ‘protection services’ for a small fee.”

“Like an organized crime syndicate? Why would they think that?”

## The Evil Princess

“I dunno, I might have mentioned it to them.”

Salem rolled her eyes and vacuumed the broom across the cave back to her fingers with just a half-fist clench. She began sweeping, using the sorcery tool for an unusually homey purpose. She swept up a particularly large cloud of dust.

When she looked up from the ground to eye-level, she caught a full body shot of Princess Mary standing in front of her and devoid of any emotion.

“Oh! Ohhhh...it’s you. Uhhh...”

Salem quickly covered up her leaf gown’s top by folding her arms and backed away nervously.

“Yeah. Remember me?”

“Yes, kind of hard to forget you.”

Suddenly, Salem’s pupils stretched out into a black blur, filling her entire eye with demonic energy.

The sight started Mary. “Hey, what happened to your eyes?”

“Uhh nothing. They just do that involuntarily sometimes.”

“Why?”

“It happens when I see something that I...” she treaded off, leaving Mary’s face but sending her a sideways eye shift.

“What?”

“That I uh...have seen before. I know, it makes no sense. Evil witches, go figure, right?”

“I guess so. I came to tell you something.”

“Oh?”

The bat had been observing the scene and his tiny mouth almost quadrupled in size when he saw Mary. He quickly loomed up in the air, trying to make feverous eye contact with Salem, as if to emphasize a point.

“Get, get!” Salem yelled, shooing him away.

“That bat seems to want to get your attention,” Mary said with a half smile. “What, are your animals not talking today?”

“Uh no,” Salem sighed. “We discussed that sometimes their talking disturbs people. Because you know, animals aren’t supposed to talk.”

Mary stared back with a frown. “Right.”

“Sorry, I’m under-dressed. We ought to stop meeting half naked like this, huh?” the leaf-clad girl laughed nervously.

“I’m not half naked. You’re the one who walks around the cave in a leaf nightgown,” Mary said, raising her brow.

“Well, you’re the one invading my cave! Ever heard of knocking?”

Mary took a big gulp. “I didn’t come here to fight.”

“Okay, fine. What did you have to tell me?”

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“Aaron wants to know...actually my father wants to know...umm, you sure have a lot of animals back there.”

“Guys!” Salem looked back at saw a front row of snakes, rats and chipmunks ready to watch the show. “Come on, guys. Give us some space.”

As the animals dispersed, the bat took the opportunity to fly up next to her ear and whisper bat language gibberish, but probably something along the lines of, *You promised me!*

“Shoo! Shoo!”

Mary put on her best queenly façade and continued. “We wanted to know where you and your sisters are located. What part of Cadabra do you think is yours?”

“Why?”

“I don’t mean...like, exact location. We’re not trying to hunt them down. We just want to know what part of the land you think you own.”

“Oh...I see. Look, Mary...”

“Calling me Mary, now? No more Candy Cane?”

“Oh. I figured Mary was the more respectable title.”

“Actually, the respectable title is Your Grace Lady Mary,” she said proudly. “I am to be a Queen someday.”

Salem squinted her eyes and put her hand on her hips. “Yeah but...I’m not calling you that, sweetheart.”

Mary’s eyes bulged. Already put on the defensive, she tried her best to negotiate with the witch, which for the sake of progress required her to not make corrections or establish her authority.

“Look the truth is...I don’t have any sisters. I mean, I had a brother and sister a long time ago. But they’re long gone. This cave...these animals...it’s all I’ve got.”

“Oh. I thought you mentioned sisters.”

“Yeah, yeah, I tell people that because I don’t want to get chased out of here by an army of a hundred guys wielding spears, okay?”

“So...you have no family,” Mary said, with at least one syllable of compassion.

“No. I mean, there are other witches scattered around here. Maybe they are distant relatives, but not real family, no.”

“That’s...really depressing,” Mary said, staring into Salem’s sad little witch face.

Salem guffawed, especially at Mary’s perspective that she had a sad little witch face.

“Look, I don’t need your pity, okay? All I asked from the very beginning was that you leave me alone. Let me live in peace. I’m not hurting anybody. I’m not working my evil magic on anything you own.

## The Evil Princess

Not interested in your crops or your forests. All I have is this cave and sometimes I frolic in the garden. Yes, in my sexy ass leaf nightgown. And I'm sorry if that offends you, Princess Prissy Candy Cane Stick Up Your Butt. And I'm sorry if my talking animals creeped you out."

She furled her brow and made stronger eye contact, eventually losing her demonic gaze and returning to pupils.

"But you know what? I'm not sorry. Because they're great guys to get to know. And maybe if you'd think about that sometimes rather than just scarfing them down as lunch you'd find that out too. Now I got to go. I got children to cook."

"Salem?" Mary said softly.

The very word spoken from a princesses' lips spooked Salem. She looked back in wonder. "You...know my name?"

"Aaron told me. The reason I came is..." She flinched at first, but quickly straightened her posture and resumed eye contact. "I'm the one who's sorry. You saved my life. And I acted like a...well, like a *witch*, let's put it that way."

"A witch, huh?" Salem laughed. "Yes, you really let your evil side show. It was kind of cool to see you lose control like that."

The bat wasn't satisfied with all this chit chat and made his objection known, choosing to fly up on Salem's shoulder and give her a provoking *Come on!* face. She swatted him away a second time before his inevitable return.

"I think you're going to be okay now," Mary said confidently, eyeing the suspiciously invasive bat. "I don't think Aaron or my father will hunt you down. I think I can make a case for you."

"Oh yeah? You'd do that for me?"

"Well...I owe you one."

"No, I told you, you don't owe me anything."

"Okay fine," Mary said mockingly. "I like you. Okay?"

Salem and the bat stationed on her shoulder stared at each other in wide-eyed uncertainty. "You do?"

"Well, yeah. I like everybody," Mary explained. "That's the whole point of the two kingdoms coming together. We tolerate each other. We promote peace. Disagreement without violence."

"Oh. Right. Yeah, I know that's what you meant."

The bat was fuming and sent Salem a serious, *Don't you dare!* stare pointing his webbed arm in warning.

"The truth is," Mary said with a nostalgic smirk. "I have always been fascinated with the story of witches. And you're the first one I've ever met."

"Ah, well, sorry to disappoint."

“No, not at all,” Mary laughed. “My mother used to tell me that you were all violent and ugly and disfigured and that you...”

“Cooked children, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot.”

“And none of it’s true? You’re not...you know...evil?”

“Well, yeah. I guess I am evil,” Salem said hazily.

“Oh.”

She laughed. “And you’re good, right? You’re the Good Princess.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“But like, I’ve never really understood what you think evil is,” Salem replied. “Like, to me, evil is dressing in black.” She snapped her fingers and instantly appeared in her black witch wardrobe, alarming her guest. “It’s casting spells and fighting people when they insult me or threaten me. I know that’s not what a princess does.”

“Well, no. We’re supposed to read our holy books. We pray.”

“You pray? What does that mean?”

“It’s when people speak...you know, to whatever else is out there.”

“Oh. Like your ancestors? I guess I do that. I talk to my parents, even though they’re dead.”

“Umm, that’s not the same thing exactly.”

“It’s just funny because I always usually hear people praying when they’re trying to kill me!” Salem laughed. “They call it an exorcism, right?”

“Right.”

“So I always thought prayer was just a way to harass us witches. I mean some of you guys, really put on a show. You sweat, you chant, you jump up and down and splash water on me. I mean, sometimes I just break out into giggling, because it is kind of funny.”

Mary smiled cautiously. “Well, real prayer is not funny to our people. It’s our way of staying humble. Staying...you know, *good*.”

“But what does ‘good’ mean? I always thought good meant boring and cranky and a stick up your butt view of life.”

“No. Good just means...compassionate, I guess.”

“Oh. Is that all?”

“Yeah. Never really thought about it. But what you said about not eating animals...treating them like friends?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s a very ‘Good’ thing to do.”

“Ohhh, okay,” Salem said unsurely, trying to learn the lingo. “I always figured that was the Evil thing to do.”

“So you’ve never eaten meat?”

## The Evil Princess

“No,” Salem shrugged. “My parents taught that to me. Within the life of every animal is a spirit, a spirit or a soul, just like you and me. When we take their life away just so that we can eat junky food we cause hurt. We cause pain. We break up families. We break apart couples who love each other. We take children away from their mothers. It’s not right, not to me.”

Mary frowned and thought about it long and hard. “But what is this? Isn’t that a bowl of milk for your cat I see there?” she said, pointing to a nearby bowl with some white bubbly substance.

“Yeah, that’s milk. But the milk was a gift. I have a cow friend I see every few months and she gives it to me. In exchange for some apples and carrots. When I ask nicely, she’s very understanding.

Mary tilted her head, enjoying the interrogation. “Isn’t that cruel to keep cows pregnant all the time?”

“It’s her choice when she gets pregnant. Hey, some human queens I know are always pregnant and no one gives them a hard time about it.”

“Yes, the baby obligation.” Mary laughed heartily. “So you speak to the cow?”

“Of course. How else can I know if she’s giving me the milk? I wouldn’t just take it from her.”

“That’s weird. We just milk our cows. We don’t ask.”

“See, how fair is that? How would you like it if I just grabbed your tits one day without your permission and started milking?”

Mary tilted her head and stretched her lips.

“That so didn’t come out right!” Salem said in shame, hiding her face for a long moment. “Sorry for the gross visual. I just get feisty about my animal friends and the way people treat them.”

“I understand. This is what’s important to you. This is what you believe.”

“Yes. And so I wonder if you have ever really talked to your animals before?”

“Talked? Well, no. My animals don’t talk like yours.”

“Yes, they do. But you’ve never listened before,” Salem said with a grin. “Listen. Guys? Come in here.”

She waited calmly as the snake, rat, bat, vulture and cat came over and began cuddling up against her. “Now without words, what do you think they’re saying?”

“I...I don’t know,” Mary said, eyeing the cat who walked over and made eye contact. He began purring and rubbing up against her ankle.

“Are you listening? What is he saying?”

Mary smiled as she pet the kitty, sensing its friendly vibes.

“Something...kind. Something friendly.”

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

“How did you know that?”

“I could just tell,” she said, smiling back at the cat. “From his... little loving smile.”

Just then, Mary stared back at Salem who was smiling herself, a bit dreamy-eyed and lovesick.

Salem caught herself and shook her head. “Yes, well,” she said, clearing her throat. “That’s the point. Most people never take the time to just talk to an animal. They only hear what they want to hear. They speak their own language and they never try to communicate with nature.”

This time, something different was behind Mary’s curious eyes. She wasn’t provoked, nor was she trying to be respectful of a new culture. She seemed genuinely intrigued by Salem’s worldview.

“Okay...now you can talk, guys.”

“Hello darling,” the cat said spritely.

Mary screamed, albeit a quiet and restrained scream compared to the last encounter. “I see...they can literally talk too!”

“Surprised, aren’t you?” the cat said.

“Just a little bit. We’re not used to animals talking in Cadabra English in my kingdom!”

“Oh, come on,” Salem smirked. “You know this is what you wanted to see. The first time I cast the talking animal spell, I was floored. I actually talked to a crab from the sea for hours. He was really boring and a bit incoherent. But it was still just so amazing to hear his life story.”

Mary’s attention went from Salem’s face to the tiny furry face on the floor. “Hey baby. Remember me?”

“Yes, yes, I do. I think I heard you talking even before the spell.”

“Tisssssssss a pleasure to meet you,” the snake said, creepy as always, although this time a bit of a good sport.

“Oooh, a talking snake!” Mary smiled extra wide. “That’s kind of like déjà vu for my religion.”

“I got an awesome stash of new fruit for you, when you’re ready,” the snake hissed with a wink. “Come and see me I’ll hook you up.”

“Heya pretty lady!” the vulture squawked.

“Well, aren’t you charming in a bird eats dead things sort of way!”

“Changed my diet. I feel a lot better now. Avoiding roadkill really takes off the pounds.”

The bat didn’t bother to say hello but made sure to reiterate the mission to Salem in an angry whisper. “*But when are you going to tell her?*”

“Shhhh!”

## The Evil Princess

*“So help me, if you don’t tell her I will! And not you’re going to like the way I do it!”* the bat scream-whispered, just barely earning Mary’s attention.

“Hey what’s that?”

“What?”

Mary eyed Salem’s short sleeve blouse, noticing a darkened marking on top of her skin. “That mark on your arm. Is that a talking spider or something?”

“What? Oh this? No, this is my tattoo.”

Salem pulled her sleeve up slightly, but not before looking at Mary in shy admiration. She pulled in her shirt slightly to show Mary the unique marking.

“What is that?”

“Really? No one in the Red Kingdom knows what a tattoo is?”

“No. But it sort of reminds me of ancient tribal markings.”

“Well yeah, it’s more or less the same thing. Except I’m not a part of a tribe and it’s not a ritual. It’s just for me.”

Mary looked in closer, taking Salem’s arm gently and studying the ink. It was circular in shape with a four-point division inside, each piece containing one lone dot.

“It represents my mother,” Salem said wistfully. “And Mother Earth. It’s our ‘religion’, if you want to call it that. But we really don’t call it that. It just helps me remember. Stay focused. Be happy.”

Mary didn’t ask to touch it, but did a swell job of mashing her fingers all over Salem’s upper arm. A bit of a rude gesture that Salem, naturally, found intoxicating.

Salem tried hard to avoid eye contact, but was pulled into Mary’s visage almost magnetically.

“I’ve never seen one before,” Mary said, only gazing at the tattoo and not noticing Salem’s awe-struck eyes.

“It means the Mother Goddess is in my mother, my ancestors and in me. It means bonds between family can never be broken. Even when our spirits depart from this world, we don’t stop looking for each other. We’ll search forever until we’re reunited in the hereafter. Someday...we’ll all be a family again.”

“Wow, I like that. It sounds like something I was taught a long time ago except we called her Queen Fen Mien I. And one day she was seduced by a snake.” Mary laughed at the irony. “But I guess I’ve never really thought about Mother Nature being like an actual person.”

“Not exactly,” Salem said. “It’s like this. First, you listen to nature. Then you look, you look deeper into the millions of colors in nature that what make up who we are. Millions of shades, each one an intense emotion, each one a heart beating full of love. A whole world of

lifetimes, of people who have lived before us and who are now watching over us. They're not just in the stars, they're in colors. The colors that we recognize. The caresses we feel from the wind, from our buddy's hands, that's a signal we follow to get closer to finding the ones we once loved."

Musical accompaniment seemed to come from the cave and from the wind outside. Salem was building up to a song and Mary could already hear it.

"Oh, excuse me," Salem said. "Mind if I sing?"

"No, go ahead," Mary answered with a glowing smile.

"Salem, not again!" the rat squeaked.

"Oh how many times is she going to kick the habit and then relapse like this?" the vulture asked.

"Oh dear and it was going so well," pouted the cat.

Alas, it was too late. Salem was singing again and the effervescence of music and color filled the air.

Just as Salem began singing she and Mary were both lifted into the air, yes by magic and twirled along with the earthy choreography of dancing florals, leaves and rocks. Mary screamed again, this time in delight as she was whisked away into Salem's magic—for once in living, breathing flesh and blood reality.

### **SONG 3 "A VIEW FROM THE SKY"**

**What color am I  
What kind of girl are you  
Are you a little bit funny  
Are you poor or wealthy  
Do you ever look down  
With a view from the sky  
What color am I  
If you had to describe me  
Would you say a gypsy or a witch  
Plus size maidel with big hips  
Aren't I just a blemish  
In your grandiose design  
It takes a billion colors  
To show us the world  
If you white out every error  
Then what have you learned**

Have you ever seen  
A perfect drawing from the sky

What color am I  
Please tell me what's wrong with me  
Not beautiful in the right way  
Morally flawed sins every day  
Would you notice that scratch  
Watching it from the sky  
What color am I  
What's the pattern I'm missing  
Should I go left should I go right  
If I could change would you still fight  
On the scale of color  
Where would you have me die

It takes a billion colors  
To show us the world  
There's nothing to hide or escape  
Needs just a few scratches to reshape  
One day it will all fit  
A lovely imperfect geoglyph...

Now for the best part, Salem's rebellious eyes said, as she grabbed a Devil's Water Pipe, fired and fused from glass and decorated as the devil's black elongated body. The red-eyed devil's open-mouthed grin made up the chamber and mouthpiece, while the pipe stem mounted near the front bottom coincided with the devil's roguishly excited phallus.

She secured the piece with her left hand and offered it to Mary.

"Now open your mouth against the Devil's smile and suck on it good. Make sure no air gets out." Salem gripped the slide from the stem and covered the carb hole. The only way to make good music was to light the devil's fire, which Salem handled with a few spurts of lightning emitted from her index finger. She bent her finger at an upward angle, perching it over the bowl and watched as the chamber filled up with smoke.

"Now slowly inhale, like your making out with the Devil," Salem said to Mary who crinkled her brow and laughed with her eyes.

She paused and then stopped her zapping fingers, removing her fingers and letting go.

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

“Now inhale again and exhale with verses of the song.”

Mary was very intrigued by the strange rush that occurred as she reached new stanzas of this high octave ditty and released the high D-major note chord progression with a thick velvety exhale.

*It takes a billion colors*

*To show us the world*

*Have you ever seen*

*A perfect drawing from the...*

Salem interrupted. “Now hold it...hold it...hold that C-note.”

“Skyyyyyyy” Mary sang, trying to puff out and stay on the right key.

“Hold it some more,” Salem said, her eyes wild and giggly, as Mary’s face began turning red from losing breath.

“Ten more seconds...”

“Skyyyyyyyyeaiiiiiiii!” Mary flubbed, releasing the note with a choke and cough.

“Good try,” Salem laughed as Mary soaked in the euphoria of a concluding chord progression, lying back on the floor and smiling from ear to ear.

The song was so amazingly good. It not only tasted all sweet and tangy, but also gave both girls a whiff of relaxation and calm. Better yet, this particular D major chord of the song was so potent it left both girls writhing on the floor and momentarily forgetting where they were and what they were just saying.

“Wow! That was so evil!” Mary said, followed by a bout of giggles. “But it was pretty awesome.” How scandalous Mary thought, that a princess would be caught singing with some strange witch.

Sure, everybody said singing was bad for one’s health, especially all that inhaling the devil’s kiss part, but if that were the case, why did it have to be so dizzingly ecstatic?

Both girls crawled on the floor, pupils dilated and buzzing, eventually turning over on their tummies. The pleasant side effects of a magical song required a few minutes to shake off. They both sat up after a few wordless moments of joy, their heads spinning with the same happy ending sentiments that many fairy tale characters enjoyed after a riveting grand finale and the cue of the end theme song.

“Yeah, about that. I really meant to have a smart conversation. But I always end up going back to destructive patterns, singing and magic. They’re my only vices.”

Salem laughed hard, much to Mary’s confusion. “Weeeell not my *only* vice...”

“Wow, that was just really fun!” Mary giggled. “Okay, Salem. I admit, I was wrong about you. You really are an interesting person.”

## The Evil Princess

“Aww, right back at ya, sweet cheeks.”

“I really think it’s important for me to reach out and get to know the people of our kingdoms,” Mary said happily. “I want to be part of the world, not just part of the ‘bourgeois’ that pretends to rule over people. I want to get to know you.”

“You do?” Salem asked in wonder.

“Yes. And the Golden Kingdom. And the kingdoms outside, the wanderers, barbarians, vagabonds. It takes an entire community to make a peaceful world,” Mary concluding, never wiping that contagious smile from her face.

“Oh...uh yeah, yeah I believe that too,” Salem said, slightly less merry, as she was noticing a certain platonic tone in Mary’s voice. It was platonic, right?

“It strikes me as amazing that human beings are the only *type of animal*, so to speak, that goes to war,” Mary ranted, finally losing her smile and developing a cute little lip grind. “Other animals fight, but it’s not for political or religious opinions. We all fight because of stupid things!”

Salem listened intently as Mary continued talking, building to an emotional crescendo—certainly a born political leader. Or maybe just a really passionate and lonely girl?

“That’s all it is,” Mary sighed with a nod. “War is stupid. No matter how you justify it. No matter who is on what side. Everybody has a family. Everybody believes in something. Everybody wants to go home at the end of the day and kiss someone good night.”

Salem met her eyes for that last statement, still trying to decipher the code of these princesses and their weird facial expressions.

“Everybody wants the same thing,” a suddenly ebullient Mary exclaimed. “We want to get back what we lost in our childhood a long time ago. That feeling of safety. That trust. That wonderful feeling of loving your mom and dad. And of welcoming in new friends. No responsibility, no prejudice. Just people loving each other. It’s like you said, we all have that bond...we’re all connected. We all want the same thing.” Mary nodded at Salem in scintillating warmth, more like a stupor of rapture.

Suddenly Salem lunged out and kissed Mary passionately on her perfectly pouty pink lips. They tasted like fruit, like natural floral and garden juices. Salem closed her eyes in romantic bliss.

Mary, meanwhile shot open her eyes in horror. She stared wide-eyed at Salem’s squirming face and hardly had a second to process what was happening. She shook her hands in distress, too appalled to even move away and break the kiss.

After a long moment of processing, she gently pushed Salem away. Instead of a chiding word, instead of an innocent question, Mary's jaw simply dropped. The words didn't come out. Only the look of thunder-struck condemnation and judgment were seen and they filled Mary's little body with voluminous rage.

The animals at the front row were also watching in slack-jawed amazement.

Salem put her fingers over her own lips and sat back, inching farther and farther away to safety.

Finally, Mary stared back at Salem and the words flowed.

"WHAT. THE. HELL?"

"Oh My Goddess. What did I do?"

Salem stood up and backed away, pacing around nervously. Mary stood up too, bewildered and scandalized, her chest pounding like a hummingbird's wing.

*"What the hell was that? Oh golly Oh gosh. Oh jeepers. Oh jeepers!"*

"I...I..." Salem managed to spit out.

"*You what?*" Mary screeched, holding her hands on her hips and glaring at her adversary.

"I don't know what that was," Salem mumbled.

"You don't know what that *was?*" Mary reviled. "I sure know what it felt like!"

Salem hid her head in regret. Yanking her hair, she said the only thing both girls were thinking. "Ahhhh stupid, stupid, stupid."

Mary's shock was only building as she looked at the animals then back to Salem, realizing she was probably the last to know of this plot.

*"Oh My Dog! This whole...the whole...the whole time?"*

"Ohhhhh someone kill me now. Just kill me now. Seriously, break out the witch kit and kill me."

Mary could barely look at Salem. Her eyes were still wide, still terrorized and by now twitching. As she replayed the incident inside her head, only one thing was known for certain. "I gotta go!"

"Yeah, me too," Salem laughed nervously. "You know, chores and uh, witch stuff to do. Kay, see ya later. So okay, let's forget this ever happened and catch up in 20 years or so. Kay, byeeee!"

Mary quickly scurried outside of the cave. A long moment of silence occurred, with Salem slowly turning her head towards the animals.

But within seconds, Mary came back to face her witchy accuser.

*"What the hell did you do?"* Mary roared.

*"I don't know!"*

"You tried to make out with me!"

## The Evil Princess

Salem shrugged repeatedly. “I think I’m possessed by a demon, honestly. I think yesterday it happened and it’s been screwing around inside my head. Yeah, that’s it. A demon. I need a priest.”

“You can’t do that. You’re...a witch. And I’m a princess!”

Mary ran away a second time, leaving Salem head in hands and devastated. No, more like devastated and embarrassed and thoroughly crushed in spirit.

And then Mary ran back into the cave again.

She seethed, clenching her fists. “YOU’RE ALSO A GIRL! AND I’M A GIRL!” She screamed as loud as a demon before finally leaving the cave for good.

The animals thought long and hard about that statement. They gradually nodded, finally getting the point.

“Ohhhhh,” the rat said. “Okay. Now I see what the big deal is. Girl and girl. I totally missed that the first time.”

The animals stared at Salem in pity. She was a wreck, grabbing her hair in angst and shuddering at her constantly looping humiliation.

“Don’t you guys even say a word!” Salem screamed. “I don’t want to hear another peep out of you!”

She stormed her away to the bedroom, sending strong signals to be left alone...left alone for a very long time.

“Hmmm,” the bat remarked stoically. “That did not go as I expected.”

“Ya think?” the vulture mocked.

“Oh my,” the cat moaned in disenchantment. “I fear dinner may be indefinitely delayed tonight.”

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## Chapter 9

### Naked Shame

*“Wherever I go I am always nude. Why would I put clothes on to win the approval of other people? They should be far more impressed by my natural appearance. Besides, I have been told that my curves are illustrious and that the violent manner in which I use them is awe-inspiring to a lonely heart. There is nothing shameful about nudity. It is the state of perfection.”*

-A dubious quote, probably apocryphal, attributed to Queen Fen Mien I

**S**alem would never live down such an embarrassing memory. For just a moment it felt invigorating, as if it was the perfect time to let the heart sing. Unfortunately, the timing was completely wrong. For that matter, the girl was most likely completely wrong. A girl screaming into the night and repeatedly shouting “what the hell?” didn’t seem like the fairy tale ending Salem hoped for.

## The Evil Princess

Then again, it didn't necessarily mean Mary was violently opposed to the idea. There was no sure sign of violent resistance—just major freak out, which surely rose one step above violent opposition. From a Princess of Blood, not the worst case scenario.

Salem sighed. Rationalization always followed unconscionable screw ups and bury-one's-head-in-the-sand denial.

For days, she lay in bed trying hard to live down the hideous memory and to pretend as if they parted on respectably evil terms, or at least formed some level of mutual respect for each other—which they had, save for the humiliating ending which untangled all of the progress made.

Salem even looked up a magic spell in her *Big Book Of Spells (Abridged)*, entitled “Forget the Past.” With a lump in her throat and a heavy heart she cast the spell to forget everything—to erase all the pain from her mind. Alas, it didn't work. In fact, it backfired as it only seemed to make Salem feel more restless at night and develop a stubborn, throbbing, burning in her loins. She really started to despise the *Big Book Of Spells (Abridged)*—apparently, they left all the really good stuff out.

Mary, meanwhile, distracted herself from the embarrassing scene by doing what good princesses ought to do. She lay upside down on her bed, reading holy books as well as the occasional escapist adventure involving faraway lands, sword fighting, magic and masquerading princes and the princesses they marry. She even took the time to pet a parrot of the Royal House, stroking its feathers and listening carefully to its eyes. The bird only looked at her, a bit quizzically, as if they both knew she was trying too hard to have a bonding moment that just wasn't going to happen.

By the time Friday Dinner approached, the largest dinner of the week, Mary had lost her appetite. Possibly because of depression, or because the incident with Salem was fresh on her mind. Or perhaps, because staring across the table from her were two huge duck eyes, peering helplessly from the full duck that had just been revealed under the pot cover. Something about the duck a l'orange course seemed strange. Its face seemed to have a silly and jovial expression. Its eyes were empty but its beak contorted into something resembling a smile. The only thought occurring to Mary as she gazed into its unusually large face and body—almost the size of a small child, she concluded—was that this animal died peacefully. That was a good thing, right?

“What's the matter, darling?” Lilith said with a gentle smile. “You've hardly touched your duck a l'orange.”

“Not hungry,” she said, looking away and tossing her fork back on the table.

“Yes, you’ve been saying that quite a bit lately. What’s going on? Is something happening with the witch?”

“What? No. Why do you ask?” she quickly replied.

“Did she threaten you?”

“Uh, no, not really. No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Then what?”

“Well...”

“Let me guess. Cold feet? It’s only natural. You’re engaged to a man you hardly know.” She chomped on her meal delicately. The silence was nice, as an evening away from the hard-chomping King always seemed tranquil and promising. “At least Aaron seems nice. Kind. Patient. Not put off by your more *interesting* quirks,” Lilith said with a tilt and an odd eyebrow twitch.

“Well...yeah I guess that’s the problem. I’m engaged to be married to this guy. This great guy, I know. But I just don’t feel it.”

“Of course not!” the weathered woman laughed. “No girl ever *loves* the man she marries. No, she *learns* to love him.” She smiled and reminisced, playing with her food and oblivious of the huge duck eyes that Mary couldn’t ignore. “You know when I first met your father, I was terrified of him. He barked. He growled. He scratched himself. It was like I was engaged to an animal. Literally, a big disgusting, dangerous animal.”

“Wow. How did you grow to love him?”

Lilith smiled, affectedly, but decidedly. “Well, I just came to realize we were right for each other. He had a softer side to him. I just had to look for it. I had to keep an open mind and look for something beautiful in that vast, mountain of fur. But what matters is that I found it. I fell in love with him. Later.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Mary, I understand what you feel,” mother continued cautiously. “Maybe you’ve met some other handsome young suitor, mmmm?”

Mary didn’t nod or fret but stared empty, rivaling the dead duck in that moment.

“But we’re not talking about a romance. Those come and go. We’re talking about love. About building a life. An important life that means something special to these people. Their people. Our people.”

Lilith lost her appetite as well and stood up to stroke her daughter’s lovely blond locks. “Mary the Melancholy...high flying Mary. So adored, so young, so full of hope. You are what they need you to be. You know that.”

## The Evil Princess

Mary's gradual nod stopped cold. "Mom...what if I told you there was someone else?"

Lilith smiled in response—a wide and uncomfortable smile, as if Mary had just said a bad word. "I would ask what's so special about a *boy* that has a heart? Compared to a boy that has a heart...and a kingdom to offer you?"

"Right. Makes sense."

Mary's new resolve to grow up and assume the role of a serious-minded princess followed a night of intense shopping at the Royal Public (Private) Bazaar, a shopping center open to the public, implying the availability of worldwide fashion and free negotiation, but of course one restricted to only the Royals, the Royal In-Laws and the Royal Guard. If anyone dared to enter the Royal Public Private Bazaar, they were to be hanged onsite. No one from the Reds understood the bloody thing, but it was a mobile marketplace of princess clothing and accessories provided generously by the House of Opula and supposedly made sense according to their demented logic. What mattered were the clothes.

Mary, after asking the Golden Elite Virgins if they suspected anything funny about Salem, to which of course they giggled "no", requested a new dress—one that would communicate the opposite of whatever Salem was reading into the previous dresses, something conservative, queenly and above all, something that says *I prefer princes, not witches*.

This time Mary left her palace wearing a full turtleneck dress that hid her neck all the way down to her feet, with no slip, with long sleeves and gloves and with dark blue boots. The color chosen had to be decisively periwinkle and no trace of skin could be shown. Even Mary's face was partly covered under a thick pilgrim bonnet, as white as can be and she chose to go free of any jewelry or earrings that might tempt the poor lonely witch. Unfortunately for the clueless Mary, the cackling virgin girls neglected to design something loose fitting and instead draped Mary in a form-fitting, flattering cotton spandex, which covered all skin but still didn't leave much to the imagination of a lonely witch. After all, after so many personal dress requests and very few thank-yous, the Virgins were starting to get a bit catty.

Mary once again set course for the witch's cave, a dastardly site that grew more terrifying each time she returned, albeit for completely new and alarming reasons each time. This time the House took no chances. They provided a horse and guard, made up of two dozen men ready to kill a witch at short notice. Mary rode the mare, battling impatience and anxiety.

A princess would surely look powerful, so why did she feel so timid? The Melancholy Heir tightened her brow and gave the halting signal to the men behind her. She looked resentful as she met Rivulet's eyes from a distance.

"Going somewhere, princess?" he said in his naturally syrupy and devious voice. "You know I was admonished by Prince Aaron to not leave you alone under any circumstances."

"I am the Future Queen. You will stand down, as I command," she said firmly.

Rivulet laughed quietly and turned away. "Very well, Future Queen Mary. By all means, demonstrate your great wisdom and power. Everybody's so inspired by you."

Rivulet and his men laughed as they walked paces backward, allowing Mary to venture into the woods unaccompanied and ready to control the situation on her own.

Salem already knew Mary was coming, as she used her creepy, stalking magic mirror to watch the action unfold. She made sure to be properly dressed this time, of course a witch's garb, but a particularly shiny shade of black this time. She felt butterflies tickling her tummy, as she hurried to the entrance.

As she passed, the vulture couldn't help but razz her. "I'm no singing crab, but something tells me you should kiss the girl."

"Shut up."

"Salem!" Mary said, entering the cave without so much as a knock or even a polite question.

"Mary. I didn't expect to see you back...so soon," Salem said.

"So soon?"

"Or ever. I dunno." Salem looked down to her toes and cautiously looked up and into Mary's poker face. "Why are you here?"

"Because, Salem!" Mary barked, angry as hell and clenching her tiny little fists. "Because you have to be so dramatic about everything! I am engaged! I am a princess. I have a kingdom that needs me. Why... why would you do all of this?"

"Why? I thought I was just talking."

Mary tilted her head and sent her a nasty look in response.

"Well, okay, not just talking," Salem admitted stroking her own hair in panic. "I liked you. And yeah, talking to nothing but cats, bats and snakes for years on end probably warped my mind."

"Well, I can't feel that way about you. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, sure," Salem dismissed, before becoming a bit suspicious at Mary's phrasing. "Wait a sec...you *can't* feel that way or you *don't* feel that way?"

## The Evil Princess

"I...I can't. I don't. Both."

"Because I must say, I felt some vibes in there somewhere," Salem said with a teething tease and a coy eye squint.

"Well, you were mistaken," Mary corrected. "I am a Princess. I am a good girl. Literally. I'm good, you're evil."

"True, that much is true."

"So let's just agree to end all of this."

"Okay, fine."

"It was a mistake. Our mistake. *Your* mistake. It was all you," Mary commented proudly.

"Oh sure, I'm the witch. People expect it coming from me," Salem shrugged.

"Right. And you probably cast a spell on me or something."

Salem waited for a laugh or a sarcastic look. Something. But nothing. Salem felt provoked by Mary's proud stance and grinned in response. "No, I didn't."

"Well...you must have. Why else would I have...?"

"Let me kiss you?"

"You're sneaky!" Mary exclaimed in judgment. "You never liked me from the start. You called me a candy cane. And another word I won't repeat."

"What makes you think I never liked you?" Salem snapped back. "You came barging in here dressed like a battleship wanting to kick me out of my house. My volume matches your volume."

"You said I wasn't pretty. I remember," Mary pouted oh so subtly.

"No, no I didn't."

"Yes, you did—"

"Mary!" Salem replied dramatically as always, her arms folded and her eyes fighting.

"I said there were three princesses in these lands. The Smart One. The Pretty One. And the Other One." Salem began counting with her fingers as her disposition caught fire. "The Smart Princess, Wendy? She's not nice. *At all*. She thinks she's so smart but everyone secretly hates her because we all know she doesn't give a flying fudge about anyone but herself. The Pretty One, Sweet Blossom? She knows she's pretty. She's so confident of that fact she walks around the kingdom and demands free stuff from everybody she meets. She's a selfish, egotistical slagbag!"

Mary listened, turning her head sideways in suspicion but subdued interest.

"And then there was the third one. The Melancholy Mary everyone talks about. The so-called average woman that doesn't know how

beautiful, how soul-crunchingly beautiful, she really is.” Salem’s voice cracked and softened. “The kind of girl you can’t look at too long in the face, because you instantly fall in love with her eyes. The girl everyone talks down to. The one that everyone underestimates. The one that everyone uses, because they all want something from her.”

Salem shook her head and sighed. “But they’ve never bothered to see you for who you really are. They don’t ask. They don’t care. But I see the real you, Mary Melancholy. You’re the girl who loves with all of her heart. You care about people. And sometimes you feel empty inside and you don’t know why. I know why.

It’s because you’re not living the life you want. You’re hardly living at all. But I know that every time we meet, we really have fun. And I, well, I just turn into a lovesick yutz when I’m around you. But I don’t care. Because you’re the kind of girl worth fighting for. Worth embarrassing yourself for. The kind of innocent face you never want to see cry. A girl who’s so blue, all you want to do is hug her and tickle until she smiles. Sweet, delicious, beautiful Mary. I knew it from the moment you walked in the door...”

Salem bobbed her head and corrected herself.

“Well, cave...you weren’t like all the other princesses and queens. You’re special. Accept it.”

Mary sighed to herself. When she met Salem’s eyes again, she revealed her misty-eyed, breaking posture. “Me? I’m nothing. That’s what people don’t understand about me. I’m nothing special, Salem.”

“Yes. Say my name,” Salem whispered, approaching her favorite princess and piercing her eyes with spirit. “Every syllable from your mouth is like a little symphony going in my head. So pretty. I could listen to you talk for hours. It’s like listening to a harp play.”

Mary’s face looked terrified. She arched her eyebrows and quivered. But she didn’t tell Salem to stop. Her witchy “girlfriend”—judging by the total amount of time spent in the cave, at least—reached in and kissed her a second time, again taking Mary’s puffy, smooth lips into her own and nestling them gently. A taste explosion occurred, with Mary’s fruit-flavored lips meeting Salem’s amaranthine kisser. She tasted something close to fine wine like she had “once”, so many years ago before she was Mary the Protected. Salem sucked Mary’s bottom lip softly, the subtlest savor of wet licking falling from her top lip.

Mary did nothing...until a moment later when she kissed back. She parted her lips and closed her eyes, letting Salem enter her mouth. Salem closed her eyes and indulged in the sensation—smooching on the gorgeous and previously unattainable Mary Melancholy and so naughtily putting her evil hands through Mary’s perfectly kempt hair.

## The Evil Princess

She snuggled the back of Mary's head and caressed her face down to her dainty jaw.

Mary hummed a high little B-note as Salem began tasting her tongue, a sweet little juice box that begged for more attention with every twist and spiral.

This time Mary didn't break the kiss. Mary opened her eyes for a moment, staring at Salem in silent, dizzy awe. There wasn't reason enough to stop, just to swoon over Salem's magical kissing ability. She closed her eyes again and let Salem suck on her tongue feeling a tidal wave of butterflies escaping from her tummy to her suddenly dry throat.

Mary hummed again, this time a hysterical little D-note squeal, which only intensified Salem's desire to feel and taste more, so much more of this delicious princess. The energy of the kiss magnified and their hungry lips created a small but salacious vacuum strong enough to send them both reeling against the wall. They didn't even break the kiss but ebulliently continued sucking face as they crashed against the cupboard in the kitchen and then into the dish rack, sending a dozen dishes and ingredients toppling to the ground.

Mary broke the kiss first, probably because they were inches away from losing balance completely and falling ungracefully to the floor. They both opened their eyes, breathless and gasping for air and stared at each other in further confusion.

"Oh dear. I don't know why I did that," Mary fretted.

"Me neither."

Mary sent Salem another bewildered and angsty facial expression, as if to say, *Seriously?*

"Well, okay," Salem said with a blush. "Maybe I have a vague idea why I did that."

"I have to go home now, Salem," Mary sulked, gathering her wits and recovering from the flush of conflicted emotions. "I can't begin to explain the many reasons why this can never happen."

Salem tried to listen but couldn't bear it. "Mary, I'm in—"

"Don't say it."

"I just really, really lo—"

"I know. I know."

Mary nodded quickly, making a fast move for the cave entrance trying to hurry away before Salem could finish. "Don't say it."

"I—"

"Yes, yes!"

Mary left the cave and ran swiftly, but not before Salem left the cave and shouted after her. "I'm freaking in love with you! And you

can't do anything about it! So there! Run away! Take your cute little bum out of here!"

She slouched down against the wall, the taste and smell of Mary still all over her face and that gushy lovesick feeling pounding in her heart. "Ohhhhhh...but what an adorable bum she has. I just want to draw it. It's so perfect."

Salem sneered and flared her nostrils. Her animals were there, their mouths gaping wide open and their eyes frozen in trauma.

"No talking!" she said with a witchy finger point.

The spell was over by now but that didn't stop the cat from meowing all night, the vulture from squawking and the snakes from hissing for hours. The cave sure loved its scandals.

Meanwhile, Mary walked back to the forest where she presumed Rivulet and his men would still be waiting. After all, no one actually listened to the Princess when she asked to be left alone. Welcome to Royal Procedure.

When she did find the camp, she immediately saw Rivulet waiting for her, sporting an unusually thick smile. An alarming expression that seemed far too gleeful to be a good thing.

"Well, now. Have you taken care of all your business?"

"I thought I told you to go ahead of me?"

"And I thought I told you that the Prince will not allow it," Rivulet said haughtily.

"Fine. Let's go."

"Hmmm," Rivulet said in jest as he walked with Mary back to their horses. "And I'm sure his Majesty is in for quite the long chat when you get back home. So many things to discuss. To reveal. To...repent for."

Mary eyed Rivulet who kept a supercilious little smirk on his vertically-gifted face.

Mary stared back in uneasiness for a long and uncomfortable moment, but Rivulet just smiled. "Did you..."

"Of course. Which is why I assume *you* will be telling them what happened, instead of putting me in that awkward position. I would never want to overstep my bounds, Lady Mary."

"Ugh. Right." Mary sighed, walking ahead of the annoying skinny-faced man and pondering the ugliness to come. No doubt scandalous confessions were in her future, the sort of flying-off-the-handle, volcanic family drama that such sins merited. But first she and a certain love-sick witch, needed a good calming song.

SONG 4

“WHAT ARE WE REALLY DOING HERE”

(Salem)

So many mistakes, a lifetime of bad choices  
Thought I understood, till I fell flat on my face  
There I stood humiliated, voiceless  
Whatever love was, it felt out of place

Never trust again, I promised with a vengeance  
Everyone's so cruel, I can't take another hit  
Lost myself in books and independence  
Fighting strong armed and, nothing but my wits

Then you come along, so innocent so trusting  
You reminded me, of a silly girl I knew  
Before she resigned and did some maladjusting  
Once a pretty girl, dressed in black instead of blue

I can read your eyes, I know deep down you're grieving  
Why am I crazy, to think that I can cure you  
Cast a magic spell, with both of us believing  
I'm falling much too fast please don't make me regret you

What are we really doing here?  
I never expected to find you  
I've been toiling my whole life to know you  
You're way too good, do I even deserve you?  
It's all I can do not to blurt out I Love you  
What are we really doing here?

(Mary)

I'm stuck in a cage, a life hardly worth living  
Thought that my future, was written in blood and gold  
Now I'm scared for once, my life is slipping  
Now there's a question, something not foretold

And wouldn't you know, my mind is in a panic  
How to disappoint, these people who trust in me  
If only they knew, how worthless and tragic  
Is my royal name, born in mediocrity

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

Have a bad feeling, love is getting on my nerves  
They always told me, be careful what you wish for  
One oops encounter, life throws you some curves  
Now I'm standing still, frozen cold at an open door

I can't explain it, this sharp hold you have on me  
Every time you speak, I suddenly give a damn  
I don't even know, why I treat you so cruelly  
Why can't I admit, what I really am

What are we really doing here?  
I never expected to meet you  
Been running my whole life to avoid you  
You're not the one perfect husband now are you  
Please don't make choose, I can't say that I Love You  
What are we really saying here?

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## Chapter 10

### A Little Touch Of Magic

*“Whatever faith you hold onto after tragedy, after higher education and after disappointing life experience, is the only faith you ever really had to begin with. So what very little I have left, I hold onto like a miser.”*

-Attributed to Queen Lilith

Mary knew that there was no reason to play games with Rivulet. The last thing she needed was that sick old pipeface trying to blackmail her. She arranged to break the news to her parents first and then Aaron, who would probably need a little extra tender loving care to mend his bruised ego. Rivulet was a monster and not really the monster-with-a-heart of gold cliché the books of old described.

He managed to be both hideously ugly and irredeemably sadistic. Whereas most villainous, treacherous and perverted men wore living animals on their shoulders as a sign of approachability, Rivulet instead chose to wear an animal of a different kind.

He carried an invisible parasite on his shoulder—an entire colony of parasites, or so the rumors suggest. Parasites that, upon his “hug of death” would overcome you and invade your organs, leaving you riddled with tiny bugs and worms, most of which would find their way out through your waste and eventually from your eyes and finally your mouth. The rumors of Rivulet’s Pet traveled all of Cadabra, leading to the common expression, “Who’s we? You and the invisible parasite on your shoulder?”

There was only one decision to make: to apologize profusely to Aaron and forget that any of this nonsense ever happened. Perhaps Mary had long passed the point of complete denial. Yes, she did kiss a witch, that much happened. And she kissed her again and tasted her tongue and sort of lost her breath in a whiff of intense something or another. She didn’t feel like she was under any kind of spell, but then again, maybe that’s what witch spells feel like—you can never tell when you’re under?

Whatever the case, even if—and it would be a big hypothetical if—she did feel something for Salem, it wasn’t anything to speak of in the real world. They were both women, one a princess with responsibilities and one a Sapphiric vagabond who spent way too much time with animals. It was surely a match made in Hell and to try to explain such a thing to unwholesomely powerful people seemed absurd.

Mary decided she could do without the drama. She determined never to go back to Salem’s lot and to purge the experience from her mind, chalking it up to youthful, sinful indiscretions. She avoided Salem, her parents, Rivulet and every living thing for a good three days, opting to feign illness and stay under the blankets fighting off the unladylike “residue” of the shameful memory.

Salem, meanwhile, didn’t sleep a wink and seemed to catch a bit of fever herself, but the kind of mental fever one cannot easily douse with water, sleep and herbs. People of the “literate kingdoms”, colloquial usage for the Gold, Red, Diamond and Pink kingdoms, used to call it “female hysteria”, because only unlearned and unaffiliated females seemed to develop the sickness. Or in other words, witches, gypsies, hybrids and all the other undesirables who couldn’t simply get married and take care of those burning symptoms like a respectable woman.

## The Evil Princess

The fever was too much for Salem and so she set off to meet Mary in secret, coming through the window of the tower like a true romantic—or so she figured something a romantic prince might try.

Salem landed on Mary's Tower, identified clearly by the long hanging blue cord which the princess draped out the window. Rumor had it that she left the cord out there on purpose, as a symbol of Melancholy, the inspirational "even temper" that united two warring kingdoms. However, friends of Mary realized that the princess simply brought all of her clothes out by the beginning of every fourth week and simply left the cord there for days on end, not remembering to pick up after herself.

Salem saw the blue cord and swooped down with a furious angling of her magic broomstick. She cautiously approached the window, making sure no guards were hiding, or Mary wasn't strutting around comfortably naked—not that the sight would have personally offended her, not at all.

"Mary?" Salem said shyly, crawling through the window and setting eyes on the princess. "I don't want to use a line but...maybe you should relax and let down your hair."

"Hello Salem."

Mary flinched twice and stared straightly at her unwelcomed guest. To Salem's interest and for once, Mary wasn't wearing anything so royal, except a simple house dress with plain blue and white polka dots. For once, Mary under-dressed for the special occasion. Naturally, the entire house dress, crudely envisioned by a dying Golden Elite Guru, in his last breath before expiring, was made from authentic ultra-fine hair Vicuna, not from anywhere near the literate kingdoms but from the unprotected Outskirts where life is cheap but quality wool and die is expensive.

Furthermore, it was the late fashion designer's expert opinion that Mary's body, gifted but not gratuitously skinny, should not be fit into the dress but sewn into it from the nude. Therefore, "The Sad Simple House Dress" required a flesh-colored and curve-hugging form with only minimal jewels encrusted to the straps.

The reason for the finicky customization being that whenever Mary grieved her tears would often cause fluctuations in her appetite, weight and dress size and these led to unreasonable requests of the palace, such as ten blankets in the middle of the night, feather fanning up in cool the tower or hot showers immediately followed by cold baths. Hence, her fashion team often found it efficient to design around her volatile melancholy, creating uniforms that would simply stretch and grow with her body. If nothing else, sewn out outfits would possibly

decrease the high number of custom dress requests from the team of increasingly frustrated virgins. Or shall we say, virgins who were even more frustrated than usual.

“You know, if you ever have something to say you can just send it via letter.”

“Awww, looks like you’re feeling under the weather,” Salem said, instantly picking up on Salem’s cool vibe and condemning face. “Got a case of the typhoid, Mary?”

Mary’s passive aggressive nature was becoming downright passive snarky. She removed all smile, glow and cheer from his visage and glared in politeness. It was as if she resented Salem’s motivations, her very presence was a slight to palace etiquette.

“I was just coming by to...check on you? Just see if you were okay. You know,” she tittered nervously. “Uh, you left in a hurry. Like you usually do. I just...just wanted to know if there was anything we needed to get clear. You know, girl talk. But not *that, that kind of girl talk...*” She guffawed waving her hands in surrender. “Just, you know, talking because that’s what normal people do. You know, non-stalkers. Very non-stalking situation we have here. Boy, you got a neat room, you know?”

Mary’s room had nothing in it, except a blue-painted dresser, a blue sheeted bed and a mirror that was intentionally unflattering to the physique. The Royal Princess Room was far more flattering. Maybe Salem’s pop-in was the true offense. Maybe women didn’t like when other women (or men, or things) just flew inside their bedroom unannounced. *Women, go figure*, Salem thought.

“I get it,” Salem apologized, looking to the floor in blank-minded regret. “I should have knocked. I guess I just thought...you know...I might have heard back from you. Even if it was just a ‘Screw You’ letter, like I usually get from non-animal friends. Which is not to say that you’re an animal. Well, you’re a human animal. You’re as graceful as a gazelle.”

“Mmm-hmmm.”

“As pretty as a sunset. Your eyes are like stars. And you have boobs like pomegranates.”

“Hmm.”

“And your silence is like a relaxing day in the briar patch,” Salem said with a tilt. “...Say, maybe you should say something right about now!”

Mary nodded begrudgingly, squinting her eyes only slightly, just enough to tell Salem she chose not to laugh.

“It was a joke,” Salem whispered in sarcasm.

## The Evil Princess

“Uh huh,” Mary replied with a final nod.

“You know just ignoring me repeatedly while being my ‘friend’ doesn’t work,” Salem vented. “It means you’re the equivalent of a dude who just stares at me and stares and stares and stares and stares and never says anything at all but still considers this a friendship. If I wanted a friend like that I’d invite a giant tarantula to my cave and just put it in front of my chair and have it stare at me and then I’d stare right back at it and I would feel this great wordless love shared between two species. Call me crazy but that doesn’t work with people since we’re supposed to speak the same language. No, it just creeps me out when you do that.”

“We said everything we needed to say. More than enough,” Mary said quaintly, picturing the last embarrassing moment shared between two awkward subfriends. Surely something less than sisters, less than childhood friends and less than prince and princess. “So...is there anything else?”

Salem grinned, looking away from Mary’s eyes, letting her win the game. “Ah, I gotcha. I guess my motivations are always sneaky, right? I guess you can read my thoughts that easy. Well, fine. Sorry I disrupted your perfect day.”

“Okay, bye-ee,” Mary sang, delivering parting words that were respectably politically correct. Nothing to be misconstrued as too friendly or too cruel.

Salem silently wept, oh the distinct memory of Mary willfully touching her skin, for one carefree moment. One silly moment that meant nothing in particular, except that she was comfortable. Actions without meaning, without social expectation, without commitment. How joyful and how fleeting. If only things could go back to that and forever.

“Sorry, I crashed your bedroom quiet time,” Salem jeered, right before slithering out the window and grabbing her broomstick for a long, cold and lonely ride home.

Mary went back to sleep, whatever was going on in her mind a mystery to everybody.

All Salem knew was that she really found women annoying. Men were disappointing for sure, but at least they were fairly transparent. Women though, what a ridiculously labyrinthine plain was located inside the female brain. Hot and passionate one minute, cold and oblivious the next. It was a bit foreign to Salem’s world—a self-contained little cult of instant acceptance. Misfit animals, misfit family and all sorts of traveling misfit people who usually got a free stay on Salem’s land, what little boundaries she had left.

Salem retreated to a tavern in the Outskirts, the forbidden territory of all Literate Kingdoms, the dark place where travelers ran free, of no particular allegiance to anyone, where the only currency were herbs, wine, liquor, psychedelic plants and A Little Magic.

The tavern was named “Pickiest Six”. Most decent people with a family name never rode to such a place. Salem, however, showed up every few months just to feel some sort of connection to higher level animals.

“Nice Day at Pickiest Six!” the horribly mutated bartender yelled out, his melted red face apparently the victim of some sort of revenge witchcraft. But even when the poor old fool opened his mouth, he revealed his toothless shame and his lack of all inner and outer beauty. “Nice Day” was a greeting of non-invasive politeness in the Outskirts. They didn’t insist you must accommodate their “Nice Day” but simply stated as fact, *It is a nice day today...and to Hell with you if you don't think so!*

Not that anyone in the Outskirts gave a damn about witchcraft, of Gold/Red politics. Nobody cared where you came from or what happened to your face so as long as you didn’t fart in public and occasionally bought someone a drink.

“What’ll it be, toots?”

“Why of course, A Little Magic.”

The half-full tavern of people and things cheered in camaraderie. A Little Magic was the most evil, soul-damning and organ grinding liquor around. It was only one shot but that little shot contained all Hellfire and Heaven in one glorious orgy of amorality.

To make A Little Magic – True Cadabra Style—one needed:

- \* 1 cup of century-aged wine
- \* 1 psychoactive man-eating plant, including the buds, leaves, resin and oil
- \* 1 shot of “Banned in Cadabra” spirits (with certified arrest records)
- \* 1 fluid ounce of poisonous mead, from preferably an un-hygienic carboy
- \* 1/5 of Pinkian Sauce (the ingredients of which no one knows, they only buy)
- \* 1 crushed apple filled with Witch Broth  
(homemade by verified evil witches with certified kills)
- \* 1/8 of psychedelic “Royal Golden Fecal” mushrooms Royal Golden Shit  
(unfortunately prepackaged, cheap bastards)

Salem walked over to the bar and in as the outcasts, the mutants, the freaks, hybrids, gypsies and plant addicts screamed their ribald taunts—which Salem knew, was just the way of the Outskirts. Everyone “loved you”, but no one “liked you” until you showed them how dangerous you could be.

## The Evil Princess

“Are you sure you can take it?” the bartender said with a smile. “How about a nice cup of Indigo Rose instead?”

Salem barked at the winking bartender in smiling disdain. “Don’t rip me off, jerk face. You fill that sucker up till it’s spilling over with toxins.”

The tavern erupted into laughter and the crowd began stomping their feet in good sport.

“Suck it, witch!”

“Pretend like it’s the blood of a child!”

Salem gave them a raspberry. “Blood of a child? What, are you running a marathon or something? I’m in a bar, jerk wad. I ain’t watching my figure!”

The crowd erupted again as Salem braced herself for the shot. The bartender poured the drink, eyeing Salem in intrigue and wondering just how hard she would fall after feeling the cataclysmic jolt of authentic 100 proof poison.

The plants and alcohol were like water. But the Witch Brew was always hard going down. And the Pinkian Sauce, whatever was in that sadistic, hypnotic milk, sent most hard drinkers to the floor curling up into the fetal position and asking mommy to stuff them back in.

“You know legend has it the Pinkians got this mysterious sauce from the last Blood Moon Age,” the bartender said.

“Blood Moon, gimme a break,” Salem said, as she took a slow and meandering sniff of the shot glass. “People think witches are crazy. But I’m not the one talking about a Blood Moon fairy tale.”

“It’s not a fairy tale,” the bartender answered. “It’s a scientific fact and a case of cosmic happenstance. Every few hundred years a Blood Moon falls over Cadabra. Slowly but surely the moon is inching away from the planet. Once the moon is at the perfect distance from the earth for the shadow to cover it, the moon turns red.”

“Oh Gawd,” Salem roared, “You must have Pinkian blood in you. You guys never shut up about the goddamned cosmos, do you?”

“Trust me, it’s going to happen again. It happens every few hundred years. Science shows us that.”

“Screw science. I got straight Ds in Applied Sciences in Witch School anyway. I was homeschooled and I still got Ds, so imagine my shame. But hey, if you want to see a real red moon, I’ll bend over, drop my pants and take the tampon out.”

The bar full of drunks laughed it up.

“I’m just warning you, witchy-woman,” the bartender said coily. “This drink here is the stuff of legends. Most broads that come in here take one drink and then leave crapping out of their mouth, pissing out

of their vag and taking it in the butt.”

“Eew!” Salem said much to the hollering glee of the drunks. “Well, now I gotta’ try it.”

A quick head shake and dunk later and Salem swallowed the shot whole. Her new friends cheered.

“Gimme another!”

The bar erupted into cackles and catcalls. *Yeab right.*

“Wait for it, wait for it!” the gypsy to her left warned Salem.

Salem shrugged and waited for a refill. Until the Pinkian Sauce kicked in, sending Salem violently crashing back first into the nearby, double steel-enforced wall. Everybody thought they could drink two shots of A Little Magic. Until the aftertaste whacked you a good one.

Salem laughed, as two rugged freaks of nature lifted her up and back to her feet. While the tavern full of new friends cheered and laughed off Salem’s impressive performance. The fact that the witch was standing was the achievement. That girl must be one lonely, hard drinking, miserable old hag, or so they said.

“I guess I am,” Salem laughed drunk, stoned and hallucinating off her ass, all the while meeting eyes with a tall hybrid Duck-Headed Woman. There were many scary looking “hybrids” living in the Outskirts, strange creatures, either cross-bred or genetically deformed, that would seem to people in literate kingdoms as “anthropomorphic”. They had animal faces despite possessing humanoid bodies. Their mere appearance would frighten any God-believing eastern or western kingdom citizen, as the ideas of animals mating with humans was sacrilegious, unnatural and perverse. The fact that these aberrations of nature spoke, as if human, communicating in perfect Cadabra English, was yet another flash of magic that defied explanation.

Obviously, stories of these hybrids were suppressed by the literate kingdoms, as no king wanted to know—or wanted his people to know—that there were genetic monstrosities and breeding crimes being committed in faraway places. That you avoided the Outskirts was moral enough, without having going into the sanguinary details decent people ought not hear. Most good people dismissed these stories as urban legends, anyway. Only Salem, with her fearlessness and all-tolerant attitude, had ever purposely made the trip to the Outskirts and made acquaintances with some of these heteroclitics.

The Duckess, one might as well call her, blew bubbles of laughter out of her beak whenever she spoke. Salem almost forgot for a moment that a duck woman wearing a duck down coat wasn’t a moral travesty. “What brings you to the Magic Tavern, O Magic One?”

“Ah, you know,” Salem said. “The usual things.”

## The Evil Princess

“Oh? And how would someone like me know the ‘usual thing?’” the freak answered.

“Yes, you must be specific among such interesting friends,” the one-eyed blue gypsy woman agreed.

“Trouble with girls! What ungrateful witches they all are!” Salem hollered to another round-the-bar applause.

“Don’t get me started,” replied a cyborg missing a good fifty percent of his human skin, no doubt an exiled man-bot from the Diamond Empire. “I’ve been there!”

The gypsy grinned wickedly, obviously a horrendously aged and duplicitous face...which Salem found refreshingly assuring. “You have girl problems, witch? I think I understand what you need. Women don’t like spells. They’re not practical like we are. They want romance, like a prince or a king might give them.”

“Yeah, maybe that’s the problem,” Salem said, reaching the peak of A Little Magic and starting to notice that weird thing that happens when her words freeze upon leaving her mouth and stay suspended in the air. What a shame, she figured. A powerful hallucinogen, taken in a bar full of freaks and mutants. Telling the hallucinations apart from the monstrosities would be difficult.

“You’re going about it the wrong way,” the blue-skinned woman assured her in a thick accent that suggested the improperly pronounced syllables of a foreigner with the dirt stuck down her throat rasp of an authentic gypsy. “You’re trying to talk your way into her heart. But what the woman wants is a letter. A letter that casts a spell on her emotions. So that she falls in love.”

“Oh yeah? A letter, huh?” Salem giggled, not quite sure if the gypsy was as drunk as she was, or if there was some esoteric wisdom in this experience.

“Yes. Some have said that a poet is the greatest magician of them all. For he, or she, can break down mountains of hate and bitterness that develop inside the heart.”

“You think she’s hiding from me? Or doesn’t like me?” Salem asked.

The Duck-Headed Woman interjected. “Think of it this way,” the creature said, taking another swig of water and blowing some nice bubbles before making her point. “Whenever a person is rude to you for no apparent reason, that’s probably because you remind them of their ex. Their ex...with whom they had lots of wild and passionate sex. So the person doesn’t actually *hate* you. Maybe she’s just afraid of liking you too much,” the Duck Fatale said with a wink.

“Awww!” Salem laughed and pointed, to the amusement of her

new friends. “I love that. That is so narcissistic and yet awesome! You wet ducks always have the driest sense of humor, you know that?”

“Sing your love for her!” the gypsy demanded.

Indeed, it was customary to break out into song after drinking A Little Magic. It was the one drink that cured a person of all inhibition and let people just “live in music” like the prophets of old once wrote. Salem was more than ready to belt out an a cappella encore of “The Bartender’s Lamentation”. Naturally, the song was little more than a poor drunk soul singing freestyle verses of banal self-pity, but what made the occasion special was that a roomful of drunken reprobates felt your pain and would spontaneously sing sarcastic accompaniment, as if to say, “Yes, you were stupid and now we’re all going to get drunk with you so that you won’t kill yourself in despair.” Or something similar to that line of thinking—drunken mutants from the Outskirts weren’t exactly Bohemians.

## **SONG 5**

### **“The Drunkard’s Lamentation”**

**Gimme the strongest thing  
Gimme the strongest thing  
Gimme the strongest thing  
You Got, Got**

**What you want to know bartender  
(Nothing!)  
I’ve come to face my tormentor  
(You ugly!)  
Ain’t nothing going to change but legal tender  
(Except gold!)  
I thought I could be a contender  
(No chance!)  
Once upon a time thought I could mend her  
(No way!)  
But she said I was the pretender  
(Owch!)  
Girl played me to next September  
(See you in October!)  
But I’m always the experimenter  
(Kinky!)  
Fall on my face before my own gender**

(While you're down there!)  
Maybe she'd like me if I were slender  
(Big if!)  
Don't mean to be another dissenter  
(Yes you do!)  
Bitches attack where you're most tender  
(Witch balls!)  
Now I know true love comes from a blender  
(Oh yeah!)  
Time to go on a bender  
(Just one?)  
Love is a glass, the love of a vendor  
(We love your money!)  
Wasted my time, should have been an inventor  
(You would have sucked!)  
Now her panties say do not enter  
(What's her number?)  
Her face just says return to sender  
(What's her address?)  
But the game of love just dismembers  
(That's gotta hurt!)  
But I'll survive and won't surrender  
(No you won't!)  
Just give me a drink Mister Bartender  
(Double price, bitch!)

(Drunken Chorus)  
Give me some wine  
Lend me some mead  
Hand me that moonshine  
Pass me that weed  
Gimme the strongest thing  
Gimme the strongest thing  
Gimme the strongest thing  
You Got, Got

So my love life is real boring  
(It is!)  
Always the same old storying  
(Heard it!)  
Witch meets a gal, at first we're soaring  
(No you weren't!)

Made the first mistake of being too adoring  
(Duh!)  
Now my heart is laboring  
(That's just gas!)  
Want to maul random people start goring  
(What did they do?)  
Ain't never been into sporting  
(Because you failed!)  
Every time I fall in love I get a recording  
(Leave a message!)  
Time to stop thinking start snorting  
(Pass it around!)  
Wasn't expecting a blow so flooring  
(What's her number?)  
Pathetic witch gonna start hoarding  
(Crazy cat lady!)  
Her gorgeous face, the next morning  
(Covered in a warlock's spunk!)  
I should have listened to the warning  
(We told you!)  
Cold black heart ain't warming  
(Witches have no heart!)  
Need another drink for heartwarming  
(Triple price!)  
No love no sex it's about time for whoring  
(Ten dollar discount!)  
Sounds good since my loins are roaring  
(Like a kitten!)  
Too much life I'm absorbing  
(But weight you're retaining!)  
Too much to risk no friendship forging  
(What friends?)  
Now I'm stuck in deep mourning  
(You mean morning sickness!)  
No sense going out and cavorting  
(Wash your dripping mascara face!)  
I know the truth now it's swarming  
(But you're a liar!)  
Real love is a good pouring  
(Happy hour's over!)  
Just want to get a fix tired of warring  
(Did you say whoring?)

## The Evil Princess

**How about you kill me when life gets too boring  
(For a price!)**

**(Drunken Chorus)**

**Bounce me magic caps**

**Flip me some candy**

**Throw me some wack**

**Fill it with brandy**

**Is this in bad taste want something sicker**

**Tell her how you feel eat ketchup and liquor**

**Gimme the strongest thing**

**Gimme the strongest thing**

**Gimme the strongest thing**

**You Got, Got**

Salem finished the song and moshed with the mutants who were more than happy to pick her up, let her crowd surf and then throw her through some tables, as if to say, “We care.”

Even amid so much drinking, swearing and barroom brawling, for one very brief sobering moment, Salem did give serious thought to the letter suggestion. A letter might not be just sage advice, but her last chance to win a woman who was obviously turning her heart cold. If she did write a letter, would it be returned to sender or would Mary’s heart be opened?

Mary Melancholy received a letter the next day, not by traditional mail, but direct crow delivery. The black crow featured a tightly wrapped scroll tied to its claws. It didn’t take Mary long to realize who sent it.

“Oh my. Do you talk too?” she asked haughtily to the crow.

“Eat me!” the crow said, not via magic, but merely because it was trained to be ironic.

Mary untied the scroll and thought about removing the band and reading it.

Right before she stuffed it into her dresser, shooing the bird away.

“Eat me!” the crow cried as it flapped away.

Mary felt tempted by the unopened letter. She knew it was from Salem. She knew it was “about something”, probably the “thing” between them. She didn’t want to know...and yet she desired to uncover the mystery of this stalker-friend-lover-witch.

## *The End of the Magical Kingdom*

She said no firmly in her mind. Even when she tried to forget, Salem's rapid fire, bell-ringing voice never seemed to stop sounding. Salem's letter was presumably an apology, followed by lashing out, followed by regret, followed by deep emotional confession, followed by insult, followed by compliment, followed by one of her cutesy nicknames, followed by some bizarre reference to vegetarian child stew that went way over her head. Followed by one long monologue because Salem never seemed to shut up.

Forget it, Mary decided. Sleep was the better option. No one could hurt her in Dream Land.

Another knock on the window in just under a week. At least the hormonal witch knocked this time, she said with her tired eyes. But when Mary looked out the window, only an owl stared back at her, with those judgmental eyes and unforgiving beak.

"I think someone really wants to talk to me..." Mary said, unbinding the next scroll tied to the owl's foot.

"Who?" the owl had to ask. Mary stared at the grotesque bird and shook her head in disfavor.

"Who?"

"Go away," Mary said, shooing it away again. "I am not taking scrolls right now. Please don't leave a message."

Mary eyed the scroll in wonder. No doubt, this was the follow up apology scroll. Probably followed by another lash out, emotional baggage and then insult. She already grew tired of Salem's predictability. She opted not to give Salem the satisfaction of this dance. This predictable exchange was just not appropriate or even desired. Mary was happy. Mary was content. Mary was ready for bed.

Another week passed and it was about time for another plea from everyone's least favorite witch. Mary could practically feel the words being scribbled. There was no way Salem could let it go. She didn't seem to have any concept of letting it go, or saving face. She simply talked and talked until she was pale in the face.

What would the shameless witch send this time to beg for attention and troll a big fussy reaction? *Let me guess, Salem,* Mary thought in derision. *Another bird? A bat?* She went to bed feeling self-assured and underwhelmed at the antics sure to come. She began to doze off into a nice deep sleep...until a loud squishy thud sounded throughout the room, alarming Mary and waking her from the deepest sleep. A huge

object had collided against the window and fallen into the bedroom. She covered her body in blankets, until she peered out with only the top of her face. The object seemed to stand up and then flop around in mad vengeance.

“What the hell-?” Mary asked aloud. She widened her eyes in horror. “*Oh my DOG!*”

Some sort of monstrous squid creature had appeared at her window. A flying squid, presumably, since the freaky creature managed to reach the top of the tower. The slimy thing had one giant eye, eight tentacles, two fins and some sort of siphon, which jet-propelled the disgusting thing into the sky and into Mary’s window.

“Jeeeeepers!” Mary said, quickly grabbing the scroll tied to the Squid’s tentacle.

The squid said, “No tip, huh? Thanks for nothing, Princess Stick Up Her Butt.”

*Of course.* Mary half-smiled. Of course the Flying Squid talked.

But Mary still didn’t read the letters, even after the squid glided away and after hours passed with quiet solitude to comfort her. Even if she did read the letters, what good could come from it? So she desired to be with Salem, a witch she didn’t understand but felt immensely attracted to. What was the best case scenario?

They meet again, experience more momentary excitement followed by confusing, wistful goodbyes? Mary understood Salem felt something, but didn’t understand what she wanted to happen. There was no plan. This was no happily ever after scenario. It lacked a prince. It lacked a solution to the kingdom’s problems. Whatever Salem wanted was selfish. The opposite of love.

Mary pulled the pillow over her head and went back to sleep.

Mary had a very wet dream that night. No, not because it was illicit or because she accidentally peed herself—and thankfully the Flying Squid wouldn’t be there to see that embarrassment—but because she dreamt of swimming all night long.

It was one of those long and tranquil dreams that seemed to last all night, even after she woke up halfway through the night, that kind of dream that lets you continue where you left off after you drift back to sleep. She remembered thinking of Fen Mien I, the Goddess of Cadabra and how she wished for a moment she could swim to the Old Island and find her.

If not find her alive, than at least to compile evidence to see for herself, if she really existed and if her intentions for Cadabra were truly

noble. She even remembered asking for a sign. If Fen Mien I was truly watching over her subjects and in particular the women that would inherit her legacy, then she ought to provide a sign of her approval. Just a trifle, a tiny little signal that shows she is aware, she is and was real.

Just then, a little voice was heard. A very tiny voice, that didn't seem characteristic of a female deity.

*"Eeello? Eeello?"*

The more she listened, the more she realized the dream was fading and reality slowly colored the world back to its usual appearance. She had unfortunately awoken and whatever the reason for this voice, it wasn't going to be the epiphany she hoped to find.

She opened her eyes and tsked, rolling over and irritated at the full moonlight shining through the window.

"Mary?"

"Huh?" She quickly sat up in bed, very aware of a real voice joining her, one independent of her dream and her imagination.

"Mary. Can you hear me?"

"Yes. Who-Who is this?"

"Well...this is like, God!"

"What?" Mary furled her brow.

"Yeah, I'm totally God."

"Umm...you mean you're Queen Fen Mien I?"

"Yeah. That's me."

"Uh huh..." Mary said in suspicion. "And so why are you talking to me?"

"Umm..." The voice hesitated, as if munching on something. "Because I have like, a message to convey to people. I want you to be my pet. No wait, I mean my prophet! I want you to judge the world and deliver kickass pronouncements of doom. It's going to be awesome sauce. Little human."

"You don't...really talk like a God," Mary deduced.

"Yeah I know. But I am God. Because everyone thinks God is like...you know...like...really, really big? But God is like, you and me, you know? It's like God is in everything. Like in the food we eat. And in Nature. And in...uh...the sky?"

"Okay, I don't know who you are. But you are not God!" Mary assured the voice. "If you were God how could you be in everything and still be here talking to me?"

"Umm...because I know magic."

"Is this Salem? Is this a practical joke or something?" Mary said with her hands on her hips.

## The Evil Princess

“Ummmmmm. Yes? Yes, this is definitely Salem. Totally.”

“You don’t really sound like Salem. You sound kind of retarded,” Mary said curtly.

“Dude, I am God. Don’t call me retarded. I am like, wrathful. So you better take that back!”

“Uh huh. Well if you’re God then where are you? Where are the miracles and shining halos and stuff?”

“You know you’re kind of an uptight bitch!” the voice pouted. “You’re really buzzkilling my mood here, man.”

“Yeah, somehow I don’t think the word bitch matters to me anymore, since you know, I’ve been called that word by a crazy witch and a retarded little cricket that thinks it’s God.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should try to see things from other people’s points of view, rather than like, judging other people for their lifestyles, man.”

“*What?*” Mary exclaimed in disbelief. “Are you under my bed? Your voice seems to be coming from under my bed.”

“Uuummmmm...no. I’m from the sky. I am NOT under your bed. Promise.”

Mary leaned downward and peered under her bed, slowly lifting the blankets to get a clear view. She didn’t even need a light for the ultra-dark room contrasted with shining moonlight, since the little golden aura was spritely and glowed like magic.

“Oh my...” Mary said, clearing away the cobwebs from her eyes and focusing her attention on a glowing little fairy, about six inches tall. The fairy dressed a bit slutty, Mary thought in brutal honesty, wearing a tiny tied white t-shirt which accentuated her tiny D cup boobs and a plaid mini-skirt that just barely covered her tiny but still very imposing butt. Her buzzing wings were matching plaid, as if she had worn manufactured wing covers. She looked like a cross between a scullery maid and a tiny little concubine. Worse yet, the fairy also seemed, much to Mary’s annoyance, to be highly intoxicated. The fairy’s eyes were droopy and a bit bloodshot and she smiled a little too much for no apparent reason. She also used far too many colloquialisms and slang that were not befitting of royalty or any civilized women, really.

“Wow...what are you?”

“Oh...well I guess you know by now that I’m not God,” the fairy said awkwardly, eyeing its tiny bare feet in shame.

“Uh, yeah, I kind of knew that as soon as you started talking,” Mary said smugly.

“Man, I really suck at my job. I’m sorry,” the fairy said. “I suck.”

“Well,” Mary said, feeling a bit of pity for the unqualified little thing. “Can you at least tell me your name?”

“My name is Rain.”

“Rain? That’s your name?”

“Yes.”

“For real?” Mary asked dubiously.

“Yes. Rain is beautiful, my mother loved the rain. Why, you got a problem with rain?”

“Not really,” Mary shrugged. “Just soaks everything. I have to carry an umbrella when it rains.”

“Oh poor you,” the fairy lamented. “Poor girl has to go out in the rain! And get wet and stuff.”

“Can you just tell me what you’re here for? Why are you trying to talk to me?”

The fairy climbed out from under the bed and stood on the edge of the blanket, its delightful aura acting like a hypnotic candle.

“Umm...well...gee, I better just get the script, okay?”

Mary waited impatiently, eyeing the fairy as she brought out her bag and searched quickly for a transcript of her magical mission.

“Sorry, I’m not good at speeches. I don’t want to mess anything up.”

“You’re doing fine,” Mary said in a quieted huff. The fairy’s unprofessionalism was a bit annoying, but the magic of a glowing tiny little fairy made the time pass quickly.

“Okay,” the fairy said, flipping through a thick book. “I am here to warn you of an omen,” the fairy said.

“An omen? That’s bad, right?”

“Very bad,” the fairy said, putting on her glasses so she could better read the script. “I am here to warn you about the next action you’re going to take,” she read matter-of-factly. “Even the very smallest deeds...” the fairy giggled a good ten seconds at the pun. “Get it, small?”

“I get it,” Mary nodded with a forced smile.

“Can influence the future in huge, catastrophic ways. The little things you do now can affect the future world very negatively. It may actually be the worst thing you ever do in life. And it can be just a simple act. A simple act that ruins everything.”

The fairy looked up from the script and back at Mary.

“Oh, I see. You’re warning me about something I’m about to do.”

“Yeah, but I can’t really tell you what it is. That would be like, cheating.”

“Oh...then how am I supposed to know what action to avoid?”

The fairy was stumped. “Well...uh...”

## The Evil Princess

“Okay, it’s like this,” the fairy said, gesturing strongly with her hands. “I’m here to basically tell you, that you need to follow your instincts. And not follow your heart.”

“But what if following my instincts and my heart are the exact same thing?”

“They won’t be!”

“But what if they are!” Mary said, a bit annoyed at the fairy’s vague allusions and stubborn simplicity.

“Okay, it’s like this,” the fairy said. “Uhh...” the fairy momentarily lost her train of thought. “Basically, you have a right thing to do and a wrong thing to do. Always choose the right thing and not the wrong thing.”

“But how do I know what right and wrong is?”

“Feck!” the fairy cursed. The traditional swear phrase was “Mien Fecker (Shecker) Loo” but it was so hard to say, most uncivilized folks just preferred “Feck” to express frustration. The word was banned from all pronouncements, decrees and signage.

“You’re making this really hard on me,” the fairy lamented.

“Sorry, but if you’re delivering an omen of doom, that’s probably something you should be clear about,” Mary said, correcting the fairy proudly.

“Yeah, I *know*,” the fairy said catnipping her right back. “Okay, so there’s a right and wrong. Right now you’re very confused. But good is always good. Evil is always evil. Don’t ever believe it when someone tries to say evil is good or good is evil. They’re just brainwashing you.”

“Hmm,” Mary said, for once, actually relating to the fairy’s words of wisdom.

“Yeah, so you get it. You’re cool?”

“Well...do you like, know what’s happening with Salem?”

“No names!” the fairy said defensively. I’m supposed to be mysterious. You have to figure it out for yourself.

“But my heart says...that I feel something for Salem,” Mary said uneasily. “But my mind says it’s not the right thing to do.”

“Well, Salem...I mean...” the fairy smacked her own head in self-loathing bitterness. “Stupid, stupid!”

“What?”

“I can’t use any names! But, like, the person you think you want is not the person that wants you.”

“Really? But couldn’t that apply to both Aaron and Salem?”

“Uhh...Prince Aaron...dammit! I said no names!”

“Just give me a clear answer!” Mary said, pounding her bed.

“Don’t go after Salem, okay?!” the fairy barked back.

“I’ll probably get in trouble for saying that. Or at least, my customer service score will be really low this month.”

“Oh...”

“So just stay away from Salem. She’s bad news. If you go after her you will regret it forever. And like, lots of bad things will happen. Dead babies...dead people. Just tons of death. Sucks, right?”

“Well, I don’t need a fairy to remind me of that,” Mary said sadly. “Even if I admitted what I felt for Salem, I would start a war. Literally start a war. I’m engaged to Aaron. I don’t have a choice.”

“Yeah. So you’d be really dumb to even think about going after Salem. Glad we understand each other. Now if you’ll excuse me, I got a date.”

“Another fairy?”

“No,” the fairy quipped with an angry face. “A big giant horse. *Yes, another fairy!*”

But something about the conversation seemed strange. Not just that an intoxicated fairy showed up and incoherently warned her about dating a witch, but the way in which she said it seemed affected.

“Wait a minute,” Mary said in deep thought. “If you’re from the same magical religion as Salem, why would you be warning against me and Salem going out?”

“Umm...” the fairy replied, caught off guard yet again. “Because... it’s obvious...” the fairy said clumsily, as if repeating something a manager fairy was saying on the other psychic line. “That...not all fairies and witches are...from the same religion. Duh!”

“Hum,” Mary said, a bit suspicious by now of the fairy’s intentions.

“Whoah, you don’t believe me?” the itty bitty thing said.

“Maybe you’re trying to convince me to go for Salem, by telling me not to do it. Some sort of reverse psychology fairy.”

“That’s stupid!” the provoked fairy said. “No, I came because I am trying to save the future. Now unless I can help you with anything else today, I am ready to end this session!”

“Go ahead. I don’t care.” Mary thought it over and looked at the fairy in smiling anticipation.

“Whaaat?” the fairy said nervously.

“Well can I make a wish? Just a really small one.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t do weird stuff, you know.”

“I just have an itch I need scratched. On my back. It’s been bothering me for a while and I can’t seem to reach it. Maybe if you could scratch it for me?”

The fairy groaned. “Okay, fine. But then I gotta go. I have my performance review coming up.”

## The Evil Princess

Mary smiled as the fairy skipped over to Mary's back and scratched that itch through her nightgown with her tiny sharp fingernails.

"Ohhh thank you!" Mary sighed. "Say, do you do any freelance work? I could really use..."

"No! I'm a fairy, not a back scratcher!" the fairy said, heading back towards the edge of the bed and ready to call it a night. The fairy folded her arms and pouted. "Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

"Fine, just go."

"Thanks and have a nice day!" the tired fairy spun around and disappeared in a mist of golden light.

Mary's sort-of supernatural experience unsettled her. It wasn't really like a sign from God, but it was so outside of this normal realm of existence it made her think—for just a moment—about a world without limitations and boundaries. What if nothing else mattered except that Mary enjoy herself once or twice...or even a lifetime of no regrets? What if there was a life outside responsibilities, potential and obligation? Maybe life was nothing more than being with the people you found interesting.

The little fairy's words of warning backfired, as she was now more motivated to read the letters. Was Salem really dangerous? Was she attracted to danger? Or was Salem's earnest heart the most appealing quality? They both shared a moment, sharing that song together, didn't they?

Mary wasn't sure what she felt. But curiosity was killing her. Now more than ever she wanted to read the letter. Maybe the fairy was just a loser who didn't train well at her new job. But maybe the one who sent her was manipulating Mary's reaction.

Maybe someone was pushing her. Was it Salem being naughty? Or was it Goddess Fen Mien I giving her a sign? Sure, a holy sign encouraging selfish action that would result in the death of millions of Cadabra residents. That seemed unlikely at best.

Mary figured maybe she would just read one paragraph. She knew Salem had a magical way with words and that nothing she said could be completely trusted. Witches were not only evil but seductive. Hypnotic. They cast spells with their words, they manipulated good people into doing their bidding.

She would read only the first sentence. Just to see how smooth and how persuasive Salem was with that devilish tongue of hers. In fact, maybe that was the sign she needed. To read Salem's bewitching

letter and to see firsthand just how insincere and manipulative her linguistic talent really was.

She nodded, gathering her wits, remaining strong and, for once, praying for strength to overcome this devil's charm.

*Dear Mackey, I mean Mary*

*Oh my God, I just ate a quarter! HAHAHAAAAH! Ever think about how weird it feels to eat money? I mean you can like feel it going down your throat! HAAAHH! Maybe it's just the shot of A Little Magic talking, Mary, but I really am over you. I think I came to my senses when the Duck talked to me. Yes, I took spiritual counsel from a Duck. It was either that or the freak with the melted face. Or worse yet my animals! Ever tried to have a long, meaningful conversation with a snake? It's impossible. Every conversation ends with a snake joke. They can't be serious! Speaking of serious, you ever just feel your body parts talking to each other? Like the other day...and by other day I mean last night...and by last night I mean a few seconds ago...my arm started talking to my leg. My leg then started talking back to my arm. And even my boobs starting talking saying, "Eeey look at me!" HAHAHAAAAH! Oh God, I just fell on the floor! I am so not attractive when I'm drunk. Not that I'm drunk because of you. I'm drunk because I'm in love with a duck. No wait, that's not true. My butt is in love with the duck. My butt is talking. In fact, my butt is writing this letter. Hmm. Okay I think I'll send this now. So long Candy Cane! You know just so you know, I may drink a lot and live in a cave and talk to animals and eat psychoactive plants and try strange new drinks at taverns but just because I do doesn't mean that I...that I...Oh God I'm gonna puke*

*-Salem*

Salem's first letter wasn't quite the hypnotic spectacle she anticipated. Salem didn't really talk like a seductress or a manipulator, but in this instance more like a drunk witch. Together with the intoxicated fairy, these magical people just didn't seem very attractive for some reason. No wonder the House of Opula and the Pinkians looked down on religion and magic. It seemed almost primitive compared to the politics of the day.

Nevertheless, the thought of a depressed and lonely Salem literally drinking herself silly because of Mary's rejection left a sharp sting in Mary's conscience. Salem was in full denial of her pain and tried to drink herself to amnesia. While Mary was in full denial of the fact that

## The Evil Princess

she owed Salem an apology. Yes, she did. Mary finally showed a pang of guilt in her face. At the very worst, she led Salem on, allowing her to believe that something was to become of nothing. Maybe Mary was the one that seduced the poor, lonely witch.

Mary suddenly scowled. No. Kissing a princess without permission and getting drunk in anger rather than apologizing for her transgression was not okay. Salem was at fault. And Mary was damn well not going to assume responsibility for a full grown witch that was acting like a baby.

She tossed Salem's drunken ranting away. But leered at the second letter, wondering if it was only more of the same. Or maybe this time Salem would say something different, try something better.

Mary flinched at the thought. Why would Mary care if Salem was "trying?" What did the princess really want Salem to do? What were they really doing here? She figured she would read just one more sentence...

*Mary,*

*I'm sorry, I acted like an ass. I shouldn't have written that letter. I don't know what I was thinking. I know you don't believe me, but I swear to your God, I don't know what I've been thinking about any of this. I don't date anyone. I don't go around looking for trouble. I don't go around breaking hearts. I don't lie to people and I don't go looking to fall in love. I don't know why any of this happened to us. Or to me, specifically. It's all my fault. I know it is...*

*NO. No, it's not my fault you spoiled little princess Candy Cane psycho! I'm tired of accepting responsibility for all of this. It's not just me. And maybe that's what's irritating me, Mary! If I really believed it was just me and that I was acting like a stalker, I would have backed off for good. I swear, I don't want to stay in the way of anyone's happiness. If you want to marry Prince Rich Boy, I'm fine with that.*

*But you came back to me. You kept coming back. You sang with me. I thought we felt something. And then I did something stupid—yeah, I admit—and kissed you. I freaked you out and I'm sorry for that. But dammit, you came back! You know how I feel about you, I've been pretty Mien Fecker Shecker Looing clear about how I feel about you! So why did you have to come back just to torture me and remind me of what I can never have? A friend. A soul mate. A beautiful, lovely, gorgeous person in my life reminding me of how wonderful life is. That life doesn't have to be lonely. That life is worth living, even the*

*sad parts, even the injustice and the endless depression I get from watching stupid people doing stupid things...even with all that stuff, life can be beautiful. Love makes life worth living.*

*I'm sorry if I came on too strong. It's just my personality. My mother was Black Magic-Solitairé and my father was Warlock-Oath Breaker. I got a strong personality. I'm aggressive because it's all I've ever known. My survival skills just spring up and kick my politeness skills to the curb.*

*Anyway, I don't want to be your "wife" or "husband" or anything. I just want to be your friend. I won't ever kiss you again. I won't. I want nice people in my life. And you've been very kind to me. I appreciate it. I won't forget it. I think maybe we should start over.*

*Hi, I'm Salem the Good Witch. Who are you?*

*Your platonic FRIEND,*

*-.Salem*

Mary shook her head in weariness. Maybe it was both of their faults, but Salem had to learn to respect boundaries. She certainly didn't talk like a witch using magical mind control for seductive purposes. She just talked like a normal person, someone who was grieving, who was losing someone they really cared about. Someone who was cracking up but trying to keep cool. Trying to stay positive after being handed the card of death, the card of imminent rejection.

Mary sighed. She knew she had to read the last letter. No other letters followed it, so this was Salem's last word—her last effort. There was no telling what she said or what she was going to do next.

*Sorry about the flying squid!*

*But they're almost the same price as crows and owls, so I figured maybe this would get your attention! Listen...or technically read, since I'm not there in person.*

*I just wanted to say that I think I am finally at peace with myself and you. I realize now where you're coming from. I went to bed last night and thought about it, totally sober this time and tried to see things from your perspective. And I get it now. You're a princess with duties and family and you want a normal life. It's rude of me to try to make*

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*you change your life and demand that you be with me. Maybe it's borderline insane - HA! Yeah I am a little crazy, so I won't correct you if you call me a psycho.*

*All this time I'm thinking all hard and tough, oh she's a coward. She's running away and blah blah. But no, maybe what it is, is that you're actually really strong. You're stronger than I am and you understand what has to be done. That sometimes living a great life is more important than just living like a hedonist in a cage with disgusting animals.*

*(P.S. The animals wish to object to my description of them. They want the record to show they objected to my use of the term "disgusting")*

*So maybe you're right. Maybe it's time I get off my moral high broomstick and start seeing things from your point of view. Maybe you're smarter than I am too. Maybe you see our future and you see the stuff that I don't see. The stuff that's going to eventually tear us apart. The stuff that we're going to clash over and end up hating each other for. I don't want to end up hating you. Truth is, I would rather stay friends than end up enemies.*

*So I trust you, Mary. That's the respect I owe you, not as a princess, but as my friend. I will keep my distance. Even if it hurts. I know you're smart and strong, more than anyone else gives you credit for. I know our lives will take separate paths. I want you to be happy above all else. Your happiness is more important than my happiness. It's something my parents taught me a long time ago and that I have forgotten over the years. So I'll step out of the way. For good. I owe you that.*

*I will support you in all of your queenly decisions. Heck, I'd vote for you...you know, if the monarchy devolved into an election or something. And if witches were allowed to vote and hey, we both know that ain't ever happening!*

*I will always remember you fondly, Mary. Everybody needs you. Just when I think I need you, you remind me that an entire kingdom needs you to keep peace in their lives. Your parents need you. The prince needs you.*

*So promise me at least one thing. That you'll stop hating yourself. That you'll be proud of who you are and admit that you are somebody special. And fine, if the people want to call you Melancholy as a symbol of whatever, so be it.*

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

*But always know the truth: that you are beautiful, you are smart and courageous. You are just the queen Cadabra needs.*

*Go and be who you must be. And may God bless you.*

*-Salem*

Mary stared at the letter a long, quiet moment as tears welled up in her eyes. “Oh Salem,” she mewled. “That’s just it. That’s not me. That’s not me at all.”

Mary knew she had to reply to her strange, wonderful friend. She had no answers and nothing really changed logically speaking. But it was a great relief to stop lying to herself by saying she felt nothing and that it was all a mistake. She didn’t regret it and she felt something strong for Salem, something that she couldn’t explain. It wasn’t just attraction. It wasn’t just love or like. It was something primitive, base, something intensely instinctual.

She was ashamed to admit it, but the princess simply felt great lust for witches. She knew it was a sin. And maybe that only contributed more so to the lust, because telling Mary what she didn’t want, only made her desire it more. That could well be a “princess thing.”

But that’s also what prevented her from pursuing Salem. It was easy to see that Salem wasn’t just the lustful type. She could tell every time Salem stared into her eyes, painfully, keeping a respectable distance, she was falling madly and deeply in love. Mary’s presence alone made Salem melt into a series of obsequious swoons. The only reason Salem maintained her erratic pattern of denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance with Mary is because her heart was volatile—Mary provoked every last emotion from Salem’s gamut of girly angst, virtually sucking her soul out of its shell into unprotected air.

Mary’s innocence was the truth serum Salem needed, while Salem was the rock of courage that Mary found inspiring, thrilling and more than a little arousing.

Mary thought long and hard about what to tell Salem in a follow-up letter. Would she confess love? Would she explain how she felt and the political ramifications a doomed romance would incur? Would she accept Salem’s unconditional surrender of platonic friendship?

In the end, she chose a less intellectual approach.

## The Evil Princess

*Salem:*

*I don't know what I feel. But I feel it all the time. And I don't want it to stop. So...*

*How about you be emotionally honest with me? Tell me the stuff that you would like to do if we got married. Like prince and princess. What do you imagine happening?*

*-Mary*

*Well...*

*What do you mean? Like how people would react?*

*-Salem*

*No, I mean like what we do...in bed...after we got "married."*

*-Mary*

*You mean.....???*

*-Salem*

*Salem:*

*YES.*

*-Mary*

Salem warned Mary that the stuff witches do behind closed doors was not meant for a proper lady but the princess insisted upon reading everything. Salem was a bit enthusiastic in her descriptions and wound up writing fifty pages of shamefulness that only a flying sting-ray could possibly deliver.

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

Salem had a warped mind for sure, but Mary's imagination was equally disturbed, as she suggested Salem come up with a creative use for the annoying six-inch "Rain"—which Salem did, much to Mary's fascination.

Mary explained that she couldn't risk leaving the palace since Rivulet had already learned of their kissy moment and threatened to tell the prince. But she put Salem's novella of shame to good use and read it closely, for hours and hours she read it and reread it, until she fell asleep thoroughly exhausted from all the rapid "page turning."

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## Chapter II

### The Look

*“I don’t care about making a sale.*

*I’m not counting on your ‘Yes.’*

*I’m waiting for THE LOOK.”*

-Attributed to Tom Callin, a traveling Cadabra salesman

Salem had mulled over “the look” for a long time, that elusive and mysterious look that says “I want you...yes, in that way, I like-like-like you.” It hadn’t been an oft-recurring look in her life, as most delightful creatures that Salem encountered were either terrified to meet a real life witch, or were more interested in her potions and love amulets than anything of a personal nature—not that Salem was exactly

the romantic prince type a girl might warm up to. Salem's mating call seemed to follow the basic haphazard formula of insult, mocking, compliment, insult, brutally honest character deconstruction, mocking, outspoken lust, neg-hitting compliment and soulful effusive expression of neediness.

That Mary spoke to Salem at all was a small miracle. She knew for sure she saw a quaint and mysterious gaze in Mary's face at least once or twice before and after Salem's Lengthy Letter of Indecency, there was certainly no mistaking platonic care for the obsessive mad princess-crazy love Salem felt and desired. The only question remaining was, was that special look in Mary's eyes?

Most Very Special Looks Salem received came from unfruitful sources, hybrids from the Outskirts, all of which were quickly animal-zoned by Salem who was 99% Homo Sapien-inclined and not zoophiscurious as was the trend—although it doesn't take a hybrid-lover to admit Cadabra celebrity Galileo deWolf III had a very sexy snout and a huge tongue with great possibilities. Other witches, scattered across the Borderlands and throughout the Wilderness, seemed far too paranoid to give one of their own the "look", when everyone assumed everyone else was just staging a beheading trap. After all, witch blood was still a hot commodity in some regions.

Looking into Mary's ditzy poker face was a hike of great emotional and intellectual terrain, as she seemed to have the look all the while keeping extra looks of cold distance, sneering judgment and bratty denial all tucked behind those rosy cheeks.

Even now, as Mary's face shined in the magic mirror, approaching Salem's lot, she seemed to be holding her cards steadily. Mary's eyes even shifted around the forest, knowing full well her stalker witch was watching—and probably leering, as usual.

Salem quickly groomed herself, making sure her long black strapless "Award Dress" was wrinkle-free, though part of Salem scoffed at the idea of accepting an award, since the last witch to win an award quite notoriously won "Best Death Scene" from one of the Old Kings. Nevertheless, she figured this is what princesses do—they dress up, they take romance seriously and they actually, for lack of a more candorous term, *try*.

Mary was conspicuously under-dressed, not indecently, but in that "I'm not officially here" kind of way, since the Royal Golden Virgins would never design a dress for a night-clad rendezvous with a commoner. Instead she wore a kimono-style blue dress with a colorful red obi that dangled just under her knees.

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As she entered the cave, Mary held her nose a tad higher in the air, playing just a little coy and never quite giving Salem the look she wanted. Rather, she gave her a half-look, a look that suggested, “I know that you know that I know,” and “I remember what you said that I said you said.”

Mary looked confused momentarily. “Salem,” she said formally.

“Mary Melancholy,” she said back, almost staying quiet, before adding...

“Are you wearing a sleeping bag? Seriously, I keep thinking you’re going to break out a samurai sword any minute now.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “Right. Keep going.”

“What?”

“You know,” Mary said with a head bob. “First you insult me, then mock me. Next, you compliment me and insult me and then describe my life to me. It’s your thing. I’ve come to expect it.”

“What are you talking about? I do not! I think you’re beautiful. I...I’ve always said that. I mean, yeah, you’re a bit full of yourself. But I get it. That’s like a princess thing. You’ve had people cater to you your whole life, hand and foot and you’re kind of completely innocent to the real world.”

“Mmm-hmm,” she said with a long face. “And now, you mock me and say something creepy, back-handed compliment and then...”

“What the hell are you talking about? You’re the one who has this psycho running commentary thing. Like you’re writing a book or something,” Salem pouted. “Which is not to say, you know, that I’m turned off or anything...I mean I really am wondering what you got hiding under that kimono.”

Mary raised her eyebrow and half-smiled.

“Can I see?” Salem asked with a naughty sneer.

Mary blinked and waited.

“No wait, I know. What you actually have under there is another giant petticoat dress. Called ‘The Zebra-Humping Dress’, another masterpiece designed by those horny virgin girls. Which by the way, maybe you ought to join their little clan, Princess Spinster. Because you are so uppity I’m starting to think my kinky letter was the highlight of your year.”

“Are you done?” Mary said straightly before breaking into laughter.

“Oh...oh wow. Do I really do that all the time? No wonder I rub so many people the wrong way.”

Mary shook her head. “And now’s the part where you say something really honest.”

“Honest? Ummm, okay,” Salem said guardedly.

“I’m really glad you’re here. It feels really cool to have you here and not have this weird thing hanging over us...about you hating me, me hating you. Just uh...you know, two people who are in the same room. And who like making out. And who are sort of attracted to each other...”

Salem fanned herself. “Well, I can only speak for myself,” she said, eyeing Mary but not quite seeing the look yet.

Mary seemed perturbed by some occasional animal movement in the background. “Are your animals talking?”

“Cast a spell last night. But I think it’s wearing off soon. I’m sure I could throw something together if you want.”

“No, no, I don’t think so,” Mary said firmly. “I don’t really want to talk to them right now.”

“Why not? Still scared of them?”

“It’s very cramped in here. And all this animal fur and dander. And stuffy air. It makes me feel weird.”

“What?” Salem said, squinting her eyes, trying to figure out the riddle.

“I’m getting claustrophobic in here. I think I’m going to take a walk. Talk to you later.”

Mary shot up her nose and left the cave, leaving Salem scratching her head.

“Fine, whatever then,” Salem grouched.

The bat, having overheard the conversation, shook his head in disgust. He flew atop Salem’s shoulder and began spitting and bat-nipping into her ear. “Go!”

“What?”

The bat raged on, flailing his webbed claws every which way, but not wanting to talk aloud and scare Mary.

“Eh?”

The bat sighed and then pointed at the princess repeatedly.

“Ohhhhh,” Salem said, finally getting it. “I should follow her. Yeah, yeah, I was thinking that. I’m not that totally oblivious to what princesses are thinking, you know.”

The bat rolled his eyes.

Salem approached Mary cautiously, a few yards behind and watched Mary wander passed the garden and into the cemeteries of the Borderlands.

“Such a romantic place, eh?” Salem said.

Mary eyed her for a moment and then chortled.

## The Evil Princess

“You’re probably being sarcastic. But I actually do like to walk around cemeteries. Always have, even when I was a little girl.”

“So do I. But I guess it’s sort of like the beach for us witches. And you haven’t really known the meaning of the word relax until you’ve seen witch soil from the Wilderness. Most of our ancestors are buried there. They never bury us in the borderlands or on any official Four Kingdom territory. But the dirt, I tell ya, is so freaking awesome. It’s like pitch black and just caresses your fingers when you touch it.”

Mary giggled softly. “Really?” She lost her smile and began looking down at some of the tombstones. “I like to think about who’s buried here. What we see as a grave of bones used to be a living breathing person, living in the moment just like us. I like to think about what kind of life they lived. What their last moments on earth were like. What they were thinking. If they lived a good long life. And how there must be generations of people buried in these cemeteries. And most of them we don’t even know their stories. The lucky ones at least have their name put on a tombstone.”

Mary looked into Salem’s eyes, a bit empty, a bit vulnerable.

“And they were all once beautiful. Just like you and I. I wonder at what point did they grow up? When did they realize that it wouldn’t last forever? That life was about more than just dresses and engagement parties. That soon enough a steady and inevitable decline would happen until there was nothing left? Was it the first wrinkle? The first grey hair?”

Salem shook away the thought and then raised her hands up in objection. “Wait, wait, wait a minute. Now...something seems really off here. Did you just...now correct me if I’m wrong...but did you just say I was *beautiful*?”

Mary laughed. “Did I?”

“I’m pretty sure I heard something to that effect.”

“I don’t think so, I think you misheard,” Mary said with shifty eyes.

“I think you should say it again.”

“No! You’re supposed to be telling me I’m beautiful! You’re the prince, right?”

“Why do I have to be the prince? How about you’re the princess and I’m the witch and we just chill?”

“Well...”

“You *are* beautiful,” Salem said. “You’re like a living, perfect doll of a human being. A painting with a million strokes, a million colors, come to life right in front of me. You’re like what happens when perfect moonlight blends in with a once in a lifetime quasar.”

“Quasar?”

“Sorry, Pinkian word. I’m geeking out again.”

“Go on.” She sent her a close-lipped smile.

“Your smile shines and lights the night sky. Your eyes burn holes through me. Your aura just makes me bend at the knee, like hot tea on a cold winter’s day. You make me melt into a puddle of lovesick muck.”

Mary started laughing.

“You’re the kind of gorgeous that makes my head spin around and makes me howl at the moon. I gouge myself with knives every time you look away and I lose your attention.”

Mary snorted. “All right, now you’re just being violent.”

“I thought that’s what Red girls like,” Salem said, moving in closer and hovering around Mary’s unusually thick and pouty lips.

“Not this Red girl,” she said softly, looking into her eyes.

Salem walked closer, taking Mary’s hands into her own and keeping tight eye contact. “Now you tell me something. Something honest.”

Mary’s chest pounded and heaved, the touch of Salem’s forbidden hands sending sparks and tingles throughout her body. She looked down at Salem who flirted with danger, falling to her knees and looking up in wild-eyed abandon.

“Something honest?” Mary asked excitedly.

“Yes. Lose yourself. Be uninhibited for once in your life. Don’t think. Just say it.”

“I think...”

“No thinking!”

“I feel...something really big...really strange...and wonderful inside. For you. And it feels really really wrong.”

“Uh huh?” Salem asked, matching her short-breathed enthusiasm.

“But in a really good way. Like I want to know more.”

“Oh yeah? Did you read that letter I sent?”

“Yes...” she said, eyeing Salem in weakness, her eyes nowhere to go but deeper into those soul-sucking irises.

“All of it?”

“Yes...*all of it.*”

Salem hugged Mary around the waist, still looking up and gazing, wrapping her fingers tight and nuzzling her tummy with her cheeks. “And after you read all that kink, did you catch that part about me being in love with you? And needing you? And loving you so insanely much that I would do anything to see your smile?”

“Yes, yes, I did,” Mary said, right before breaking Salem’s grasp and letting her fall boobs first to the ground.

## The Evil Princess

Mary lay down on her side, next to the fallen sexy witch, her hand lazily resting her head.

“Ohhh...you tease me so viciously,” Salem moaned into the grass.

“Maybe a little.”

“You’re evil that way.”

“Oh, I’m evil?” she laughed.

“You *are* evil. You’re an evil princess.”

“You take that back,” Mary said, lightly pulling Salem’s hair.

“Oww, stop that!”

“But I’m evil. So I guess I can tease you and pull your hair all I want now, right?”

“I’m so going to turn you into a frog...” Salem said, holding her own frustrated face in her palms and looking up at the moon.

Mary sensed her vibe and invaded her space, locking eyes and smirking. “I want to know something.”

“What?”

“So, okay. It’s obvious you’re really really really into me?”

“Oh, is that obvious?” Salem said with a sarcastic tongue flick.

“But I’m just wondering why. Is it like a princess attraction or am I the first girl you’ve ever met that was...*open* to reading your letters?”

“You’re definitely not my first, doll-face,” Salem said proudly. “But I’d be lying if I said you weren’t the first *holy crap she’s really that hot* that I’ve ever met.”

“Really?” Mary smiled, indulging a bit.

“Oh yeah. You’re the type of girl everyone’s threatened by. Other princesses probably run over their own mothers to look like you. I mean there’s witches here and there, but they don’t take care of themselves. Lot of problems with greasy scalps.”

“But is it all looks to you?”

“Hmmm,” Salem asked, spinning her head around to meet Mary and then doing a freaky full rotation neck spin.

“Eew! I keep forgetting you’re a witch,” Mary said, taking a shift back but laughing it off.

“Well, lemme ask you this. Is it all just scandal to you? Would you like me if I was an ordinary prince and not just a great way to rebel against your parents?”

“Fair question.” Mary smiled back. “Would you like me if I wasn’t a princess?”

“I would like you, Mary Melancholy, no matter what you looked like. If you were a little worm, if you had a little worm body and a worm face, with golden locks, I would still take you and house you and carry you in my pocket for the rest of my life.”

“Awww,” Mary said with a tilt. “But only if I had gold locks?”

“Yes, little wormy gold locks. Now here’s a question for you. Would you like me if I wasn’t a witch and was just an ordinary girl?”

“Salem, you could never be ordinary,” she said, tittering. “Even if you tried. Even if you had some witch reassignment surgery, you would still be weird.”

Mary squinted her eyes. “But I like weird. I really do just...*like* you.”

“Tell me why else you like me,” Salem said, caressing Mary’s cheek with her hand. “Besides, I really am wondering. When did you start liking me and stop hating me? Since your first words to me were more or less, get the hell out of here.”

Mary rolled over on her back and looked up at the bright yellow moon. “Because you weren’t impressed by me. Nothing was fake about you. The minute you met me, it was like, you knew I could be a better person than I was. You made me question everything I thought I knew...about life and everything.”

“Oh yeah? So I’m like the teacher? Kinky student-teacher fun?”

“Like the not eating meat thing. You said it just in passing. But ever since then I haven’t looked at animals in the same way. I haven’t even eaten another steak or slab of bacon. It just feels weird now. You cast a spell on my brain.”

“Well sweetie,” Salem said, falling on her back as well. “I’m always happy to help further your teaching. In whatever *hands-on way* you need educated. If you know what I mean.”

Mary sent Salem a look—almost the look, but not quite. Something in between coy and snarky, that go-ahead look but with a confusing halt at the end of it. Salem had built up that “hypothetical look” in her imagination for quite some time now and it looked something very close to that. But not quite that.

Mary flipped over and climbed onto Salem, enjoying the cruel torture, as she simply looked into her green eyes for long wordless moments.

“How do you know what love is?”

“What?” Salem asked nervously, nowhere to go but into Mary’s face, her features shining against the backdrop of moonlight like cosmic endless beauty. Her five senses overwhelmed with Mary’s body, she could only listen in agony.

Mary stroked her hair and looked deeper into her eyes, but still more interested in the conversation than giving Salem what she wanted. “You always talk about love. But what is it?”

“Love is a cranky witch not wanting to smack the taste out of someone’s mouth. For once.”

## The Evil Princess

“Come on, be serious,” Mary chided.

“I am serious. Love means murdering someone without asking any questions. Just because your girlfriend asks you to do it. Ain’t that romantic bringing home a severed head out of love? Sure beats chocolate. Nothing but pure psychopathic love shared between two sickos. I would kill so many people for you, my beloved psychopath.”

Mary backed off and folded her arms. “Hmph.”

“Now what?”

“You’re always joking. Always trying to shock me. Why can’t you be real?”

“Real? Why can’t I be—”

“Stop kvetching!” Mary interrupted. “You know what I’m talking about. You’re really good, Salem, at playing the wise ass and the seducer and the teacher. But where is the real you? You talk about love so easy. But where is your heart? Is it true what they say about witches?”

“What, that we have no heart?”

“Yeah! That. Talk to me.”

Mary leaned over and grabbed Salem’s face with both her hands. “Where is the little princess inside of you?”

Salem pushed Mary off of her and stewed, falling back on the ground. “I dunno, sweet cheeks.” A solemn frown came over the witch’s face and her wild green irises stayed far removed, peering up into the stars.

“Maybe it is true what they say. Witches aren’t much to talk about feelings, you know. We’re natural born entertainers. Not heavy into philosophy.”

Mary listened closely.

“Even when we try to kill you and cast a hex, we’re still pretty theatrical and funny about it, you know? Maybe we’re just of the opinion that life gets too serious most of the time. Like that stuff you were saying about the cemeteries. I can’t listen to that.”

Salem turned away and hid her eyes, groping her neck. “It just reminds me of all the stuff I don’t like about life. Like the fact that none of this is going to last. The idea that someday I’m going to lose you. Whether you wise up and walk out on me, or whether we just die after a lifetime of being cackling old hags together. It’s going to happen someday.”

Salem shrugged, finally meeting Mary face to face. “I can’t think about that stuff. It robs me of the joy I have in life right now. This is what I worship. The Now.”

She sighed as she stood up and began shaking her fists.

“God damn it, when my dad died he was drunk off his ass. But he did it on purpose. He didn’t want us to cry too much for him. He wanted us to laugh. He told us fairy tales that were bizarre and made no sense, with all sorts of terrible, horrible things these cartoony little creatures did to each other because they were sadistic freaks of nature.”

Salem laughed hard, a tear dribbling onto her cheek. “He told me this one story about a talking mouse torturing a little mushroom man with giant dildos. And it went on for like an hour. And we kept saying, ‘Dad stop it! We don’t want to hear any more of this!’ and then went, ‘Wait, wait, wait, but don’t you want to know what he did with the lead pipe?’ And I was like feck noooo!”

Salem belly-laughed and fell to her knees holding her insides. “And he kept going telling these awful, sicko stories all night...making us laugh till we peed ourselves until...until...we were actually really happy when he stopped. We were relieved.”

Mary listened quietly, teary-eyed and with a smile.

“That’s a warlock’s death. Screw all this grief that goes nowhere. Leave them laughing. A funeral should be a roast, a comedy of errors, a complete farce.”

Salem began kicking the dirt around, venting her anger on cheap Borderlands soil. “Before my mother died she cast her last magic spell and sang a showstopping number with her broomstick, complete with swamp accompaniment from owls and alligators. She sang her heart out and threw in some dirty limericks just for sissy and me. With her last breath she did triple flip choreography and tap-danced her way into HELL!”

Salem breathed heavily, her manic energy rising so high her hair was statically charged and twirling in the air. “Clowns, goddammit. That’s what we were. Silly, singing, funny as shit clowns.”

She met Mary’s face again and released some of the tension. “That’s all we know how to do. And that’s that. So I guess I’m finished with this game of truth or dare-”

Mary tackled Salem to the floor and planted a long, lingering, steamy and effervescent smooch on her lips. She kissed in Salem’s essence deep and hungrily, joyfully wriggling her silky black hair and barely giving her a chance to breathe. Their tongues touched and mashed together, sending ripples of pleasure from their mouths down to their fluttering tummies, to their tingling toes and out again, permeating the air with a warm dizzying glow.

Mary broke this kiss and stared into Salem’s terrified eyes.

“I like the entertainer. But I also like the little girl trapped inside. Behind all those layers.”

## The Evil Princess

Salem listened helplessly, her heart never before so exposed and open for a death blow.

“Not everyone wants to fight. Not everyone wants to hurt you. You can let me in whenever you want. And you don’t have to sing if you don’t want to. You don’t have to act tough to impress me.”

Mary leaned in and whispered into her right ear, her strong floral scent leaving Salem dizzy.

*“Because I already know your secret. You’re strong on the outside. And a hopeless romantic inside. And...you’re pretty cute, you know, for a witch.”*

Mary pushed herself up and then leaned back down to her left ear. Salem smiled in bashful surrender, as that melancholy voice sent shivers from her ear down to her heart, to her spine and sparking all the way into her abdomen.

*“I hope you can forgive me for being so rude to you the first time we met. I’d love to make it up to you. Somehow...maybe we can think of something...”*

“Ummm...hum...well gee...I...uh...”

“I know, I know,” Mary said, sliding her fingers across Salem’s lips. “You don’t handle this mushy stuff very well. So I have an idea. Why don’t you entertain me?”

“Huh?”

“Since your type loves the theater so much. Entertain me. And put on a good show.”

“What do you...”

“Oh come on,” Mary said with a squint. “Don’t play dumb. I know you have a song and dance already written for me. Don’t you?”

“Weeeell,” Salem said with a swagger. “It just so happens I was working on a number. For my animals. But well...you know, I adapted it to fit you.”

“Uh huh,” Mary answered with a big smile. “For your animals. Yeah, right. So...let’s hear it then.”

Mary relaxed and sat back against a tombstone, perfectly at ease and ready for a night’s entertainment.

“Well, gee, now the pressure’s on!” Salem stood up and gestured a bit much, trying to calm her nerves. “Okay, well, you know how in life sometimes for breakfast all you ever get is bagels? Then one day you get to choose something else. Maybe a donut. Maybe not just a donut but one of those special crème filled donuts.”

“Right...”

“And then you might say, ‘What’s that? A vanilla crème donut? Never heard of it. Pass me the bagels, because that’s what I always get. Ever since I was a wee little brat that’s all anyone’s ever given me is bagels? Well, maybe you never know what you want until you try a

different flavor now and then. And hey, that's the story of my life. All my life all I ever knew were bagels. But I got six hundred and sixty-six variances of taste in my palate. And maybe everyone wants bagels. But not me. The whole world's nuts about bagels. They love salt. Not me."

"Oh?"

"I like vanilla crème. When it's time for breakfast I never second-guess. I know what I want. And what I want most is you. Because you, Mary Melancholy, are not a bagel."

"I'm not?" She laughed.

"You, my friend, are a vanilla crème donut. And that's exactly why I like...no, exactly why I *love* you. I love you Mary and I will always love you, for as long as I live and even after death when our corpses rot together in gross, disturbing ways."

"Why am I a vanilla crème donut?"

"Well, because you're..."

Salem giggled but stopped talking. She huffed. "Because you're..." She puffed. "Because you're ahhh..."

She raised her hand and shook her head, just a little verklempt.

"Awww, it's so cute to see you all emo," Mary teased.

"Well...how about I put it another way?"

## **SONG 6**

### **"BECAUSE YOU'RE SWEET"**

Salem beginning grooving to the music, which seemed to be accompanied by the night sounds of the forest; frogs on bass, whistling tree branches on strings, owls on vocals, pond dunks as a bassoon and woodpeckers on bark as drums.

**You say I'm an abomination**

**You say beware of my curse**

**You say I'm a chain toking hard drinking sacrilegious whore  
(you're right!)**

**A b-word, s-word or something much worse**

Her hips began swiveling forward, letting the fast drum beats guide her. Her arms rose into the air and above her head, joining in the same rhythm. Her belly bounced to the music as she moved closer to her captive audience.

**You say I'm hundred percent organic evil (and you're right)  
Cause what's bad for me quenches my thirst  
Sometimes I go skip dinner altogether  
Just 'cause I want dessert first**

She kept up the pace, drawing closer to Mary while alternating between effeminate palm waves and stronger come hither motions. Her pelvis rolled to the music, until she squatted to her knees. She rose again, lifting her hands up and then to the side, wiggling as stars as they returned to her rolling belly.

**And when they ask me why I like you  
Why I'm so green eyed mad about you  
From your golden locks to the tips of your feet  
The truth is I like you 'cause you're sweet**

She took Mary's hands in her own and began dancing a five cramp roll number. She continued the fast floor tapping, turning around and backing slowly into Mary's lap. Bending down, her tapping continued, as she slid shoulders back and forth for Mary's viewing pleasure. Before Mary could touch, Salem snapped back around and kneeled down, pushing Mary away with synchronized hand waves moving in clockwork motion.

**You feel like vanilla  
You smell like vanilla  
You tickle my palate  
Want to taste your vanilla**

Salem stood back up and tap-danced her way backward, first balancing herself on the toes of her shoes and then the edge of her heels. As she kept up the mirthful rhythm in her twirling ass, she let her fingers run wild, making horizontal V-shapes that slid off her eyes and away from the center, from her face to her ears, then one hand upward V-sliding to her forehead and hair and then the other hand down from her mouth to her chin. Her tongue emerged matching the same outward thrusting of her knees, pelvis and side-winding hands.

**And when they ask me why I like you  
Why I'm so green eyed mad about you  
From your golden locks to the tiny shiny lil tips of your feet  
The truth is I like you 'cause you're sweet**

After pointing and touching Mary's chin, she reached into her dress and brought out a retractable broomstick. She clicked the button and expanded it to full size. She continued dancing with her fast-shifting butt and then held onto the tip as the broomstick flew into the air, carrying the same rhythm into the sky, zigzagging up and down, side to side and in a double sphere.

**You're made of vanilla  
You're as smooth as vanilla  
You smell and taste like sugar  
You melt as Ice Cream Vanilla**

She rose to her feet, tap dancing on the still floating broomstick using only her tippy toes to continue the dance number. She took a rest and sat sideways on the suspended broomstick, until the broomstick started flying around the air taking Salem's relaxing body on another series of MM, V and S patterns. Salem's hands kept busy giving catty claw strikes, till she had enough and threw her hat to the nearby ground.

**They say a witch cannot be trusted  
They say I'm going to break your heart  
They say I'm going to lead you down a path of hedonism  
debauchery and sin (well yeah, probably)  
But maybe what you need is a just a fresh start**

She stood up on the broomstick side and began twirling around the stick 360 degrees, dancing up a storm, complete with tiny lightning bolts. She lay down on her back atop the broomstick and collapsed her arms and legs, before spinning in a circle and rising back to her feet. She straddled the broomstick as she lowered it back to the earth, preferring to use it as a chair, sending her head and limbs to each side. Then, she plunged its head into the ground, before jumping atop its bristles and performing a one-legged balancing act. Her arms were in the air, wrists on top of each other and capering downward until they separated and caressed all ebbs and valleys down the front of her shifting front body.

**And if you let me love you sugar sugar sugar baby  
I'll take you along with me to a safe place  
We'll spend the rest of our lives living freely  
And every day I'll live just to put a big syrupy smile on your face**

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She jumped backside first onto her broomstick and began throwing her legs to the opposite side, changing positions. As she reached the crescendo, she began rolling forward off the broomstick but coming right back up from behind and maintaining the same place. She fell backward only to bounce back to a front position, hardly losing Mary's eyes for a split second. She allowed herself to fall forward again but turned the whole horizontal-lying broomstick from front to back, hanging upside down, bat-like. She started pulling an invisible rope with her hands, pulling Mary closer to her.

**And when they ask me why I like you  
Why I'm so green eyed mad about you  
From your golden locks to the scrumptious fresh bakery taste of  
your feet  
The truth is I like you 'cause you're sweet**

Mary blush-smiled as Salem dragged her closer inch by inch. Salem went in for a kiss, but teased with a sudden retreat and push-away. She grabbed her broomstick and vacuumed back her hat. She started sweeping the floor with exaggerated motions but then left the broom standing, twisting with its inanimate but still manly frame. She grabbed the rigid stick and converted it into a standing pole. She straddled and spiraled around the broomstick, merry-go-rounding several times while raising and lowering the brim of her hat to the tune.

**I wanna  
Chomp some cotton candy  
Taste some raspberry jam  
Lick a little chocolate  
Eat cherry pie till I'm damned**

She suddenly appeared behind Mary, her eyes even with hers, but her face and body turned upside down in midair. Her legs kicked and cycled in place, but that didn't stop her dress from falling over her face, letting her can-can style frills and ruffles do the dancing for her.

After giving Mary a good laugh, she turned right side up and floated upwards into the air, snapping her fingers for the finale.

**And when they ask me why I like you  
Why I'm so green eyed mad about you  
From your hair to your toes and the creamy, fruity, swirling  
things in between**

**I say I like you  
I like you  
I like you  
Because you're sweet**

**You move like vanilla  
A volcano of pure vanilla  
Everything you touch turns pure  
I want to taste your vanilla  
I wanna kink up your vanilla**

She took Mary into her arms and floated into the air, spiraling them both in a mini-tornado of a sped up slow dance. Salem's big and excited eyes looked so beautiful in the spinning dance, reflecting the full moon above, while her lips glowed a little light show of invitation becoming one shade brighter red as the next verse chimed.

**The truth is  
I like you  
I like you  
I like you  
Because you're sweet**

Salem reached the crescendo and hugged her broomstick tightly right before collapsing to the floor in mirth, committing honorable felo-de-se in light of Mary's world-ending beauty.

Mary laughed and applauded, red in the face and swooning. "That was *not* written for your animals."

"Yaaaa all right, you got me," Salem said, sitting up and wiping her brow. She pulled her wet hair back and stood up, her ebullient green eyes for once looking sociable and maybe even a little childlike.

And there, lo and behold, Mary finally gave her "the look." The "it" factor. The look that was unmistakable and instantly translatable into a thousand languages and even ancient tongues. The princess gave the witch the "look" and the rest was history.

"It was for you," Salem said, before backtracking in panic. "But you know, took like ten seconds of my time," she continued, snarking it up a bit. "Cuz that's all you're worth." Salem put her hands on her hips and shook her head side to side, staying tough and always in character.

"You're so evil, Salem," Mary said with a snooty glance.

## The Evil Princess

“I am.”

“You’re a bad girl. You know, you’re the opposite of what I should be looking for.”

“True. I can’t argue that.”

“I mean, I’m a good girl. I’m supposed to get married before any of that *stuff* you’re thinking goes on.”

“You’re right. And I ain’t got no ring or wedding dress for ya, honey.”

“Mmmm,” Mary said, sizing Salem up and snorting in judgment, not so much unlike a feisty young mare sizing up a challenger.

“Cause you know, my specialty is taking pretty dresses off of princesses. Not putting them on.”

“Uh huh. Uh huh. Besides, everyone knows witches are kind of twisted. They want to do naughty awful things to nice girls.”

“No. Terrible things. Horrible. Unspeakable. Really nasty, dirty, creepy things. And do it over and over again. And sometimes I just like to take girls to the forest, to the cemetery and you know, tie them up and stuff. And I say, go ahead and scream your little goldie locks head off because no one can hear you.”

“Mmmmm-hmm.”

“And no one can stop me,” Salem said, moving in closer and poking her. “And then they just scream and scream. And scream.” Salem tapped her fingers to Mary’s lips. “And scream some more. And sure enough, no one saves them. And another sweet princess goes missing.”

Mary turned her back on Salem and took three steps away.

Salem suddenly appeared in front of her blocking her way and just centimeters away from her face. “Where you going, Little Red?”

Mary turned the opposite direction and ran faster, but only to run into Salem again, falling backward to the ground...until Salem caught her. Mary did a double take on what she thought were two of her favorite witches.

“How did you...?”

“Disappearing act,” Salem said, standing in front. “No, there’s not two of me. And aren’t you disappointed?”

“Maybe I am,” Mary said with tipsy eyes, standing up to her feet. Only to realize Salem was directly behind her, nibbling the nape of her neck with that cool spearmint whiff of witch kiss. Mary’s eyes lit up in surprise then shut tightly in numbing anticipation of another soft moist clench.

“You wouldn’t even know what to do with one of me, would you?” Salem whispered, bringing her forearm up and over and surrounding Mary’s neck, entrancing her to stay put.

Mary shuddered in excitement, her stomach reaching into her throat and every gulp going down hard like rocks. “Maybe...you could show me what to do?”

“I might have a few ideas,” she said, lip-caressing her shoulders and holding her elbows with her hands.

Mary moaned softly, barely keeping her eyes open and looking into the stars. Salem’s cool hands groped up to Mary’s wrists, then her elbow then her inner elbow, a little forbidden patch of sensitive milky-white skin, that had never been touched in that special way before. Salem’s fingertips swirled and swooned, coddled and clasped in just the perfect way that Mary’s body began strangely vibrating.

Suddenly tensing up, Mary felt a spark of electricity build deep in her elbow skin and then spread like wildfire through the rest of her body. She panted and wheezed and bit her lip in muted embarrassment as she looked up and saw stars.

Her heart throbbing and her chest thumping, she reached up and grabbed Salem’s head and neck and grabbed on tightly as Salem continued kiss-chomping the side of her neck, summoning a vampire’s lust and surely leaving behind a super-hickey of Fen Mien proportions.

Mary opened her eyes wide and bellowed a throaty laugh, right before breaking away from Salem’s back embrace, turning around and shoving her away.

The “look” shared between them had evolved into something far more intense, ravenous and unclean on so many levels. The two women stared at each other, eyes locked, breathlessly undulating and unable to say another meaningless word.

They ran into each other’s arms and embraced, neither one willing to be the “princess” and kissed as thirstily and sloppily as a cantankerous king might attack a virgin. Their lips smacked and spattered as their kisses deluged each other, from their lips, to their cheeks, to their chins, to their necks and even the insides of their teeth—whatever these ardent lovers did, it must have counted as a dental cleaning.

“Take this off,” Mary finally managed to whisper, greedily pulling down Salem’s dress.

“No, you take this off,” she whispered back, fumbling with the kimono and dying to see what kind of floral patterns she might have underneath.

“You first.”

“You first!”

They said, still devouring each other’s spittle and sucking each other’s sugar lips.

“Okay...so on three, we take them off together.”

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“Awwiiight, that seems fair.”

“One,” Mary mumbled already digging into the bottom of her long award dress.

“Two,” Salem said, spreading apart the folds of the kimono dress.

“Three!”

Both girls embraced, tossing away their former skins and rolling down a steep grassy hill, giggling like mad. For once, just as connected in body as they were in mind, for once throwing away their worries and snuggling their faces in mounds of warm and unencumbered flesh and for once, possibly only once in this lifetime, embracing the “Now” of the moment regardless of whatever tomorrow would bring.

One can only imagine what “naughty-awful” things the two newly united lovers experienced that night, but those sordid details are not apropos to reveal in a wholesome morality fairy tale and they’re certainly not gentlemanly, in respects to a Royal Princess of the Red Kingdom.

In a totally unrelated episode, Salem’s animals were just waking up and realizing that the cave seemed unusually quiet and free from noise pollution.

“Hey, something seems off. Does it seem a lot less nasally in here, Salem?” the vulture said.

“Yeah, Salem. Do you notice a lack of incessant whining and kvetching about loneliness and having no friends?” the snake asked.

“Ohhhh, I get it. Salem’s not here!” the rat wisely deduced.

“Oh my heavens. I wonder where she went?” the cat wondered.

“Ohh, I’ll bet I know,” the vulture said with a nod. “She’s probably with Mary.”

“Oh no, you don’t think they’re attacking each other do you? That Salem’s on top of Mary giving her the business? That would be unfortunate.”

“Nah,” the vulture said. “I don’t think they’re fighting. But I was listening to them earlier and I heard a lot of noise. They must be learning a new song or something.”

“I think they might be talking about interior design,” the rat said. “I know Salem is always talking about going to Mary’s place and seeing if the carpet matches the drapes.”

“What do you think, Snakey?”

“Well, I..hey guys.” The snake opened his eyes in snaky, disobedient wonder. “Salem isn’t here. Do you realize what this means?”

“No, what?”

“If Salem is gone...that means...”

The animals looked at one another before erupting into applause.

“Dessert night!”

The animals scurried into Salem’s kitchen, intent on ransacking the dessert cabinet.

“Oh lordy!” the cat exclaimed grabbing a carton of eggnog and grabbing a large bowl.

Meanwhile, the vulture opened a box of goodies and took out an empty beehive. “Honey straight from the hive! My favorite.”

“Give me some of that!” the bat said. “I’m going through sugar withdraws.”

“Get your own!”

“Gimme! You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry, you know.”

The snake rummaged through the bottom cabinet and found some powdered donuts. “Ssscrumptious!”

The rat jumped up on the kitchen table and rolled over an onion, then a lemon, pepper and salt to the center. He grabbed a knife and began tangling with it, eager to cook a brand new recipe.

“What are you doing?” the snake asked haughtily.

“I’m not making dessert. I’m making dinner. For your information, I am a chef,” the rat said proudly. “Does that surprise you?”

“A rat cooking? That’s the dumbest thing idea I’ve ever heard!”

“Oh yowsa!” the vulture said, licking the end of the beehive with rapid tongue strokes. “You guys got to try licking this. It’s *really* good.”

“Say...” the rat pondered. “What do you think Mary and Salem are doing right now anyway?”

“Who cares?” the vulture squawked. “They’re really missing out if they’re not licking all this sweetness like we are.”

“I know!” the bat screamed, greedily grabbing the end of the honeycomb from the vulture and licking it twice as hard. “I just want to keep this licking this strange little thing!” The bat grabbed the peanut-shaped queen cell of the comb, at the lower end and licked it repeatedly, zigzagging his tongue in twelve different motions.

“Hey, I want to lick it too!” the vulture said.

“No way. I call it. I’ve been waiting a really long time for a licking this good. Look, the hive is almost brand new. Never been eaten. I’m licking it and I’m going to lick it again and then lick it AGAIN. I’m going to lick it until my damned tongue falls out of my mouth. And I’ll be damned if you’re going to stop me.”

“Stop licking it all for yourself!” the vulture said. “Or so help me I’ll...”

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“Go ahead and scream all you want. Nothing can stop me from licking this sweet spot. Ohhh yeah...I am the night, I am the *night, baby...*”

“Guys, guys, guys,” the snake interrupted. “Why don’t you share? Batty, stop licking for just one second.”

“What?” the bat said, a dribble of honey leaking down his chin.

“How about this?” the snake said, always a tactician. “Batty, you take that end of the hive. Now both of you lay side to side. Then Buzzy, you lie down in an inverted order, aligning your head in the opposite vertical direction. Now you lick the top of it. He licks on the bottom. And you can both lick simultaneously.”

“Wow, this is a great idea!” the vulture said, moving into position and licking the other end of the hive. “Now we can both lick it at the same time!”

“Sharing always feels better, right?”

“This is a good idea!” The bat exclaimed.

“Boy, it’s a shame Mary and Salem aren’t here to enjoy all this licking and honey eating.”

“Their loss!”

“Guys, guys,” the snake said, laughing at their novice-level honey eating. “Allow me to show you some of the finer points of honey eating. The snake wrapped himself around the hive and stood it up to demonstrate. “First, you got to make sure you’re not eating the brood. If you notice any brown capping don’t eat it. That’s bee larva and it’s really hard to get out of your throat once it’s lodged in there.”

“Avoid the dark stringy parts. Got it.”

“Well, good because I love licking the honey. And the harder and faster I lick it, the better.”

“We know, Bats, we know.”

“Just do what I said,” the snake reminded them. “That way, you maximize your honey intake. Now the next part is important. If you pull apart the honeycomb slightly you get a lot more honey flowing out. Now, put two fingers inside the honeycomb and start burrowing upwards, softening the comb inside and letting the honey flow. Now lick and suck it out at the same time, while working the inside. You’ll get double the honey that way.”

“Like this?”

“No, no, no. You got to put all your fingers into it. Like a scooping motion. Push it in there. Now pull it out. Come on. Harder! Faster!”

“Oh my God!” the vulture exclaimed. “You’re right! It’s just dripping all over my mouth!”

“Me too! I can barely lick, so much honey is filling my mouth.”

“Wow, it really works,” the vulture said. “Honey is just pouring all over Batsy’s face. It’s probably best poor Mary isn’t here for this grotesque display. I can’t even imagine what that poor girl would do if she saw someone’s face covered in that much gunk.”

“You’re not going to drown in there, are you Batsy?”

“If I have to die, then this is the way I want to go,” he rasped.

“I say you’re missing the best part of all,” the cat demurred, slopping up his bowl of eggnog. The bowl almost as big as his frail body, he gobbled it up in a hurry, before any of his buddies could claim it. “I much prefer eating to licking. It’s a full tongue and mouth experience that’s not really comparable to li—eeeeekkk!”

The cat was so enthralled with his gorging feast, he neglected to keep his balance and fell face first in the giant bowl.

The animals stared at him until he emerged, legs out first, covered in yellow slop. They laughed at the cat who shimmied hard but to no avail. He was soaked from head to paw.

“Damn, Catty!” the vulture squawked. “You are getting really wet, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, forget what Salem and Mary are doing right now. You, my friend, are seriously wet and dirty. That’s what I call one super wet pus—”

“Don’t say it!” the cat reviled. His grumpy cat face shooting spears he meowed in contempt. “Don’t you dare say it.”

“What?” the vulture said with a cackle. “I’m just saying you’re really wet right now. Under all that fur. That is one sticky, dripping wet pus—”

*“I said, don’t say it!”*

“What’s your problem?”

“You know what the problem is. I assure you, I know I’m really wet and sticky right now. Yes, I know. But I don’t appreciate you using the P-word just to describe my current state of wetness. If it’s used in a derogatory way, I’d prefer you not say it at all.”

“Fine, fine, keep your panties on. Sheesh. Hey, can we at least call you a wet kitty?”

The cat sighed, tiredly licking himself in what would undoubtedly be an all-night tongue bath.

“Kitty would be the more appropriate term.”

“Haha! Wet kitty! I wish Salem could see how wet her kitty is right now.”

“Yeah poor angry kitty. All hot, wet and shivering.”

“I wish Mary could see how wet that kitty is right now too.”

“Oh believe me, she’s going to find out soon enough. That wet

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kitty's going to be dripping all night long. And I can't wait until Mary gets an up close and personal look at that wet little fur ball."

The animals laughed at the poor soaked feline, who licked clean what was left of his dignity.

"How you doing, Batsy?"

"Ughh...my tongue is getting really tired," the bat confessed, his face covered in honey and his wagging tongue quickly losing power.

"Well, take a break."

"*Never!*" he said, going right back to his rapid-fire tonguing.

"How are you doing with your fancy dish, Ratty?"

"It's coming along. I just have to cut through this onion and lemon. Then we can make lemon pepper legumes burgers."

"Sounds great!"

The snake and rat grabbed two ends of the knife and carved the onion in half, then the lemon. "Almost done! Now just a dash of pepper and..."

The rat stopped midsentence having huffed into much pepper flakes. "And uh...and uh..."

The snake and vulture looked at each other in headshaking impatience.

"And uhhhhhh...uuuhhhhhhhhhhhhh..." the rat cried, each breath more desperate to hold it in than the last.

"Don't try to hold it in, silly. Just let it out. Let it out everywhere and you'll feel much better."

"Uhhhhhh...uuuhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..." the rat raised his paw, still trying to stifle it.

"So..." the snake said, getting bored. "What's taking Salem so long? Do you think she's going to come anytime soon?"

"Oh yeah, Salem's definitely going to come," the vulture replied.

"I think she's going to come any minute now."

"I hope so. And do you think Mary will come too?"

"Who knows with Mary?" the vulture said in uncertainty. "I mean she's one of those foo-foo girls that can't make up her mind about what she wants to do."

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhh huuuuuuhhhh!" the rat continued to suppress his sneeze, much to the annoyance of his avian and reptilian friend.

"Huhhhhhuhhhh!"

"That's true."

"I mean she's always showing up here. Always coming. And then going. And then coming again. I mean, she's probably come and gone ten times in just the last few minutes."

"She shouldn't keep playing with Salem's heart like that. She should

just come be with us and mean it this time. This time, really come! Hold nothing back and just come with all your heart, Mary!”

“I know!”

“And trust me, Salem loves her. Once Mary shows her face in Salem’s cave, that lonely hag ain’t letting her out for a minute, not even to breathe!”

“True that.”

“Yeah, I mean Salem’s so lonely her cave has mice.”

“I...resent...that...” the rat barely said before continuing his huge, inevitable sneeze.

The rat pounded on the table, unable to control his spasming body.

“Huhhhhhh...huhhhhhh...oh man this is going to be a big one...I can feel it...”

“Oh, Ratty, no one wants to hear you loud gasps and hyperventilating. We’re all much more interested in what Mary is feeling right now.”

“AAAACHOO!” the rat screamed, shaking the table and falling to the ground in exhaustion. Now crying from all those sliced onions, he sighed. “Owww...that one was so big it hurt.”

Of course, wet kitties, honey licking and full body spasms so big they ended in tears were the furthest things from Mary and Salem’s mind...

Or at least *now*.

Mary and Salem basked in the afterglow of their first successful date, still in their natural state, but covered in a river of leaves that Salem brought together to keep them warm from the cool night air.

“So...” Salem asked cautiously. “I don’t want to be presumptuous and say you must have enjoyed yourself. But then again, I’m not sure. Are crying tears, screaming and temporary blackouts a good thing?”

“Umm...” Mary said, hiding her face in the leaves. “In this case, yes they were a very good thing.”

Salem laughed. “Well, that’s good.”

“You...really, really know what you’re doing.”

“It’s in my skill set. Pretty much just that, some magic and cooking.”

“Pretty much all you need in life,” Mary said with a soft giggle.

“Cool. So should I cook something for you now-?”

“No, no, no, Salem,” Mary said firmly. “Don’t do anything. Just sit here, quiet with me and just be. Don’t rush off. Don’t put on another show. Just chill.”

“Hermm...okay.” Salem’s restless legs started vibrating.

## The Evil Princess

“You’re shaking the leaves.”

“Ah, sorry.”

“Talk to me honestly again.”

“Oy vey. I thought I passed this test.”

“It’s not a test, silly. I just happen to really like the real you.”

“Awwright. I guess being quiet just goes against my nature or something.”

“Yes, that I find very easy to believe.”

Salem flicked her tongue.

“I wanted to ask you, you know, before you got all creepy and touchy feely...” Mary teased. “About your siblings. You mentioned them to me before. But did something happen to your brother and sister?”

“Oh...” Salem said, trailing off with her eyes and thinking back to unfortunate yesterday. “Well, I guess it wasn’t the same thing. My sister disappeared a little while after mom and dad died. She wrote me letters for a while, after she left home. We always used to play this game where we tagged each other and called each other ‘Stupid.’”

“What was the point of that?”

“Uh, not much except that once you were tagged, the other person got to call you stupid all day long. But it was fun.”

“Huh. Your idea of fun seems to always involve verbal abuse.”

“I have noticed that, sometimes,” Salem said with a nod.

“And so she stopped writing?”

“Yeah, pretty much. She sent me about three letters tagging me each time, knowing full well that I couldn’t write her back because there was no return address, that little witch. Figured she just got herself killed. Between the two of us, she was the dangerous one.” Salem said with a wink.

“Wow, hard to imagine. So you don’t think she’s still alive somewhere?”

“No, no, I don’t.”

“Because the letters stopped coming?”

“I just don’t feel it anymore. I think I believed she was alive maybe two or three years ago. But I just don’t get that psychic vibe anymore.”

“What were your family’s names?”

“Uhh...Yaga was my dad. Sirach was my mom,” Salem shifted uncomfortably. “Agnes was my sister.” Salem wagged her head back and forth, hating the conversation and gritting her teeth.

“I’m sorry it hurts to talk about it.”

“No, no, it’s fine. I guess normal people talk about stuff like this.”

“And your brother?”

“I never really knew my brother that well. He left home right after dad died. Agnes and I were still pretty young. He came back once in a while, for family pictures and stuff. And when mom died. His name was Quinn. I don’t think that was his real name though. He was kind of a compulsive liar. A constant traveler. A jackass of all trades, dad called him.”

“Hum. What was he like?”

“From what I remember of him, he walked the line between really funny guy and total ass-face jerk wad.”

“That’s a big brother for you,” Mary said with a laugh.

“Okay, so maybe now I should turn the tables on you,” Salem said, poking Mary softly on the nose tip.

“Go ahead.”

“HmMMM, okay,” Salem said with squinting eyes. “...I want to know...”

“Yes, I really like you, Salem.”

“I...I didn’t even ask yet! My question is...”

“I don’t know exactly what I’m going to tell my parents or Aaron. Not yet.”

“...”

“I know I have to tell them something. I don’t know what to say. At all.”

“Well damn, that’s really uncanny! Are you a mind reader?”

Mary laughed. “No, I just knew what you were going to ask.”

“How’d you know? You got psychic powers or something?”

“I don’t think so. My dad once told me that I was ‘people smart.’ I was never book smart, that much was obvious. So he said I was blessed that I got more of the ‘people smart’. Whatever that meant.”

“Who says you’re not book smart?”

“Everyone,” Mary said with a double blink. “Pretty much everyone I ever meet, Salem. They all say I’m stupid. Or shallow. Or a dumb kid, no business being a queen. Sort of a girl that just accidentally walked into the right place at the right time.”

“Well, that’s bull,” Salem said. She took Mary’s head in her hand and stroked her hair. “From now on, I don’t want you to be talking like that no more.”

“Oh?” Mary asked with a bratty smile.

“Yea, that’s right. You’re my girl. And nobody calls my girl stupid.”

“What makes you think I’m your girl?” Mary said with a smiling head tilt.

“Because,” Salem replied as she squeezed Mary’s lips together, giving her a fish-face. “I just told you so.”

## The Evil Princess

“Ooh, so confident.”

“Uh huh? What of it?” Salem asked with a debonair half-glance.

“Hey, say something all cool and rebellious.”

“Yea? Mmmkay.”

“Do it!”

“You hold your horses!” Salem said, right before shifting into proper position and frowning just a tad. She furled her brows and squinted her eyes subtly and nodded.

Then she took out an invisible cigarette. She lit a line of small, crackling lightning rods from her thumb. She waited for them to die down and then took a deep puff.

Mary giggled and waited for it.

When she exhaled she blew out a little puffy cloud of smoke, one that maintained its shape. As soon as it left her mouth it began taking shape and forming a cumulus head. Eventually, the cloud morphed into a face, one conspicuously resembling Mary’s big eyes, pointy nose and long locks.

Mary laughed and clapped.

*“So...you think the end of the world will come when the Blood Moon rises? Naw, naw. Now you listen to me. The end will come when I allow it to come. I’m Salem the Evil Witch. And I’m mean. I’m a mean drunk. I’m a mean stoner. I’m pretty much a mean sober too. Oh yeah, I also have a nasty habit of stealing princesses from happy arranged marriages and feeding them poison. I’m more powerful than a king. More vicious than a barbarian. More ruthless than a robot army. All that plus I got a woman’s impatience. And that’s really scary.”*

“Ooh, that’s such a bad girl thing to say,” Mary cooed, grabbing her arm and tracing her tattoo.

“Yea,” Salem answered, cocky as hell and taking another puff, sucking back in the mini-cloud. “And you can memorize that for Aaron too. Eh?”

Mary heard her but seemed perturbed by the idea. A queasy feeling came over her, then a long awkward silence.

Salem stared at Mary, as if assuring her that she really could be a warrior witch, if that’s what it took to win this game. But Mary was less sure of it. Something already seemed foreboding and dire about the whole situation. Nothing is ever as easy as it might seem. Nothing is ever fair. And everyone, indeed everyone, is willing to fight to the death for what they believe in. Life taught her that, if nothing else.

“What’s the matter, sug?” Salem asked, noticing grief in Mary’s eyes. “Talk to me.”

“Salem, would you give up your beliefs to be with me?”

“What’s that now?”

“I’m just curious. Belief is all a person has, supposedly. Is love stronger than a person’s belief?”

She rolled her head side to side, thinking over the answer. “The more belief a person has, I guess, the harder it is. I believe in laughter. You believe in a lot more than I do. So I dunno.”

“Ah, I see.”

“I believe in family, I guess,” Salem added. “In my family, no one ever left anyone else behind. If anyone ever said, hey, I’m gotta leave and become a monk, or whatever. We were like, ‘You idiot! Fine. Where do we visit your monastery?’” Salem laughed quietly. “It was never a question of losing touch or saying goodbye. There was never any goodbye. Family trumps belief. It has to because beliefs change. But family is forever. Now and even after death. You never stop holding each other’s hand. You never stop looking for each other.”

Salem stared at Mary soberly. “But maybe that’s not how you see things, eh? You don’t even use the word ‘love’ like I use it. Maybe we’re still just friends...”

“No,” Mary said, extending her hand and touching her face. “I don’t think of you as a *friend*. At all. Not in the slightest.”

Salem smiled, keeping her head down and bashful acceptance.

“Especially not after all *that*. That we did. That was not becoming of friendship.”

Salem snickered. “Aww shucks. Well, maybe this is all just another cemetery fling then.”

“A princess doesn’t do that. You know, fling around.”

“Then what are we?”

“Something...sort of like family. Maybe there’s not a human word for it. Maybe it’s something sort of like what the animals have.”

“How’s that?”

“There’s no king or queen, or husband or wife in the animal world, right? Sometimes It’s just partner and partner. Sometimes it’s not mate or male and female. Maybe sometimes it’s just a very special friend. A confidante. A kindred soul.”

“I’ve always liked the word, ‘bosom buddy.’”

Mary giggled. “That seems like you.”

“I just don’t want to get too attached, you know?” Salem backed away, while Mary moved in closer. “I don’t take terms like *family* lightly.”

“Hey,” Mary whispered, taking her hand and kissing each of her fingers. “I give you my promise. My word. I won’t just leave you. I want to be here with you.”

“Promise?”

## The Evil Princess

“Kiss me,” Mary said. “Feel my promise in my kiss.”

She reached over and kissed Salem on the lips, this time a less intense flavor, a more simple fusion of body and mind. Their lips pressing against each other, just barely wet, seemed to communicate profound and possibly indescribable thoughts—of trust, of love, of the beginning and end of all things.

“Okay. I trust you,” Salem said, releasing the kiss but holding onto the moment by caressing Mary’s face and then softly pressing her lips. “I guess that’s what normal people have to do, isn’t it? Trust and stuff.”

“Yeah.” Mary smiled mischievously, a bit clown-like and silly, hoping to distract from the serious moment. “I have another idea. I think we both ought to make a rain check wish list. Most people call it a bucket list, because it’s supposed to be things you wish for before you die. But I think a rain check list is less gloomy.”

“How does that work?”

“We each make a list of five things that we are going to do for each other. I still feel bad about the way we first met. So I am going to let you list five things that you want me to do, to make it up to you. And I will do them all. It’s like a genie list. Or maybe a wish-list.”

“A witch list?”

“A *wish* list. Like wishes.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I’m not a genie so I can’t promise that I can do every single thing on the list. But I can try my best and come close to it. And then you’ll be five more wishes happier than you were before the list.”

“Awww,” Salem said with a long smile. “That’s so corny and weird and I love it.”

“So make your five wishes.”

“They can be anything?”

“Yes. I’m in a wish-granting mood today. I’ll do anything I can to make them come true.”

“Well gee, numbers one through twenty have already been taken care of with our romp in the forest. Uh...oh hey, I know number one.”

“Go ahead.”

“I want you to call me beautiful. And tell me why.”

“Okay...you’re beautiful, Salem. In a different way.”

“Whoah, that’s not cool. Why in a different way?”

“Umm...because when I look at you, I sort of get a strange melty feeling. Your face, your clothes...your very intense green eyes. Like butterflies in my stomach. Like a dizzy head rush. Like just strange hormonal things happening inside me, where I don’t know what I’m thinking and I just seem to become a slave to my own selfish urges.

You make me do crazy things.” Mary paused right before increasing her pace, gesturing strongly and running out of breath. “*Dirty things* I never even thought of doing before I met you. You’re so beautiful you make me want to rip away all my fake beauty clothes and makeup and just be raw and naked and rolling around the grass in the forest.”

“Huh...” Salem said, listening intently and mystified. “Yeah, I guess that is a different kind of beautiful. And I like that definition.”

Mary laughed. “You’re not beautiful like a princess. But that’s not what I like. Get it?”

“Got it. I’m definitely okay with that.”

“And now my wish is that you tell me what kind of beautiful I am.”

Salem kept a smile and looked at the ground, counting the ways. “The kind of beautiful you are. Hum. Well, you’re definitely beautiful like a princess. But yeah, there’s something else to it too. I think you’re the kind of beautiful that’s really powerful beyond physical attraction. You’re the type of beautiful that changes people. That makes people stop and notice stuff around them, you know? And you’re the type of beautiful that not everyone knows how to lose gracefully. God, Mary. I went nuts thinking I had found you and then lost you. People can’t forget you. Even after they meet you once. They try, really hard, to get over you. And that’s all they can do for the rest of their lives. The kind of beauty that changes the world.”

“Wow. That’s scary and flattering all at once,” Mary said with a goofy little simper. “I never really heard that growing up. I heard I was just average.”

“Average? Get the hell out of here. Sounds to me like they’re keeping you on a short leash. The secret is...no one tells the elephant how powerful she is. If she never knows, then guess what? The mouse gets to be in charge.”

“I like that,” Mary said with a nod.

“Yea...Ratty told me that one. I told him it didn’t make any sense, since he was a rat and not a mouse. So that just pokes holes in the whole story.”

“How did he take it?”

“He got majorly pissed. But hey, you tell him he’s both a mouse and a rat and his head gets way too big. I tell him, dammit just pick one!”

Mary laughed. “My turn. I think you owe me another song. That sugar song was a bit of a cheat. I want a real sweet song from the heart.”

“Sweet song?”

“Yeah! You know, every fairy tale romance needs a sweet song.”

## The Evil Princess

“Sweet song...”

“Minus the flavors. Just from the heart. I know you don’t do sweet songs very well. But I am a princess and you owe me one.”

“Gee wiz,” Salem sighed. “I think I’m getting a bum deal here with this rain wish list.”

“If you’re lucky you’ll get my bum as part of the deal.” Mary smiled ear to ear.

“Pervy,” she answered with a smirk. “Mmkay, fine.”

“No cheating. No animals or plants doing bass. No forest noises as an orchestra. No magic. Just your voice. Just your acapella voice.”

“Damn, you’re so high-maintenance, blondie.”

“I am. Who knew entertaining a princess would be so much hard work?”

“Kay,” she said snapping her fingers and trying to create a rhythm.

*So many regrets, a lifetime of bad mem'ries  
Then you came along, cast a spell on me  
You gave me a hope, a hundred million remedies  
Your laughter is the cure, for what ails me  
Am I really dreaming here?  
I never expected this to go my way  
I guess I never expected you to stay  
It's all I can do to put a smile on your face  
And bring a little love and class to this place  
Am I really dreaming here?  
Somebody pinch me*

“Somebody pinch me.”

Mary smiled in gooey-eyed tranquility.

“So what did ya think?”

“Mmm, I thought it was...*interesting*.”

“Whoah, what? You didn’t like it?”

“I liked it.”

“You just liked it? But you didn’t love it?”

“Well...I guess it was kind of confusing?”

Salem’s mouth dropped. “I can’t believe it! I pour my heart out to you and you totally diss me, saying you didn’t love it.”

“Well, if you’re going to be an entertainer you have to deal with criticism, you know.”

“How’s this for criticism? You suck.”

Salem crinkled her nose.

Mary suddenly screamed, shifting around and jumping in the pile of leaves. “Wooo!” Is that you?”

She swooped down inside the pile but came back up. “Something is tickling my feet. That’s you, isn’t it?”

Mary screamed again, the tickle-monster apparently going into full assault mode and poking every soft spot on her heel.

“Stop tickling me!”

Salem raised her arms in the air. “No hands. It’s not me.”

“Yeah right!” Mary squirmed around, avoiding the extra set of hands underneath the leaves tickling her feet.

“If you’re going to criticize my sweet songs, you’re going to have to accept tickle-monster rebuttals to your criticism.”

“You’re so evil. Call it off. Okay, okay, I’m sorry! It was great!”

“Well now that’s my next rain check wish. I want you to surrender to tickling to appease my bruised ego.”

“Torture is not to be included on the wish list!”

Salem laughed it off, intoxicated by so many “looks” over the past hour, each one ribald and bold, no mistaking the connotation. Finally honest, even a bit afraid, because whatever they had was palpable. Transmigrated from fantasy land into the real world and the look served as the portal between worlds, reassuring her that anything was possible.

Raw, effusive energy bounced back between the two of them, nowhere to go but in perpetual motion. Now immersed in a fantasy come true, how long would real life take to catch up to the fantasy, the paradise world that they surely deserved? Salem listened wistfully to Mary’s laughter, peppered with the sound of her name coming from Mary’s lips, sounding like a harp, a symphony of syllables. If this heaven of Mary’s were real, this would be the eternal moment. Right here, like this.

Whatever life meant before, it was all a grand rehearsal for this moment, a profound realization of her destiny. To make this Blue Princess laugh. To take a girl, so melancholy, so insecure and so doomed to failure and to tickle her until she laughs for mercy. To show her that life could still be a lot of fun. That at any given moment, a big goofy and contagious smile was just waiting to come out of nowhere and strike. Life could be a riot. Life could be so funny that it’s actually worth dying for in the end.

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## Chapter 12

### Mercy of the Gods

*“Who Was Queen Fen Mien I?”*

*An Essay by Prince Aaron*

*“Historical record is nothing but fossilized hearsay. First, we find an artifact and then create a story behind it, mind-mapping it to other stories we’ve heard, based on other quaint artifacts we’ve found and other wonderful tales of hearsay that generally honest looking people have told us. In the end, we create a compilation of possibilities and declare whatever is uncontested as our heritage, ancestry and legacy. Sometimes facts are contested, which necessitates a popular vote. The elite and the majority rules upon what is believable, leaving a minority to seethe and lament about ‘revisionist history.’ Our records are what make life worth living, our martyrdoms worthwhile and our decisions morally sound. If not for records, artifacts and convincing explanations, we would have no idea what we were doing here, where we were going, or where we had been. If not for the recorded mistakes*

*of the past, we would have no caution as to the present, no reason to live a special life with meaning.*

*In the beginning, once upon a time, someone told us that Queen Fen Mien I founded the ornate land of Cadabra turning a lush tropical paradise, untouched by mankind for centuries, into a thriving society of social equals; a land of freedom, of safety and of ambition. The artifact proving the existence of Queen Fen Mien I had no contesting from scholars or historians. Upon excavating an enormous wall from underneath a 500-meter tall mound, our ancestors found a marble tomb bearing the name in fine carving. Closer inspection after opening the tomb, sacrificing as many as ten men to an ancient curse, or so legend would have it, revealed a stone bust of Queen Fen Mien I. Only the eyes were made of still-glistening sapphire, somehow inserted and molded into the stone with a craftsman's precision—impressive for earlier generations who lacked the sophisticated tools we take for granted today.*

*The stories behind her magical eyes, blue as the ocean, as deep as the skies, were not without dubious allusions. A scroll inside the tomb revealed the so-called truth behind the founding of Cadabra. The Queen first emerged from the ocean, fully developed and eager to start a life on land after a repulsive stay in the hypocritical world of Poseidon and Amphitrite and their political chicanery.*

*Everybody claims the Queen, because a more beautiful and altruistic character could not be desired; she was the paragon of feminism and the original Virtuous Woman, brave enough to defy a God, strong in that she depended on no man to create a new world where women and men existed as equals and exploitation of any sort was unfathomable.*

*In short, everyone loved the idea of Queen Fen Mien I, a woman whom books of old describe as having a "heavenly voice" and a "siren's singing ability"; one who needed only make a request aloud, for ten honorable men to volunteer their chivalry, laying down their lives for a woman who constantly earned respect through action, though and principle.*

*Scrolls of ancient times suggest that the Queen was a woman who pioneered peace, quickly developing a reputation for forward thinking. She asserted herself as a natural born leader, unheard of years ago for a woman to assume the role of a Queen in an anarchical society and later welcomed immigrants, refugees, vagabonds and even pirates to her land, free of judgment and taxes—but with strict conditions of politeness and respect.*

## The Evil Princess

*Over time, the reality of Fen Mien I's existence became secondary to the heroic implications of her name. Many of us doubted her divine origins, plenty of us questioned her altruistic, morally flawless nature—after all, who rises to the ranks without sacrificing someone or something?*

*Still, whenever her name was used it was never in vain. She represented something profound about our lives as honorable men and women. She spoke to the humanity in us, the little we had left but gripped in desperation. She reflected the peace we all wanted, the dreams we all held onto. It mattered less whether she actually existed, or if she was as immaculate as described, than it mattered to us that her legacy was real. Her legacy was modern, powerful and resonated in the people's hearts.*

*In Fen Mien I, we see a mother figure who bore us, sacrificed for us and taught us everything they know about how to lead, live and love. No one dared erase her name from the records because everyone aspired to be reconciled to the Old Magical Kingdom, with the Queen, buried with her to rest blissfully for an eternity. History is nothing but what we believe it to be, the interpretations of old and absurd events and completely up to the living to assign it meaning. We choose to believe in the Queen because doing so grants us an empowering feeling of peace. With the end of the Magical Kingdom, her reign, we all experienced great plague and atrocity, the likes of which we have never recovered from; the likes of which still breed in us a bloodlust that cannot be quenched. What we all want is for the Queen to rise again, symbolically or even posthumously, so that she can show us the way to peace and prosperity once more. As the songs say, "Please come back to your children, O Queen. Without you, we are lost children crying for your touch. Without you by our side, we have been abandoned, left with just a picture of your wailing blue eyes."*

**M**ary had no idea what exactly she was confessing or what any of it meant. All she really knew is that she couldn't walk away from whatever madness this was—and it wasn't fair to Aaron or the people of Two Kingdoms to be dishonest. She told Salem to lay low while a royal fiasco broke out. She would tell her parents and then Aaron of her plans—her insane plans of meeting Salem and staying with her, come what may to all the political chicanery. It was a speech she had no idea how to broach. Suddenly, the little fairy's transcript seemed like a very good idea.

She stood before Satyre and Lilith who were lounging in the King's courtyard, Lilith sitting with her daughter and the king, as usual, working with his hands, sharpening a new sword. This time she wore a fainter shade of denim blue, the color of guilt and remorse, a dress that apologized for the recklessness of youth.

"The Apology Dress" was an ambivalent creation and one that reflected Mary's own dual temptations, the choice to be loved or the choice to love someone else. The tulle gown skirt, reaching down to her ankles, was smooth denim but with boscage trimming. Her bodice was plummeting in a v-shape down the front and back and suspiciously colored black, as if to feel Salem's presence with her. Only a blue mesh shawl would keep her warmly reassured from the cold chill in the air, not to mention serve as a cover for some rather conspicuous hickeys. Her shoes were blue suede flats, albeit decorated with teardrop shaped blue rhinestones, suggesting the shabby nature of her self-serving apology. The virgin fashion team by now clearly didn't care for Princess Mary.

"Is everything all right, dear?"

"Ummm...yes and no. I guess...the guard told you...?"

"Only that you had something very vital to share with your father the King and the Prince of Opula."

"Right."

Through the corner of her eye, Mary saw Rivulet, who was standing there smiling generously and serving as "moral support" for Mary, ensuring she would go through the full confession.

"Hello My Lady. The Prince and I were just discussing how lonely our place has been without your presence. We were starting to wonder if something may have happened."

"Thanks for your concern," Mary said bitterly.

"Well, this is family business," the tubehead sniveled. "I dare not pry. But I *shall* report back to Aaron. To keep him *abreast* of such transpirings."

Rivulet's voice successfully annoyed all three Red Royals, particularly his improper emphasis on the word *abreast*. Alas, that was just the way Golden People talked. And yes, it was quite vexing.

Satyre never hid his contempt for Gold Kingdom Guards and etiquette and hastened Rivulet's exit. "Are you going to talk about leaving or are you going to leave?" he snarled until Rivulet exited the courtyard.

"Something happened. Uh..."

"Oh come, darling," Lilith said while making a pleasant little bridge with her hands to rest her chin.

## The Evil Princess

“Surely it’s not all that bad. We always rather enjoy your confessional. They are always humble, never gaudy. Very even-tempered and interesting...”

“Let her speak, Lilith. Mary, tell us what you’ve learned,” Satyre huffed in a very beneficent way, at least for the likes of him.

“Please.”

“I uhhhh...uhhhhh...”

“How old are we tonight, darling?” Lilith grouched. “I thought you were a grown woman? Confess what you’ve done. Behave like an intelligent young woman. Pretend if you must.”

“I met someone else,” Mary said matter-of-factly.

“I see. And...” Lilith mirrored her.

“Yes, mom!” Mary finally spoke vivaciously. “Yes. This person is worth giving up a palace for. Worth millions in gold. Worth sacrificing all of my inheritance. It’s just this crazy idea that I want to marry for love.” Love. Did she really say the word love? Is that really what was happening? Is this funny feeling inside, this all-encompassing, stomach-shriveling, feverish feeling what love felt like?

Mary’s voice disheartened and she began clasping her hands together as her heart sang. “I don’t want to make myself fall in love. My whole life I have been even-tempered and moderate, melancholy in every way. I don’t want to be that way in love. If I have nothing else in life, let me at least feel something real.”

Lilith said nothing but sent her eyes over to her husband in anxious expectation. Everything, all of life and death, depended on Satyre’s next facial contortion.

Mary watched in flinching relief as Satyre’s face melted from piercing stoicism to a warm simper. Satyre’s “little smile” looked rather broad and terrifying, but it was nonetheless a smile. That had to be a good thing.

“Then tell the boy. The engagement’s off.”

“Wh-? Satyre!” Lilith exclaimed in apprehension. “What about...”

Mary quaked in joy, grabbing her head in disbelief and shooting her eyes open.

“Really? Oh wow...I didn’t think...”

“She has made up her mind,” Satyre said, clenching his sword handle and admiring the new and untainted blade. “We are not *in debt* to the Kingdom of Gold,” he said with a bitter gaze. “If they want to go to war over this...God help me, I’ll give them a war. The bloodiest.”

Lilith stared at Satyre disapprovingly as he eyed his sword, feeling the rage burn much better than fine whiskey.

“Perhaps our daughter has learned that this Aaron boy is simply not the high caliber of a prince that was promised.”

Satyre smiled widely, a look of great paternal pride developing with every rocky dimple. His face looked like a mountaintop, one that no one could bear to see crumbling down.

“Oh dear. This is not going to go over well at all,” Lilith sighed, eyeing Mary in disdain.

“I’m so glad to hear you say that, dad. I don’t want to do anything to start a war.”

Satyre shrugged it off, the thought of thousands of angry men about as worrying as a bad shave. “People start war. They fight over everything. Gods. Territory. Possessions. There will always be a reason to fight. But today, my only daughter shall be happy.”

Lilith stared at Mary passively, not happy in the slightest. She even mumbled a snide little nothing to herself. “Well, apparently that is all that matters.”

Mary smiled...and smiled. And smiled. Her face no doubt frozen in that moment and her jaw locked in trepidation of what comes next. “OH! There’s something else,” she added with a big, nervous grin.

Satyre mirrored his daughter’s bubbly visage, but Lilith stared in stomach-turning anxiety. She already knew whatever was to come was a deathblow.

“Ummm...well, how do I say this. Uhhh...there is someone else I want to be with. And uhh...” Mary said, her hands and fingers dancing like a wedding reception.

“Fine. What is his name? Aaron and all of two kingdoms will be informed of your *new* engagement immediately,” Satyre boomed.

“Ummm...Salem.” She recovered from a crippling pause. “H-Her name is Salem.”

Satyre lost his smile and the world seemed to stop turning for just a few terribly long moments. Lilith continued staring uneasily, having already anticipated this moment and trying hard to think of an escape, any escape.

“Yeah. She’s uh...a witch.” Mary nodded awkwardly. “Boy, you didn’t see that coming, right?” she laughed and snapped her fingers in jest.

Lilith glanced over at her husband who seemed to be on slow boil.

“Well now,” the Queen said. “Here’s an idea. I suggest we forget about this silly incident and pretend as if we just mysteriously lost a half hour of daylight time.”

Satyre seethed and grunted through his clenched teeth.

“Is this a joke?”

## The Evil Princess

“Yes, I fear it is. A very unfunny joke. A very inappropriate thing to say,” Lilith assured them.

“What? No. No, I mean it!”

“I’m sure you do!” Lilith laughed, aching for a cup of wine right about now, or six or twelve. “But we’re just being silly now, aren’t we?”

“Why?”

“Well for one, you cannot marry a *witch*,” Lilith quipped. “Silly girl. You can only marry a prince. Or at least a non-witch. A person who is not a witch. For starters! Does that make sense to you?”

Mary shrunk back in heartbroken defeat. She should have been stronger, she thought. A strong woman would have risen to the first sign of opposition. But in an instant they broke her. They laughed at her. She was not a princess but still a child.

“You cannot throw away everything we’ve built just for you...for us...just for your tawdry amusement,” Lilith warned.

Mary tilted her head and spoke with a cracking voice.

“But...following the heart? Romance?”

“Something to be kept between a prince and a princess, darling,” Lilith replied firmly. “Seriously now,” she said raising her eyebrow. “You couldn’t even ask a minister to approve of such a thing. You can’t mix Good with Evil, you know that. Witches are evil. You would lose everything all for a little torrid...*thing* you have going on.”

The very thought grossed Lilith out. The thought of a witch and her daughter doing terrible, horrible things...and she wasn’t even informed about the gratuitous use of the six-inch fairy Salem described. Imagine if the poor old chaps had actually been privy to Salem’s harrowing mind. Oh, the shame, oh the scandal.

Satyre was angry all right, but deflected his anger away from his frail and whimpering daughter towards a common enemy. “The witch has cast a spell on her. Obviously.”

“No, no she hasn’t...” Mary whispered.

“YES SHE HAS,” Satyre roared. “You’re so young and innocent. You don’t realize it. But witches have the ability to cast spells. Sometimes by a book. Sometimes by just their words.”

“She’s probably hypnotizing you, darling. Once the spell wears off, you’ll return to normal. And you’ll laugh about this incident...as loudly and boisterously as we are laughing now.”

Ironically, Lilith said that with an ice cold face, traumatized at the thought and not laughing in the slightest.

“And we’ll deal with that witch,” Satyre ominously promised as he stood up and began stomping around.

“No. Don’t hurt her!” Mary begged, shaking her fists and pacing back and forth.

Her parents stared in contempt, as Mary stood in front of Satyre, blocking the way to certain revenge.

“You don’t understand, do you? This is what Salem was worried about. That nobody would understand.”

“There is nothing to understand,” Lilith decreed. “You are a Princess. You are to marry an important man. Not a...a *witch*.”

Lilith detested the very word and Satyre agreed. However, Mary was surprised to see a shade of kind emotion in her warrior father’s rugged face. “Mary...you’re our only child. You are destined to be a great leader some day. Don’t throw it away. Don’t take for granted all you have.”

Satyre couldn’t bear to look at Mary anymore today and left the room in a huff. He even took the time out to slice and destroy a dinner table that was looking at him funny. Mary sobbed, as crashing plates and splitting wood sounded.

Mary began romping away in the opposite direction, prompting Lilith to stand and call her attention.

“Where are you going?”

“To see Aaron! I’ll make him understand!” Mary cried.

“*Don’t tell him,*” Lilith pleaded. “I’m warning you, child. *Don’t...*” she said with an eerily calm but stone cold face.

“I don’t care! Aaron deserves to know the truth.”

Lilith looked on in frustration as Mary fled the courtyard, sobbing and rushing for dear life.

Prince Aaron’s Abode was far from humble. But Aaron always neglected to defend himself and the truth is that his parents insisted on making Aaron’s private palace the most prodigiously extravagant spectacle in all the land. Aaron’s Abode was built upon an old and abandoned temple and rumor suggested, it contained an ancient relic that belonged to Fen Mien I. The Relic, protected heavily by armor and under seven locks, reportedly powered the wisdom of the Gold Kingdom, giving their kings and queens inspiration from God(s). In fact, The Relic was a suitable substitute for pithy religious ostentatious displays. Because The Relic was secure and powered the kingdom’s spirituality there was no particular need to mention religion or God in political affairs. It was simply understood that Fen Mien I fueled the produce of the Golden Elite.

## The Evil Princess

King Amram built the Abode, once a modest sanctuary, up to greatness so that it could serve as Prince Aaron's future glory. He even enlisted the help of the Diamond Empire, who had diamonds and "purple gold" reserves, (speaking of intermetallic compounds made in respect to the trademark of the Gold Kingdom) reserves to spare, in exchange for a non-aggression pact. In a gesture of goodwill, the new Princess in charge, Wendy™, (who only had one name, but a trademark symbol distinctly printed after her name) even sent skilled craftsman to help Amram's construction. Wendy reached out, not only for the pact, but as a symbol of her respects to Fen Mien I's legacy and as a vote of confidence in the Gold Kingdom's triumph of material philosophy over stubborn religious adherence, such as what the Red Kingdom taught. After all, Wendy knew Amram's family. More importantly, she remembered Mary, her childhood friend who was now betrothed to Aaron when she became of age. Or at least, whenever Aaron first developed amorous feelings.

Aaron's Abode was built atop a hill and separated into three atriums that served as the Three Attributes of Aaron. Power, Wealth and Mary. Mary was the attribute Aaron needed, as a symbol to the people that he was a fair and loving husband, as well as an almighty ruler. The Inner Bedroom, measured 20 cubits long and 30 cubits high, with an elevated floor. The floor was built with fine chocolate wood from the Commonwealth of the Pink Sky, the best in Cadabra and its walls and floors were overlaid with pure gold. Statues of gold were erected, monuments to Fen Mien I, Amram and Amram's forefathers and Jaquie, built in platinum and placed one level higher than the men. This would be Mary's legacy and preliminary construction had already begun on her mount.

The Outer Bedroom of Aaron's Humble Abode was considerably more ambitious than the Inner Bedroom, which was meant to paint Aaron's modesty. The Outer Bedroom measured 40 cubits high and long and was overlaid with gold, platinum and diamond. The Doors into his two-bedroom were covered in fine Pinkian Wood, as well as florals and artwork from only the most insane artisans with certified kills. Unlike the first bedroom, which was Aaron's intimacy, his time all pretensions were stripped away. The Outer Bedroom was intentionally overbearing, with double the gold and with a symbolic color scheme of Blue. For Blue represented something precious to the Gold and Red Kingdom, even though no one actually understood or dared to explain why. Blue was simply the color of greatness, beyond human reasoning. Little wonder than that Mary Melancholy in her Blue uniform and hazy

blue eyes captured the interest of Amram, who was looking for someone to match Aaron to when he became of age. Mary wasn't the shiniest rock in the aquarium, or so they said, but she did have marvelous taste in fashion. Amram knew ever since Mary was ten, she was the most qualified of the future princesses to marry his son. To marry him off to Wendy or Blossom would surely be a diplomatic nightmare.

Besides, love was important, not merely wealth, Amram figured. Aaron should be betrothed to someone\* (who had a kingdom), whom he could more easily love. That was the romantic thing to do and Amram was a hopeless romantic at heart, or so he figured.

There was more to speak of, of course, the Courtyards of Aaron, the Back Yard of Aaron, the Living Room of Aaron (one Public and one Private), the Spring River of Aaron and the Royal Waste Room of Aaron, the Glorious Man Cave of Aaron (one male, one female), but alas, Princess Mary seemed too distracted to pay much attention to those wings.

The point is, Aaron was embarrassed by the spectacle his parents put together for him. Everywhere he went, he was resented and treated with overwhelming respect. Respect he never earned, or could possibly ever earn through his own efforts. Aaron resented his wealth. The very idea of marrying a nice woman and starting fresh, far away from his family's wealth, seemed to be his darkest and most unmentionable of fantasies.

Prince Aaron was sitting down on a throne seat inside his Outer Bedroom, accompanied by Rivulet, who wanted to be sure and make his presence known to Mary, so that she wouldn't procrastinate breaking the news. In fact, from the look of Aaron's face—stoic and contemplative—it would appear Rivulet already delivered the heart-crushing news.

Rivulet excused himself, smiling gleefully as all skinny-headed people had been trained to do.

Mary stood still, eyeing the vainglorious scene in mistrust, wondering what she could possibly bring to Aaron, that such a great man might ever be appeased by her.

"Your Majesty," she said softly.

Aaron broke a smile and laughed softly.

"Nonsense. You will always be Lady Mary to me."

"I guess you heard?"

Aaron looked down at his shoes in uncertainty. "Yes, Rivulet informed me of what happened. So...apparently our witch friend Salem has been casting some love spells?"

## The Evil Princess

“It’s not a spell, Aaron. I...I do feel something for her,” Mary said, summoning courage perhaps only because Aaron’s face glowed with warmth and approachability.

“Darling,” Aaron laughed. “You don’t know what you feel. It’s a common reaction to a witch’s curse. Everything you think you know turns upside down. It’s a symptom of the curse.”

He smiled confidently, forgivingly, which halted Mary’s straight-to-the-point approach. “Before long, you may even start wondering if you really prefer strong, handsome men at all,” Aaron laughed again.

Mary stared.

“I assure you, that you do. Don’t worry, I’m not upset. I realize that witches are very crafty.”

“But it’s not...”

“And I know that young girls, like my lady dearest, are a bit...shall we say, ‘experimental’ right before their wedding night?” Aaron tittered and blushed at the thought. “I heard from a friend of mine that there is this special harem near The Outskirts. She traveled there right before her debutante ball and learned all sorts of *interesting things* to do with other women in bed.” He laughed hard. “Who knows, if Salem had played her cards right, maybe she would have joined us in one of these lonely bedrooms.”

Mary frowned. He was getting it and yet not getting it. “*Aaron*. I’m not going to marry you.”

Aaron lost his smile but maintained eye contact.

“It wouldn’t be fair to you, to marry, for comfort but not love. You are a kind man. A fair prince and future king. You’re loved by all and could have any woman you want.”

“But I want you,” he said with resolution.

“Please, I beg you, just forget me. I’m nothing. I’m nobody.”

“No. No, Mary.” His voice warmed her like a fireplace. His sensitive eyes almost cried with her, reassuring her that she could be forgiven. She could always be forgiven.

“Don’t ever say you’re nobody. You are destined to be great. You are my Princess Mary.”

“But I’m not. I can’t.”

“You can. Forget the past. Look forward to the future.”

“I’m sorry.”

Aaron sighed, becoming more nervous by each passing second. Why was she so firm? Why was she so much unlike all the other women, the ones who swooned at the chance to be invited to immortality? Indeed, what had he ever done to her but be kind?

“Don’t be. We will all learn to be great, in the way our parents would have us. Now Mary, I know you love your parents, your people, just as I love my own.”

“I know and I probably should...but I just can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Just answer me this,” Aaron said, weakening in spirit. “What did I ever do to be treated like this? Is it true what people like Rivulet say? That pretty women really do hate it when nice guys try to be gentlemen? That deep down, you all really want to be abused?”

“No...it’s not true...”

Aaron’s weakness quickly amplified to outrage. “Would you have loved me if I argued with you, instead of complimented you? Insulted you when we first met? Devalued you as a person and demonstrated my power?”

“Aaron, no...”

“Because let me tell you something about power, Mary,” Aaron said softly, his eyes injured and fleeing. “Power means nothing. Wealth means nothing. Not to me, certainly not to anyone else. It’s all lies. It’s all posing. It’s *empty*.”

The very words coming from Aaron’s mouth alarmed Mary, enough to quiet her for just a moment.

“Come on, let me show you.”

Aaron took Mary by the hand and took her to the Inner and Outer Bedroom, then the Living Room, then the Courtyard, the endless layers of gold, titanium and diamond spinning around in Mary’s eyes like a kaleidoscope. Finally, he took her to the secret room labeled only as The Blessing. It was armored shut, made accessible only by a custom-made golden key.

He opened it slowly and the bursting color from inside was so intense, music seemed to play and they were both blinded. Upon rubbing their eyes open they saw it: The Relic, contained in a pure ivory-colored case, surrounded by walls and floors of sparkling materials that defined elemental category.

“What...what is this?”

Aaron smiled as he gave her the tour.

“This entire room is constructed of Calemmitite, a new and undiscovered metal from distant space—far beyond our own galaxy. Asteroid ore that has been polished to perfection. Legend has it, a wizard came to Fen Mien I and gave it to her as a gift and heaven knows where he got it from. She transformed all of the ore into a secret ark, where she determined she would leave one of her most prized possessions so that her spirit might nourish the growing kingdom.”

“That’s interesting...I don’t love you,” Mary said.

## The Evil Princess

“*And...*” Aaron continued. “This is my point. I don’t care about any of this stuff. This space ore is worth a million times more than all the gold my father owns. That makes all of the King’s palace, his influence, his riches worth nothing. But here’s what matters, Mary.” Aaron softened his disposition and spoke from the heart.

“It’s nothing but worthless metal. But we can use it to help people,” Aaron reached a crescendo of emotion. “We can use it to help other people, to motivate them to look beyond money. To make them stop and pause and see how war is only tearing us all apart. Together, we can stop war all over Cadabra. We can make this world a better place because of the luxury, the gift of God, that has been given to us. We are fortunate to have more than most people will ever have. If we squander what we have been generously given...heaven help us.”

Mary shut her eyes, resigning herself from objecting any further. How could one argue what Aaron was saying? He was the proverbial nice man, the king, the authority figure that everyone needed to make sense of the world.

“Aaron. I know that you will do great things...”

Aaron’s eyes lit up.

“But I cannot join you. I cannot marry you.”

He stared a long moment and then looked down in defeat.

“I can’t do that to you—”

“YES, YOU CAN!” Aaron screamed to the heights of the Abode, sending Mary into a panic. “YES, YOU CAN! YOU CAN AND YOU WILL!”

Aaron clenched his fists and began bashing the case containing the relic, pounding on the tinted glass. “YOU’RE GOING TO MARRY ME! IT’S CALLED HAPPILY EVER AFTER, GODDAMN IT!” Aaron raged, breaking the glass open and bloodying his own fists.

He grabbed The Relic now openly displayed: a perfectly rounded and polished sphere of an unknown origin, featuring a shining blue hue. He threw it hard against the wall and listened for the shatter—but to no avail. The Relic, true to legend, was unbreakable. But he went to town on the case, tearing down the case with his sword and pounding the debris until it scattered all over the floor.

Mary ran away from the Relic Room, until she realized the door was locked from the outside, made accessible only by Aaron’s key.

Aaron kicked over the remaining debris and followed Mary back into the Outer Bedroom. “*You think I give a damn about all these things?* Things are nothing, Mary. Things are only physical representations of power. You want power? You want to see me demonstrate my confidence?”

Aaron ran over and pulled her by the arm bringing her back to his face. He smacked her hard in the mouth, the sheer power of his arm sending Mary reeling to the floor.

Aaron roared, “Now don’t you feel attracted to me? Now that I’m behaving more like a bully witch? Is this what pretty girls like? A man to treat them like shit? There’s plenty more where that came from. Now fall in love with me, you ungrateful, spoiled stupid cunt!”

Mary sat up, shivering and in stunned silence, holding her lip that was barely bleeding.

“I paid enough for you by now,” Aaron said. “Every woman has a price. A princess. A prostitute. A housewife. A concubine. You’re all incentive-based creatures that only want what you can’t have.” He raised his voice in rhetoric, inching closer to her face. “Well now, what value can I offer to attract you, the customer? Because we both know true love is a joke. Like money is a joke. You want to know what marriage is, what politics is? What growing up is? It’s owning up to your responsibilities. Just as I have.”

Aaron walked over to Mary, almost as if he was being chivalrous and ready to help her up. But when he saw the baby-like panic on Mary’s face he opted for a different approach.

“Oh...did I frighten you, Mary?” Aaron stared her down until Mary dared not meet his eyes directly. “What is the *incentive* for me not to slap that stupid look off your face?”

Mary struggled to say a word, much less a sentence. “I’m sorry,” she whimpered. “I don’t expect you to forgive me.”

“Forgive? *Forgive?*”

He slapped her face again, causing the princess to cower, throwing her shaking hands over her head and rolling up into a shielding ball.

“No. I don’t forgive. There is nothing to forgive. We’re going to be married. And we’re going to be very, very happy together.”

Mary could say nothing else, but continued staring in helpless, melting surrender.

“You can be loved. Or you can be afraid. But you *will* be mine. Because I tell you this. If you ever cross me, Mary, I will give you a damn good reason to cry. Plenty of reasons.”

Mary stuttered and cried, as Aaron walked away, toppling over dressers and stepping on crowns and jewels—demonstrating for sure how he felt about all “things.”

He looked hard into Mary’s eyes as he crunched his own personal crown beneath his feet, costing the kingdom thousands—perhaps millions.

“Now then, are we in agreement, My Lady?”

## The Evil Princess

Mary cowered and could only nod in response.

Aaron took her silence as offense and swooped over to meet her, grabbing her jaw with his fingers as she lay on the floor.

He looked down at her, moving his face closer to hers. “*Say it.*”

“Whuuu...”

“Say it. What are you going to do?”

“M-Marry you,” she blubbered, as snot and tears rolled from her face and into Aaron’s hands, apparently edifying him.

“Say it louder.”

“Marry you!”

“You’re damn right you will. Or so help me, I will kill you.” He wiped Mary’s crying snot off on her blouse, cleaning his hand. “No. First I’ll kill that black-haired, big nosed whore. And make you watch as she dies. Then I’ll kill your stupid old bat of a mother. And make you watch. Then I’ll kill your senile old father. And make you watch. *Then* and only *then* will I put you out of your misery. I’ll wait until you beg to die. How’s that for a *tragic* death? Then people will finally understand why you’re so goddamned depressed all the time.”

Aaron shoved her face back down to the floor, leaving the broken princess in shambles.

“Now then...don’t you feel *attracted* to me? Tell me again how much you like the bad boy.”

*To King Satyre and Queen Lilith*

*From The House of Opula, Prince Aaron:*

*Dearest Lilith and Satyre of the Red Kingdom,*

*I regret what has happened. In my ignorance of widespread Celtic culture, I neglected to study up on witches and the powers they possess. It is clear to me now that Lady Mary has come under a terrifying spell of one Salem, the Dark Witch.*

*This voodoo “love spell” is unquestionably devilish, unnatural and evil. Through the use of what is called a gris-gris, or voodoo amulet, the witch casts a spell of sympathetic black magic, a love curse. For the spell to work, the voodoo doll must be stabbed in the heart with a pin to cause great depression or “melancholy”, so the victim will be vulnerable. Along with the pin, a name is stabbed into the doll’s heart, representing a spirit of the Devil. This is the spirit of power and domination.*

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

*Mary's mind and body are being held hostage by a demon. She is physically powerless to resist the witch's curse until the magician is killed.*

*Please don't harm Mary right now, no matter what nonsense comes out of her mouth. Know that it is the witch talking.*

*I still love her. And I know you still love her. She is OUR family now, yours, mine, the people we represent. I am going to deal with the witch. I will force her to end the spell and return the Mary we all know and love back to us. I will not lose what we have worked so hard to build. I love you both. And above all, I love Mary.*

*Peace be with you,*

*Prince Aaron*

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## Chapter 13

### The Gold Standard

*“Everyone pays for sex. Everyone pays for love. Everyone pays for freedom. Everyone pays for protection. If you got to live life, you might as well be handling the money.”*

- Attributed to the Great General Mean, the Founder of the Kingdom of Gold

**T**he House of Opula had a way of instantly quieting great rage. Whatever your denunciation or arraignment, by the time you saw the twelve golden pillars that raised the roof thirty cubits high, your message seemed slightly less lofty and your complaint sounded more like a squawk than a doomsday edict. Prophets had been known to travel across all Cadabra, their righteous indignation boiling over with holy spirit, only to leave the palace broken and robbed of all faith.

Amram's questions to the prophets who would judge the Kingdom of Gold were concise and brutal:

*If your God is so great, why are you clothed in rags?*

*If your land so disapproves of our ways, why do you still owe us debt?*

*If you truly are a loving prophet of Good, why are you trying to destroy us, rather than help us do better for the world?*

A few minutes with Amram did the trick, not that he was an exceptionally sententious man, or even a reasonably affable man who smiled joyously at random moments throughout the day instead of only smiling when he heard news of deceased old competitors.

But the pillars made of shields of beaten gold radiated through the entrance room, robbing all poor men of their piety. Whatever you were, Amram was too. He was not a man of God, but a thinking man who acknowledged God's Providence. He was not an elected politician like all the others, surviving on campaign donations, but a cornerstone of the economy that Cadabra simply insisted he be invited everywhere and so he might as well be a king.

Amram not only inherited wealth but increased it, letting everyone profit and thus allowing a menagerie of very different human beings to finally speak the same language: the language of prosperity. He built the house his war-weary father only dreamed of building, if only the Reds would move past their holy wars and let the rich be, let the hardest workers and the smartest traders profit and keep their own earned wealth. Amram avoided confrontation with Satyre for decades, even while maintaining the necessary cold war, so that he could further profit while Satyre continued stomping around in mud.

Aaron entered his father's home feeling the same humility, even if all this was destined to be his someday. Even if all of Cadabra was destined to be his someday, since it would only be a matter of time before every province and kingdom was working for Gold wage. The golden walls only magnified the lush ivory shrines embedded amid the gold, bathing everything in those notorious trademarked colors.

Aaron's long walk to Amram's elevated throne only helped calm his fist-shaking and disheveled state. The King's throne was mounted high, with descending steps of gold shekels and statues of animals. Lions counter-facing goats, oxen, wolves, bears and eagles in some apparent tribute to old myth, suggesting that Amram's great forefather, General Mean, had a coronation ceremony that was met with a chorus of forest animals singing and issuing proclamations of fortune. Another myth was that General Mean was named after his priggishness and bastardly people skills and not for the true meaning of his name, the "desirable middle between two extremes".

## The Evil Princess

There were never any gemstones in sight, less someone assume there wasn't enough gold to waste. There clearly was. Amram's throne was surrounded by two empty chairs, one for his wife and one for his son, along with seventy other seats for the judges and royal advisors. Ivory sculptures of old forefathers in Amram's lineage, dating back to Queen Fen Mien herself complemented golden candle lamps.

Visitors were always impressed that Amram, not really a fan of technology, mechanized his throne and had a pulley system set up so that every time he stepped upon the throne, the golden animals would stretch out on one foot to seat him. He being a sort of materialist-deist, wasn't above entertaining tales of black arts and allegedly had his throne cursed, so that any future conqueror would be killed by the animal sculptures if they attempted to steal a trademark.

By the time Aaron reached the top level, being "allowed in" by the sliding lion and ox, he felt exhausted and had a chance to think over his unfortunate experience with Lady Mary.

"Word has it that you have experienced some problems with Princess Mary," Amram said, drinking his gold-laced wine, as always, half-asleep and half drunk.

"What did you hear?"

Amram shrugged with just a tug of his double chin. "Just that she prefers the company of a witch to a young handsome man."

Aaron stewed over the idea and remained silent.

"How opprobrious," the king said. "It's best not to let a journalist grab hold of that story."

"The problem is not with her," Aaron said, taking in a deep stench of oxidized sulphide and stoically frowning. "It's with us."

"Oh?"

"We are the ones who have tolerated witchcraft all these years. Tolerated their black magic. I fear our curiosity into occultism may have opened a channel for demonic possession."

Amram grumbled as he sat his gold cup down.

"Demonic possession? Really?" He seemed cynical of the notion, probably influenced by the fact that he already spent a small fortune paying a seer to curse his golden animal statues for fifteen more generations.

"Yes. I said...I did...some things that didn't even feel like me," Aaron said in earnest. "I fear the witch is trying to break into my head and manipulate my thoughts."

"I'll tell you this once, Aaron," he said in warning. "Don't make your personal vendetta a part of your kingship. Do not drag the kingdom, the marketplace, into your therapy sessions. You will end up

in great debt because other people will begin to trust your misguided altruisms and absurd ultimatums. Soon, they start to think you owe them something.”

“I do owe them something. I owe them the truth. And witches are the problem. How many years have we tolerated them, father? Letting them live in the borderlands? Letting the Outskirts harbor them, despite the fact that we know they are planning to destroy us? Or even if they are powerless, the fact that they want us destroyed? How long do we tolerate that? We refuse to fight back. We let them spread horrorism and fear and we sit back and do nothing because of our *progressive attitude*. Our liberal tolerance. Another word for weakness if you ask me.”

Amram sighed, uninterested in politics, the less important commodity in Cadabra trade. “Nobody likes witches. They play on their own team. They’re anarchists. But are you going to spend millions trying to step on every cockroach?”

“I will do what I must,” Aaron said. “You of all people should know that a king must be respected above all else. If he loses respect of his people, he loses all power.”

Amram heard enough and stood up, tapping Aaron on the shoulder. “Follow me to my private bedroom.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that at all,” Aaron replied, quite disturbed.

Amram led him down the throne, expounding on a rare father-son moral of the story. “You know when I first inherited the crown, I believed it quite a patriotic thing that I marry the first girlfriend of my youth. Her name was Sapphira. A lovely name and a lovely face.”

The two royals stepped off the throne and journeyed past the corridors and interior cathedrals made of pure, well, obviously. Amram welcomed him inside his private rest area.

“Sapphira had her charms. Lovely locks of red hair and such a convivial smile that matched her glowing eyes. When I was a boy, I found her to be the most gorgeous woman I had ever laid eyes on.”

Amram welcomed the warmer bedroom air upon his shivering arms as bundled up in his blinding robe, the very color of the sun.

“But after my coronation, she didn’t transition to the royal life very well. She had a cloying selfish streak about her that only seemed to grow with time,” Amram said in bitterness. “She never quite understood the finer things of diplomacy. Knowing when to be silent. Knowing when to be supportive of her husband’s point of view.”

## The Evil Princess

Amram went over to the closet, opening the door and looking through some of his more ambitiously designed robes, not just the one he had one, which was clearly a bit homey and bought at a discount price.

“She felt very inclined to speak her own opinions. Worse yet, she spent an inordinate amount of time complaining about everything. Nagging me like my own mother. Taking for granted that everything she had in life, or ever would have, was mine. Because before she became my queen, she was nothing.”

He looked at his son closely, squinting his eyes. “My seer told me she needed *submissive training*. As all new wives do. Because great queens don’t come prepackaged that way. They must be molded. Shaped into something great.”

Amram laughed quietly to himself and nostalgically reflecting on old times. “And then I met your mother one day. A woman practically bred for greatness. Raised by a duke and capable of discussing great books and reciting poetry of the highest caliber. And a woman who understood how to evoke the best qualities in me. She was simply a better match for me. A better deal.”

Amram stared his son in the eyes. “Well, my seer was wrong. Sapphira didn’t need submissive training. She was a *lost cause*. She had no ability or desire to change.”

Aaron listened intently, unsure of what his father was saying.

“I spoke to Rivulet about arranging a hunting party for the queen and I. She was so happy to learn how to handle a sword. I still remember the smile she had that day, as the soldier took her in his arms and showed her how to position the weapon for a swing.

Amram stared into Aaron’s defensive eyes and tightened his brow.

“I even called out her name, telling her I loved her, just so she would look at me again. I wanted to remember her with a smile. I wanted to see another all-too-rare moment of genuine admiration for me in her eyes. Like the first time we met. And the way she couldn’t wipe that grin off her face, that look of unquestioning love and devotion.”

“I’m sorry to hear that...did something happen to her?” Aaron asked, fearing the worse.

Amram sighed and gave his son the same crusty look he might as well give to his daughter-in-law.

“She suffered an unfortunate accident.”

“Ah, I see,” Aaron said in relief. “And so you’re telling me this because you let her go. Just like you’re trying to tell me to let go of...?”

“*Let her go?*” Amram replied, his voice starting to snarl. “Why on earth would I let her go? Ask her yourself if it was an accident.”

An angry Amram reached into the darkened closet and pulled out Sapphira in the flesh, one and the same. She had that same beautiful, adoring and smiling face, just the way Amram once saw it, just the way she kept it then and now, plastered onto her twenty-three years ago. Sapphira hadn’t aged a bit, her youthful eyes very much wide-eyed, if a bit glazed. Her red hair was just as colorful and her golden ball dress was marvelously ironed out to perfection. Her skin was brilliant, the same pinkish hue that he remembered clutching at night and amazingly still felt soft to the touch. Her body was fabulous, thin and curvy in all the right places, very much the embodiment of the feminine ideal. She even wore the same golden ivory slippers he bought for her and presented at their wedding reception.

The only thing that had changed was that, much like Amram felt about her personally, she was now physically just as empty inside. Her organs had been disemboweled, gutted through the large gaping hole starting in her chest and reaching down into her abdomen. Nothing but the blackness of the dark closet could be seen through that wide and spacious portal, leading one to wonder, almost casually, how could a girl so beautiful exist with no functioning heart or lungs?

Aaron’s mouth dropped open and his eyes shifted back and forth, fighting the urge to cower. He did a double take, almost touching Sapphira’s arm, but quickly withdrawing his hand. “Tha-That’s not a mannequin, is it?”

“It is the one souvenir I allowed myself. I hate the idea of memories. They are the only thing we cannot keep. The only thing that escapes a lock and safe. I wanted to be able to see her, whenever I wanted. This way, I would never have to say goodbye. I wanted to remember her like this. As the beautiful and perfect woman she could have been. Not the ugly monster she turned into.”

It was one hell of a skeleton in the closet. Aaron’s eyes never recovered from the shock of seeing his almost-mother preserved just the way she would have looked, chemically preserved, with polyester resin, clay and glass eyes helping to form the perfect restored body. He couldn’t stare into its eyes for long, for every time he did, he thought he saw her pupils move, as if acknowledging him, as if asking him for help.

“So I paid a taxidermist to stuff her body but preserve her real flesh, her real face. Eventually, I realized Sapphira was an ugly girl on the inside, but such a wonderful and reassuring woman on the outside. The image of her always fresh in my mind was so powerful, so unbreakable. I simply had to keep her just as I remembered her. For

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some women, the peripherals are all that really matter. And they alone should be preserved.”

Aaron could take no more and pushed the stuffed princess back into the closet, not once more looking at its seemingly living eyes. Amram smiled, amused at his son’s weak heart.

“One might speculate, yes one might, that I keep her around here for rather altruistic reasons. To remind me that I’m still human. That I still make mistakes. But I feel she’s still with me. In spirit. Well, in body and spirit...just minus all her internal organs.”

Aaron flinched and could barely look at his father.

“Every king gets a starter marriage,” Amram said with a scowl and a point. “With no questions asked. It’s just easier than creating a political scandal, don’t you think?”

Aaron took a heavy inhale and sat on the bed. His father walked over and slapped him on the shoulder.

“I will tell you now. Mary Melancholy will never be queen-material. She is a gutter slut. A street rat pretending to be something she’s not. She will never change. She’s too stupid to learn. You can’t turn lunchmeat into prime rib, no matter how you try to *reshape* it.”

Aaron looked up at him, pondering the message.

“Here’s what you do,” Amram said, avoiding eye contact with his son, as befitted the conversation. “Marry her, as the peace treaty requires. Honor your obligation. Then, one day you just make a wish. Wish her to go away. Let this wish be known to your guards. And simply never think or speak of it again.”

Amram smiled, still standing over him. He found Aaron’s eyes. “Unless...you’re a collector just like your old man.”

Aaron stood up, finally allowing himself to feel revulsion at the idea and at his father. “And no one ever noticed that Sapphira went missing? Her mother? Her father?”

“I’m sure they wondered until the day they died. But there was nothing that could be done. People go missing all the time. And believe me, if Satyre starts something, he will turn every last kingdom and province against him.”

“You’re *wrong*,” Aaron said firmly. “Mary is my queen. Maybe she needs a little training. Maybe she’s not ready yet. But I will *not give up*,” Aaron said strongly. “She is the one I chose and for good reason. She will be a great queen. And she will love me. You’ll see.”

Aaron stormed out of the bedroom as Amram looked on, still grinning. He almost reached the palace entrance before seeing Queen Jaquie approaching from the west wing.

“Aaron? Were you really going to leave without saying hello to your mother?”

“Oh, sorry. I just was talking to father and...”

“Problems with the princess?”

“Well, maybe. Father just showed me something...something...”  
He shook his head. “Something I wasn’t prepared to see.”

“Well, sometimes it’s better to leave trophies in the closet. Isn’t it?”

“You...know?”

She laughed calmly. “Sapphira was my anniversary present.”

Aaron tightened his brow, not sure what he was hearing.

“There is nothing more romantic than a powerful man disposing of his feelings for old girlfriends. And wives. It satiates the jealous nature of our womankind.” She smiled. “You might even say Sapphira was my ‘Witch’, my problem, for a long time. It was a battle I won.”

“I cannot lose Mary. She is the one I’ve chosen. She is going to be the one. She might even be the one who saves me.”

“Then maybe it’s time you fight for her.”

“Yes, that I can do,” Aaron said, developing a glimmer of triumph in his eyes. “And I will win. At any cost. I’ll show him that I am right.”

“I’m sure you will. But try not to judge your father too harshly, Aaron. These are all just games of love and war.”

“But...what father did was immoral.”

Jaquie laughed quietly. “Immorality. Such ten dollar words. A million people have a million definitions of morality. But guess who they all listen to? There is no morality outside of us, sweetheart. It’s all about seeing the bigger picture. There is only the Gold Standard. *We’re* the conscience of Cadabra. It’s not God. It’s not the poor, the ones who are selling their own children and their own blood just to survive.”

Jaquie rubbed Aaron’s shoulders from behind, calming his stress while pontificating. Her words seemed to echo in the otherwise empty throne room. “It’s us. Who do you think can afford to build a government in the first place?”

She reached over his shoulder and smiled, looking into his eyes. “They can’t survive without us. We’re the ones who lead the lions to their trail. We’re the ones who feed the sharks.”

Jaquie removed her hands and walked away, turning back to him only once. “I like Mary. I think she can learn to get it right.” Her eyes went dark, her voice heightened in challenge. “But for God’s sakes, Aaron, *be a man about it*. Show her just how madly you need her attention.”

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## Chapter 14

### Good Vs. Evil

*“There is Good and there is Evil. Never shall anyone convince us that they bleed into each other and become the same substance. If Evil permeates Good, Evil has won.”*

-Attributed to King Satyre, but dubious, considering the king’s unwillingness to speak to quote compilers

**P**rince’s Aaron’s letter of apology to Satyre and Lilith was just about as ineffective as his explanation to Mary, or so he figured. His anti-pep talk with his parents showed him the unflattering truth: that words meant nothing in love and war. He had accomplished nothing thus far except to drive Mary deeper into the witch’s caresses. The time for talking was over.

Furthermore, he hadn't much intention of breaking a voodoo love spell. The best way to stop a witch was by cutting her head off, everyone knew that. It didn't really matter whether Salem employed a magic spell or if her naturally effusive personality just inspired female hysteria. Whatever the case, she was as good as dead.

Prince Aaron approached the Snake Garden, looking grim as night, clenching his sword tight in hand. He traveled with a small army, as was custom, but Aaron had no notion of depending on armed guards to take care of a witch—the same witch who tried to steal his bride. Aaron had no use for possessions, only power. Power was the quintessential truth and the very quality that all God fables were built upon. He tried to love Mary, but to his disappointment, the silly girl proved herself incapable of love, she desiring only the usual “things”, like power, protection and novelty.

So he decided to give Mary the ridiculous “love story” she wanted—the one that inevitably ends with tragedy. That is what all silly girls ultimately wanted, wasn't it?

Rivulet accompanied him, as usual, much to Aaron's annoyance. But for once, Rivulet and his spear-headed misogyny didn't bother the prince.

The prince almost related to him now, a ghastly but true thought. For a moment, Aaron even pondered what could have happened in Rivulet's past to make him such a particularly fiendish executioner. Was it as dark and merciless as what happened to him, with Mary? His heart was broken, Aaron figured and viciously so, which was a far lesser transgression than ripping out an honest man's heart.

“On your word, sire. We'll have an old-fashioned witch burning. Just like in the good old days.”

Aaron stared at Rivulet in angry warning. “Don't you act until I give word. I am not my father. I'll kill the creature myself in a fair duel. I don't need anyone's help.”

“Care to bring out your witch-killing kit? Or perhaps your bag of toys?” A coy Rivulet asked with a long smile (as long as it could possibly get across that largely vertical face), as if daring the prince, as if implying something about the prince's confidence.

“Wait for the word.”

Aaron looked around the garden and the surrounding forest, not finding anyone at first. However, as soon as he spotted the cave a short distance away, he moved quickly, fearlessly, ignoring the bugs, snakes and rodents that protested his visit.

“*Salem*,” he bellowed. “You know I'm here. You know why I'm here. I'm here...to kill you.”

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A haunting bellow sounded from inside the cave, which only invited Aaron in to prove himself once and for all. "I'm not afraid of your magic. So...you think you can beat the living tar out of me in a fight? Let's find out." Aaron took his sword out from its sheath and squeezed in hatefulness. "Try to steal what is mine will, you? I want to see what color you bleed."

As Aaron looked around the cave, walking deeper into the darkness, Salem watched in amusement. She floated straight above him, every bit as quiet as a spider.

"Psssst. Hey you."

An alarmed Aaron looked up, seeing only Salem's hands as they moved into position. "Wha-?"

"How about a drink?" Salem asked, as she pinched the prince's nostrils shut and stuffed a bottle of hard vinegar into his mouth. "Say when."

"ACCKKKK!" Aaron screamed choking down cups at a time, as Salem's grip was like a vice.

"Now I myself, I'm not much of a wine connoisseur. It all tastes like vinegar to me. What do you think?"

Aaron's face began turning red as he glugged down cup after cup.

"Gee, a big bad prince who can't even hold your vinegar down."

Salem released Aaron's nose and watched him gag and wheeze his breath back, spitting out and vomiting up all that wasted vinegar.

A bell rung and the fight was on. Although, to be fair, Salem was not exactly a one-woman army. Her broomstick suddenly came to life and assumed the boxing position. The broom began jabbing Price Aaron with body blows and even snuck in a couple of stinging uppercuts courtesy of its hard bristles.

Aaron fell hard on his backside covering his scratched face for comfort. The broomstick was just two more jabs away from a technical knockout.

"Sorcery!" Aaron called out.

"Duh!"

Aaron picked up his sword and sliced the broomstick in half. He clenched his trusty sword ready for action. But within seconds, the sword started resisting Aaron's movements and eventually began spinning in a hectic circle. The sword picked up momentum, then becoming a twirling spiral and soon enough, a merry-go-round. Aaron held onto his sword for dear life as he was picked up off the floor by the spirited weapon and flung hard into the nearby stone wall.

“Oh come on, big man. Is that the best you got?” Salem taunted, as Aaron *again* recovered, struggling to ward off the dizzy spell and resume battle.

“Evil witch!”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Salem said with an evil little smile. “Because in case you haven’t heard, I already have a girlfriend.”

Aaron bit his lip in rage and picked up his sword, ready to behead the cackling demon.

“If you can’t take the heat, stay out of the kitchen.”

Indeed the Kitchen was particularly dangerous. Before Aaron could even stand to his feet, forks came flying out from the cupboard, firing at him like missiles. He ducked, swiping some of them with his sword. Pots and pans followed next, flying through the air and just missing Aaron’s body who stealthily avoided a collision. He even saw the huge cauldron approaching and rolled forward, avoiding its hard landing just inches from his face.

“Can’t handle a woman’s touch? Is that it?”

“You are no woman!” he griped, trying to aim for another sword swipe—all he really needed was one.

“Now, now. Don’t make me put the Branks on you.”

“The what?”

“Oh, I’m sure your buddies have talked about the Branks.”

Specifically, the metal face mask that suddenly appeared on Aaron’s mouth, rendering him speechless. The prince barked at her but only pained mumbles came forth from the mask, until he dropped his sword in weakness.

“This is what we witches do. When our husbands start acting up and we have to *handle them*, we prefer it if they are restrained, so that they are seen and not heard.” Salem laughed as Aaron squinted in fury...

And strategy, as the prince dropped his sword only to reach for a hidden dagger inside the bottom part of his sheath.

“Oh did you want to say something, sug?” Salem asked, snapping her fingers so that the mask disappeared.

Aaron touched his mouth and took a moment to gawk at his new cheek piercings. “Say your prayers to Hell!”

Just as he began motioning for a stab, Aaron’s dagger fell to the ground. A few snakes had joined tails and bound Eric’s arms together behind him, rendering him unable to move. The snakes had a bigger plan: more jumped into the snake ball and encircled his wrists. The biggest elongated fellow jumped over a vine, creating a forest-friendly version of a ceiling beam. The snake-rope pulled itself until Aaron was

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lifted off the ground and suspended in air, with his arms cracking as they were lifted up further behind his convulsing body.

Aaron howled in pain, but still glared Salem down.

“Now then,” Salem taunted. “This is usually the part where you, the Good People, torture me to death. Asking me to confess something that I didn’t do. Right?”

Aaron screamed out in pain, shutting his eyes.

“I know, it hurts, right? Well, here’s what I’m going to do. Rather than listen to you scream and beg for another four hours—you know, like you usually do to witches—I’m going to give you the chance to apologize and walk away.”

Aaron raged, gritting his teeth and absorbing the pain. “I’ll never apologize to you.”

“Ohhh I like it when they’re stupid!” Salem exclaimed. “That means more torture to come! Confess! Confess! Eeeheeheehee!”

The mock witch laugh went over well, as Aaron shifted around eager to break the snake rope and beat the woman into submission. But even with his power and girth the snake-skin was unbreakable. “Go ahead and kill me...I’ll never apologize to you,” Aaron said.

“Geez. You got to be such a jerk about it,” Salem said in disgust, right before calling the snakes off with a wave of her hand and a well-placed moan. “Let him go, boys. It’s more than you deserve. Now get out of here before I get medieval on your ass.”

Aaron was enraged and all the more so when the snakes let him go. He screamed bloody murder and reached for his sword for a final beheading shot.

Salem saw it coming and mocked him, screaming just as indulgently. When Aaron’s sword collided, it stabbed only solid wood, as a table top suddenly flew into place, in front of the blade, right before the sword reached her pallid skin.

The table top took over from there, exerting more pressure on Aaron’s body until it eventually crunched him down to the floor. Salem willed it with her magical hands, thrusting and flexing her fingers down to add more pressure to Aaron’s body—not two seconds away from bursting.

Aaron screamed again. “I pray, help me God to destroy this evil witch! Give me the power!”

“Oh gimme a break,” Salem laughed. “Can’t you win any battles yourself?”

Salem walked over to Aaron and onto the table, smearing Aaron’s head to the floor. She knew this was her moment to shine. She had never danced before and there was no audience except for a psycho

prince, but how could she not follow her instincts and do an interpretive dance? She began tap dancing a steady beat at first, but then progressed into ballet, taking wide turns and jumping into position. Then she finished with a bit of a figure skating with a long jump that included three full rotations in the air, before a hard landing all over Aaron's aching insides.

"Get off me!" Aaron screamed. How much do you weigh?"

"It's not polite to ask a girl about her weight," Salem chided. "But since you asked...oh about a thousand pounds at the moment. I'm feeling bloated. Sorry 'bout that."

"Get off!"

"How tough are you, anyway?" Salem asked, holding her hips in judgment. "You can't even beat up a woman!"

"You'd be surprised..."

Salem didn't like the tone of his voice or the ominous words. She hadn't heard from Mary in days. "What does that mean?" She squeezed her fingers closer together, intensifying the pressure on Aaron's chest as she lost her smile. "You better be kidding. You hurt one hair on Mary's head, so help me I'll..."

"What is it to you? She's my wife, not yours."

"Oh? And why are you here being a jackass to me? I think it's because you know I'm a threat. Maybe Mary doesn't want to marry you after all."

"Oh? And she wants to marry you? You make me laugh..."

Salem tilted her head in interest. "Did she say that?"

"Disgusting!" Aaron grumbled. "Princesses and witches will never belong together."

Salem bobbed her head sourly. "Oh just for that, I'm breaking out my worst torture device of all. Introducing the PEAR."

Aaron finally pushed the table off of his body and grabbed his sword, sitting up into a defensive position. "Bring it..."

"Actually, I'd rather sing it."

Salem hit a high, glass-shattering B-note—as B is usually the most evil note on a scale—and waited. Within a second two dozen pears came floating out from the cupboard, all with their peary little sights on Aaron.

Aaron eyed the scene in fear and braced himself.

"HOLD! HOLD!" Salem screamed to her pear army, as four more dozen pears appeared backing up the first three rows. The army of fruit waited until another four dozen pears joined the army. But Salem still wielded the commanding order.

"HOOOOLD! HOOOLD!"

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She finally relented and made a thrusting gesture. "Attack!"

Dozens of pears went crashing into Aaron's face like mini-catapults. He was pummeled from head to chest and even when he fell to the ground, he was beaten all over his stomach and legs by those ruthlessly, juicy and thick pears. The real question was, were they still edible?

More pears joined the army and fruit punched the weary prince just as he tried to stand back up. Instead of a victory taunt, Salem merely sang a merry song about fresh fruit, she always one to enjoy a good calming rush after a good fight.

Aaron gurgled and screamed into the floor. "Fine! You win this round."

"Say you're sorry!" Salem yelled back, as she commanded another row of pears to pelt him good. Aaron's body was peared out and he struggled even to turn his face.

"I'll be back! I'm not sorry! This changes nothing!"

"Oh for sparing your life I get a death threat? That's gratitude for you." Salem eyed Aaron in evil spite. "You know what? I got one more pear just for you, pretty boy."

She took one pear in hand and concentrated her magic by convulsing and directing energy onto the fruit. Within seconds the pear became red and presumably flaming hot.

"Oh no..." Aaron wisely deduced.

Salem haughtily addressed the prince, as formally and affectedly in Gold Talk as possible. "*Prince Aaron. I do believe I have won this battle. Indeed, one might say that I have, yes one might...*"

Salem tilted her head and hoisted back her arm ready to pitch the burning pear. "And now you know you're nothing now but a big red hot pain in the..."

"Noo!"

Salem sent the flaming pear shooting right towards Aaron's fleeing Royal Ass. He ran as fast as he could but the pear was searing hot and burned the royal derriere on impact, sending the chosen one into a butt-grabbing circle of tribal dances and chantings.

Salem's animals cackled with laughter, even as the resident critics gave their literary review of the performance.

"Five stars!" the "Cave Rat Tribune" proclaimed.

"Best witch defeats man fight eval" said the Vulture Voice.

"What a beautiful display of barbarism," said Cat-mopolitan Magazine.

"Ah, the primal thrill that comes from watching a big kid destroy her toys with such earnest sadism", said Entertainment Snakely.

“I would have beaten him some more,” The Bat Digest summarized, always the pickiest of the bunch.

Salem bowed in true showmanship and the critics were bemused.

Meanwhile, Rivulet and the King’s Guard waited, a bit bored, a tad impatient. How long did it take for a man to kill a witch? How sadistic was this cold and calculating prince, Rivulet wondered...

Until he saw a peculiar object in the sky, something like a shooting star, or a rare anomaly that beseeched humanity. Could it be a sign, or a new revelation to unmask? Rivulet and his man stared curiously at the zigzagging spot as it quickly grew in size. It became bigger and more pronounced, to the point that some of the Royal Army began to cower, wondering if it was an intergalactic threat, perhaps the beginning of the Blood Moon?

But Rivulet waited calmly, eventually discovering that similar to most of life’s oddities, the flashing light had a distinctly human origin. It was Prince Aaron, crash-landing into some bushes in a disastrous tailspin after being flung high into the air by his opponent. His hands firmly grasping his buttocks, the prince screamed bloody murder.

Rivulet watched his superior crash and burn, quietly amused and taking his time, looking for just the right barb, as all the Golden People were inclined to do.

Even when Aaron crashed face first into the ground, he quickly picked himself up and ran circles around Rivulet and his men, grabbing his butt for dear life, noticing smoke coming from his burnt pants, leaving him temporarily pear-alyzed.

Aaron screamed again, slapping his own cheeks trying to put out the scathing fire.

“Sire?” Rivulet said with an unusually reverent smile. “Sire, it appears your biscuits are burning.”

“Don’t just stand there. Get me ice...water!”

Aaron turned and glared towards his guards, noticing that quite a few of them were cackling at his misfortune. He looked back towards the garden, then to Rivulet, then backward towards his own flaming derriere.

“Shall *we* destroy the witch for you, Sire?” Rivulet asked preciously.

“NO. Go back home. I’ll deal with her later,” he said pounding his buttocks for dear comfort.

Aaron appeared before the Red King and his throne room looking bitter, soured and anything but disgraced. It was a tragedy, a royal offense and certainly not the humiliation that the witch felt it was.

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That's certainly what characterized Aaron's face, who came to update Satyre, Lilith and Mary in stringent, frowning obligation. Mary had slipped back into the Apology Dress, now wearing it as a symbol of her universal shame and was scarcely even glancing in the direction of Aaron.

"In the night on the nineteenth day of the ninth month, an incident occurred which I will report to you in honesty. The witch overpowered me. Using her magic. As we know, divinity has nothing to do with the physical realm of existence. I fear that she called upon her evil powers to subdue me."

Aaron looked to his side, momentarily stroking his wounded ego. "She even...cast a spell on me. She made me feel improper lust towards her. Made me feel ungodly desires. The next time I see her," Aaron said with a sadistic grimace on his face, "I will *remove* all of her...temptations."

Satyre, however, found the plot confusing and looked puzzled as he continued the questioning. "Wait a minute. I don't understand. What happened?"

Aaron quickly cleared his throat. "I told you what happened."

Satyre nodded but his eyes seemed combative. "Right. She was tempting you, calling upon her powers and then what?"

Aaron flinched again and folded his arms. "She...she beat me. With objects. She struck me."

Satyre stared at Aaron in huffing disbelief for a long and uncomfortable moment.

"*It hurt*," Aaron assured him quite seriously, offended at the implication.

Suddenly, Mary loudly snorted, failing to keep a straight face in the midst of this serious discussion.

"Mary..." Lilith warned her, struggling to keep an impudent smile from forming on her own face.

"Sorry," Mary said, still unable to rid herself of the giggles.

Aaron was seething by now and eyed Satyre in defiance, which only seemed to provoke more of Satyre's waggish interrogation.

"So you were beaten by a woman?" Satyre asked again, perfectly droll. "A woman, a witch, pummeled you into submission."

By now a few of Aaron's guards were clearing their throats and stifling laughter, tapping their spears on the floor to avoid tipping Aaron off to the insolence.

Aaron reflected carefully and steepled his fingers together. "She used things...to beat me with."

Several of the guards and Mary sniggered at once, trying hard to avoid an avalanche of yuks and belly shakes.

Satyre leaned forward and knitted his brow, staring into Aaron's sensitive eyes. "Did she...deflower you in any way?"

"*What?*"

More laughter emerged from the room, quickly filling the halls with inappropriate echoes.

Satyre's stone face only seemed to make the conversation more uproarious and even Lilith had to close her eyes and grab her jaw to escape the contagious giggles.

"Did she touch you inappropriately after she beat you?" Satyre asked. "Did she play with your naughty bits?"

Aaron saw red, incensed and stepping back two paces. "How dare you! I am a Prince of the House of Opula! I'm not one to be mocked!"

"Show me where on the voodoo doll that she touched you," Satyre said to Aaron, who had already turned his back in outrage.

Aaron turned around and walked over to one of his guards, eager to deflect some of the embarrassment elsewhere. "Anything funny?" he asked his guard, staring him down in choler.

"N-No, Sire," the guard said quickly, curiously out of breath.

Prince Aaron's eyes flared as he invaded his space and put his face to his subordinate's face, his royal lips just centimeters from the shivering man's cheek.

"Share the joke with me. Make me laugh," Aaron added with a grim stare, tilting his face and letting the guard see the beads of sweat on his brow, the psychotic rage firing in his eyes.

The guard pursed his lips, flexing every muscle and contorting his face into a tittering mess of stifled emotion.

Aaron turned around and stared down a few more of his cackling guards, shoving his nose right into their faces and demanding they explain themselves. It was difficult to suppress what they all really felt and the poor boys' repeated flinching and the strange act of squeezing their lips tightly together to silence their throats only added to the discomfort and the urge to guffaw at the prince's humiliation.

The prince had enough and pointed to Satyre's court. "Kill him! All of you, kill yourselves! I command it!"

Rivulet rolled his eyes and spoke up, softly, carrying the conversation away to a comfortable place. "Now, now. It's been a long day. Shall we head home? We'll discuss our bloody plans for vengeance tomorrow. After a long and accommodating breakfast."

"Perhaps you should get the job do next time," Satyre said. "This is a task for a man."

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Rivulet shut his eyes lazily and opened them, meeting Satyre's provoking grin head on. "King Satyre, for your own good, don't agitate the situation. This man is soon to be a king. Perhaps you are the one who underestimates the powers of the Witch."

His subversive comment did cause Satyre a second thought. How did a prince with an army fail to take down a witch? Could the legends of their power really be true?

The sausage-headed fellow and Aaron stormed out of the place and Satyre matched their demeanor, walking away from the women and huffing and puffing his way to bed.

"Stupid little man."

This left Lilith and Mary to themselves in the quiet throne room, admiring nothing in particular except a few red curtains and a modestly decorated bronze throne set for the king's seat, the queen's and the princess's. The Red Kingdom didn't have the lavish detail of Aaron's Palace, or even a decent royal budget to work with and Satyre lost no sleep over it. Whatever money meant to the world, it had to be second to blood. That was all Satyre was sure of, well, that and that getting out of bed every morning was only worthwhile if there was meat. Thick and tough meat. He had heard of Salem's vegetarianism through Lilith and one can only imagine the face he wore for the rest of that wordless night.

Lilith turned to Mary and sighed.

"Needless to say, you are forbidden to see her."

Mary shrugged.

"And needless to say, we anticipate that you reject our forbidding," Lilith pontificated. "So then you are ceremoniously barred from leaving the premises."

"I'll find a way," Mary mumbled, looking to the medium-high ceiling.

Lilith rolled her eyes and hummed. "Of course you will, dear. That's what mothers and daughters do, isn't it?"

A wordless moment passed and Lilith softened her disposition, looking back at a pouting Mary. "Mary, why? Why throw your life away? Even if this thing you're talking about is something real, what makes it so special? Why is it greater than any other romance you could have with anyone else? What I fear is that you don't yet understand the real meaning of love."

"What?" Mary groaned in response. "That it's not all fairy tales and happily ever after? That it's not paradise, or the cure for everything? That I'm too stupid to know what love is?"

“No, child. I fear that you don’t understand...how easy love is. And it’s everywhere.” Lilith laughed tenderly, a wistful gaze back at her only child. “You could fall in love with anybody. There is no set destiny for you. There is no right or wrong. There are only...myriads and myriads of faces.”

Mary listened in wonder as Lilith continued, her gaze so tempered and striking—something uncomfortably close to the truth. “Each one with a story to tell. Each face capable of saying, ‘You’re so beautiful.’ Each of one them so sincere. What I fear is that you don’t realize that this is only your first love. There will be more. And more. You may realize one day there were so many missed opportunities.”

Lilith concluded, touching Mary’s face in a kind and forgiving gesture. “But that you only had one choice to make. One choice of mate that somehow...we all deceive ourselves into believing is the ‘real thing.’ If you’re not careful, you will be left alone and with nothing. Nothing but a fleeting memory of what felt right at the time.”

She removed her hand and stood up, delivering a note of finality. “Love...is the most deceptive devil of them all.”

Mary thought long and hard about her mother’s words of wisdom. “Maybe you’re right. But for the first time in my life. I feel something. How can you ask me to forget that? To deny what I feel?”

Lilith smiled in begrudging pity. “Because years from now, you’re going to find yourself a lonely woman. I am spared from loneliness only because I have you, my child. If you were to marry this...witch, you couldn’t have any children.”

Lilith’s long, lingering gaze woke Mary up for a moment.

“I...I guess I never thought of that.”

Lilith walked ahead, closer to the palace entrance, as Mary’s eyes followed her. “It’s the little things that make up life, darling,” she said with a nod. “Don’t cheat yourself out of a good life based on a whim. What you’re sure about today...you may regret dreadfully tomorrow.”

Just as Mary started to nod and come to some agreement with her tormentor, she thought it over and seemed bewildered at the whole conversation. “So wait...that whole speech you gave...you’re making this all about you. What about my happiness? Why does it have to be all about you?”

“Well...let’s put it this way,” Lilith said with a teasing squint.

“I brought you into this world. Through great pain, suffering and searing pangs of distress...not to mention all sorts of disgusting bodily fluids of which you couldn’t fathom in your most disgusting of nightmares...”

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She widened her eyes. “What a mother wants most is for her child to experience that same joy of child birth.”

“I’m confused,” Mary said. “You want me to feel the same pain you felt birthing me?”

“Well, of course. It’s only fair.”

Mary tsked and grumbled to herself.

“Let’s put it this way...I want a grandchild.”

“Oh.”

“Do I have to sing it to you for you to understand?”

“Please don’t, mom.”

Lilith cleared her voice and started doing the unthinkable. She sang about babies. About delivery. About placenta, breast feeding and all the other horrors. Her song was so bad, so poorly composed and in such poor taste (who would have thought there could ever be a rhyme for “my water broke”?) that poor Mary blocked the incident from her memory.

Why Lilith had to be so excessively cruel about dispensing familial punishments is anyone’s guess.

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## Chapter 15

### The True Definition of Magic

*“I, Prince Aaron, like many of us born into a life of luxury, went through an agnostic phase in my youth, where I doubted the existence of God, of Queen Fen Mien I and of the myths of Cadabra. It was only when I saw the reality of Black Magic and felt its excruciating punishment, that I realize now how wrong I was. How wrong we all were, to doubt the influence of the Great Savior Queen. To deny her existence is to open a channel to demons, to Devils and to their whores on earth, otherwise known as Wizards, Warlocks and Witches. A witch’s black magic is real and deadly. If you let these abominations enter your life, they will steal from you. They will take your women. Your wives. Your children. Maybe not physically but spiritually their thinking will pervade and corrupt what is pure.*

*They will cast a love spell with a demon paraphernalia and cause your family nothing but grief. Worse yet, some of these witch voodoo dolls can be used for violence. By simply creating a doll, a gris-gris in your image, they can stab it with pins causing massive internal*

## The Evil Princess

*injuries. Some of my own men have paid the ultimate price and have been killed using these voodoo dolls. Spontaneous combustion at the hands of a demon witch. My friends, there is no protection against such unnatural powers except from the hand of God.*

*Your Gold Kingdom is no longer ashamed to believe in God. Because God, Fen Mien I, are one in the same. God is protection. Embrace what was formerly forbidden. There is no longer any reason to feel alone in the world. No longer any reason to feel guilty over your weaknesses, your childish superstitions. Because they are not superstitions but pathways to the truth. Though we always wander away from Goodness and Charity, like a rock, God is always there waiting for us to come back. God is with us. The road to heaven is indeed covered with golden intentions.*

*God Fen Mien I smiles upon our campaign to restore Cadabra to holy status.”*

*-Prince Aaron’s Statement to Cadabra*

Aaron’s confrontation with true magic only succeeded in sending his campaign back towards traditional godly fear. He knew the Gold’s military and even men in his own court, still believed in God and Devils, even if the Royal Class rejected such terminology. To deny them of their belief would be cruel.

Therefore, Aaron immediately made it clear to the army and to all people of Literate Kingdoms that Evil existed and that God existed. Most importantly, God resided with the Kingdom of Gold, certainly not with witches and Black Magic.

Aaron’s surprising addendum to the Gold Kingdom’s charter was met hesitantly by the House of Opula, but embraced by the soldiers and by the people who were finally starting to hear ugly rumors about witches, voodoo dolls, about The Outskirts, animal-human couplings and all sorts of other evil things. To them, God was the only protection against absolute moral anarchy, the likes of which witches held dear. Amram and Jaquie remained quiet on the subject, choosing only to say that they believed in divine “Providence” and certainly in the spirit of Queen Fen Mien I which powered the production of Gold product.

The Red Kingdom also responded favorably to the statement. Even the glum King Satyre was observed giving a few hard nods of agreement when he read Aaron’s heartfelt proclamation, which vowed a return to deistic thinking.

At last, something the two men could agree on: the protection of Mary and the loathing of Black Magic, which targeted the young and innocent.

Therefore, when Aaron saw it fit to re-propose to his kidnapped bride-to-be, after that disgraceful tryst with a witch which invalidated the previous engagement celebration.

This time, however, it wouldn't be a second marriage proposal from a man, but a re-proposal from God.

Aaron felt that the people—the women—only respected power and wealth, the very same reason men chose to believe in a supreme deity. The time for an official re-proposal was overdue and people began to wonder why the marriage made in heaven stalled. Some inquiring minds wondered if Aaron's attention drifted from Mary Melancholy, or if the Red Kingdom was renegeing on its promise. If the marriage had stalled then someone deserved censure, someone flaked. Because every love story required a happy ending and everyone knew that.

Aaron sought to put an end to the cruel speculation and deliver them a show, a grand spectacle of love that could warm hearts and put to rest doubts on his character. The victory of Aaron was the victory of Princess Melancholy and was the victory of the poor people of the Red Kingdom. A people that had given up war for peace, their freedoms, for prosperity.

So Aaron would have to show them the luxury of deference, the profitability of compromise. It had to be a godly victory, a godly display. Everyone knew the approval of God was linked to wealth. The Kings of Old built palaces of gold, the holy arks were built in diamonds and ivory and jewelry well represented the diverse color of the human species.

Besides, Melancholy herself deserved to be impressed. The little girl grew up too fast and was thrust into a position of power and responsibility that she may not have been ready for. Like any foolish little princess, she just needed to be impressed. To be swept off her feet by the riches and the charm of a real man, a prince, who could give her more security than she could ever fathom. He owed her that.

So Aaron stepped forward in the day's brisk wind, a new day of possibility and forgiveness, of acceptance and grace. His guards, for once were not holding weapons but trumpets and drums. They had put away their defenses for the love of God and the sanctity of marriage. Twelve of his guards walked in front of him and twelve in back, each odd number of them alternating between rhythmic drum beats and resounding trumpets. They were surrounded by a quickly

## The Evil Princess

moving circle of twelve quartets of musicians who played, respectively, their own choirs of harps, tubas, violins, flutes, cellos, basses, bassoons, trombones, gimbals, clarinets, horns and oboes.

As soon as the Royal Orchestra assembled, hundreds of belly dancers emerged from behind the procession, swiftly filling the streets with rows of tambourines, handkerchiefs and multi-colored dresses, creating turning wheels of motion, combining colors of red and gold, as it should be. Just as the dancers settled into the Royal Celebration, children, little boys and girls not a day over twelve, grouped together behind the women and began their synchronized hums, accompanying the music and pronouncing blessings.

The scene was already a spectacle before artists joined the Celebration, drawing and painting the moment of zeitgeist they beheld. The centerpiece, an unobstructed center of the road viewable for miles ahead, was reserved for only Prince Aaron. He wore not white but black, natural fibers made from cotton and linen—conspicuously absent of silk and wool—pure sources, with respect to the animal life Mary suddenly held so dear. He even wore a thick black top hat, strangely reminiscent of a warlock's hat, proving to Mary that he wasn't just an oblivious nice prince. He could be her everything if she wanted. He could be the bad boy, the shady wizard, the crafty imp that riled her passion. If only she would give him a chance to impress her, to prove his complexity, he could captivate her passions and take care of her better than any witch.

But wait—surely just a man walking down a road was not enough to impress such a blue princess. If she saw him walking down the road in simplicity, in fawning wonder like all the other suitors, she would reject him. His true self, his naked fears and longing, wasn't enough to impress her. She was spoiled by magic, by allusions to miracles and wizardry. Nothing human he could ever offer her could measure up—except another miracle.

So Aaron stood still, as did the Royal Orchestra, as his ride showed up. Descending from the sky, was a bit of Good Magic: a white stagecoach without a horse, with spiraling golden ornaments in place of wheels and golden javelins on the top above the gold-plated entrance.

Onlookers of the spectacle gasped and even the dancers and musicians flinched as the large stagecoach hovered in air, before slowly floating over towards Aaron. The stagecoach looked magical, albeit feigned magic, courtesy of the Diamond Empire's cutting-edge magnetic levitation technology. But the Diamond Empire was never one to spoil the illusionist's secret; to those who wanted Good Magic, the coach was magic. To those who wanted science, it was a scientific

breakthrough. The best part, Aaron felt as he boarded the stagecoach to be carried away by an invisible horse to the astonishment of the crowds, were the sparkling diamonds surrounding the vehicle, the perfect complement to the blinding shine of gold.

The magic coach only helped to draw crowds of the Gold Kingdom out of their three-story homes and onto the roads to take part in the human experience, for once not a materialistic one. It was quite an amazing scene, considering that the Golden Kingdom itself was highly divided and for one experience to unite three civilizations of different views was nothing short of economic peculiarity, or “financial miracle”, as the expression goes.

The so-called 1% of the filthy rich, the House of Opula, had suffered a breakdown in negotiations for profit sharing with the Golden Elite’s, otherwise known as the 6%. The 25% Upper Class and Independently Wealthy Tradesmen Union were unhappy with the 6%’s dominance of territory and division. Yet, this petty division between the three heads of the Golden Kingdom only seemed to provoke the 68%, who were the Independently Wealthy Class, who felt as if their independent wealth was substantially lower than that of the Upper Class and Independently Wealthy Tradesmen Union. The whole thing was a mess, which only highlights the economic peculiarity of Aaron’s Stagecoach Ride, a patriotic event that seemed to unite multiple classes of the Golden Kingdom in their love of gold.

The commotion of the Stage Coach, the music, dancers and singing children only attracted more attention and within hours thousands of onlookers left their homes behind, that they might be a part of Aaron’s experience. They left behind their comfortable lives to rejoice with Aaron, the symbol of their long-suffering, the man who kept four classes together—and now, with the peace treaty from the Red Kingdom, the man who would unite the two greatest kingdoms in Cadabra.

They took the journey from The Golden Palace and the 79 streets of AU (Aaron’s Ubiquity), all the way to the Red Kingdom’s territory. Thousands took part in Aaron’s First Love March, bringing not a single weapon, but only their patriotism and clapping hands. As the Golden invaders made their way to the Red Kingdom, either a huge army or a myriad of wedding guests, they were welcomed by the Red’s own population of marriage enthusiasts. The godly spectacle was enough to woo the blood-satiated kingdom, who desired, for once, to see a lifelong image of beauty, of marriage. A happy and traditional marriage with romance, a vicarious love story the entire population could live and enjoy.

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A marriage of trust, of self-sacrifice and chasteness, as neither Aaron nor Mary had been unvirtuous to anyone's knowledge. And someday, the union would culminate with the beautiful children of tomorrow. The children would redeem previous generations of their wars, their mistakes and their stubborn will to fight.

And so the Red Kingdom celebrated, they marched along with the Golden Kingdom, to see the spectacle, the victory and the majesty of a happy ending. The war-like chants of the people soon overpowered the singing and musical instruments and the roads erupted with Aaron's name and strong sentiments of approval.

"Somebody's getting married!"

"Long live the king!"

"Bow to one knee!"

"Save us we pray, our savior, the man of two kingdoms!"

The Great Prince exited the stagecoach, standing on seemingly nothing and waved his arms to his thousands of followers, causing an explosion of cheers. He floated to the ground and took twelve steps ahead of the legion, walking in confidence and clutching his fists in exhilaration. He even had a rare and genuine smile on his face. It was that of a gullible young boy still seeing stars, long before the greedy world would ever crush his dreams.

Mary Melancholy became alarmed at the noise of rioting outside her window. She looked out the tower seeing only a sea of people and a giant Flag, of pure white and gold stars. He had come for her and nothing could stop him. The hand of God was with Aaron, not against and no one in Cadabra could afford to stop the happy ending from taking place.

The palaces opened their doors to Prince Aaron and the Royal Procession. Thousands of well-wishers dared not miss the moment. Not the moment of Aaron's re-proposal, or Melancholy's first appearance and her much speculated-upon Re-Proposal Dress, but the moment where she inevitably said yes. It was not a question of what she would say, or how she would say it, but rather when. The moment she accepted the young man's generous proposal was the event everybody came to see.

Princess Mary Melancholy was escorted down from the spiraling staircase, now formally dressed for the event and looked the very portrait of innocence and femininity. She looked up towards the center of the room and there Aaron walked, stepping forward to meet her in the throne room, where King Satyre and Lilith waited.

Mary Melancholy's Re-Engagement Dress was truly a magnificent setting and beyond just the whims of the Virgins.

It required consultations from the Red Kingdom and Gold Kingdom alike, as much a political statement as a mere dress. The dress required layers of interiors, mainly bustles to hike up the skirt in the back and hoops to expand both protruding sides.

The bodice and skirt were bamboo viscose, pure white and embroidered with olive branches and golden coins. The feeling that the Golden Kingdom “bought” Mary was palpable and her gaudy two-foot-long sparkling gold crown atop her head was just as much a blow to Mary’s ego as Aaron’s fists were to her face. Gone was the subtlety, the courtship and the class. Gold stars and butterflies deluged the dress while giant puff sheath sleeves turned Mary into a Virtual Good Witch of White Light. Worst of all, there was scarcely a note of blue to be found and Red was only represented in the girl’s shoes—a pair of red pumps with rose flower heads on the side strap. Her hair curled up nicely and her thick locks, falling all over her forehead and eyes, helped to hide her disposition from her betrothed.

Aaron made brief eye contact with Mary before returning to the face of his guards. “My name,” he said firmly.

Mary squinted her eyes in disbelief as Aaron’s Squire brought out a rather lengthy scroll and cleared his throat. He began reading thoughtfully, making sure every syllable was enunciated to perfection. “Aaron of the House of Opula, the rightful heir to the Kingdom of Gold, the Son of Amram the Great and Unrivaled, the Son of Lady Jaquie who is the Mother of Wealth, the joint heir of the Kingdom of the Red and the Kingdom of Gold, the House of Opula’s Standing Regent General of the House, the Prime Minister of the Golden Elite, the Chairman of the Upper Class and Independently Wealthy Tradesmen Union and the Chief Representative of the Independently Wealthy Class, Twice Knighted, Twice Honored in Combat, Twice Ordained by the Church, Twice voted by Nine Continents as the Most Valuable Member of a Royal Family in Cadabra, twice the winner of the Altruistic Peace Prize, twice the Master Artist and Poet Laureate of the Court, twice elected as Head of the Court of Master Artistry, Twice...”

Prince Aaron shoved the squire to the floor. “I, Prince Aaron of the Kingdom of Gold,” the impatient prince raged, “re-propose to Lady Mary Melancholy of the Red Kingdom, the House of Satyre. Here is my ring.”

He took a ring from his pocket and eyed it in reflection.

“Here is my ring, worth the lives of ten men. They gave their life on an expedition to find this piece well beyond the mines of Cadabra. It is a prize made from pure unblemished gold and flawless shining diamond.”

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Two servants took the ring from the hand of Aaron and transported it by pillow to the hands of Mary, who was instructed to only touch the ring while wearing gloves made of muslin cotton. Mary looked on, eyeing the ring, but making no particular expression.

Satyre matched the vacant expression, always unimpressed with material wealth, but at least tilting his head at the idea of ten men dying for the object. Only Lilith gave Aaron a polite smile, always the congenial type.

“I would now like to add an addendum to the official re-proposal. I have re-proposed marriage to Mary Melancholy for love. Our love will be the fire that keeps two kingdoms warm and bonded together in purpose and unity. Let us put away our swords and spears. I am tired of fighting. I am tired of death. I am tired of nihilistic denial. We are not animals. We are men and women. We are God’s creatures. Our joint houses will symbolize a new era in the continuing legacy of our names.”

Aaron sighed in discomfort. He turned around to leave, to signify to the crowds outside that the re-proposal went unchallenged. A small applause broke out which only amplified as moments passed. Music started playing and the singing of children was joined by onlookers and enthusiasts of both kingdoms. Not merely a cheer for traditional marriage, but a cheer for patriotism, for peace. For hope.

“Prince Aaron?”

Aaron flinched and slowly turned back around, miffed at the interruption of the beautiful moment. “Yes?”

“You have not yet proposed to my daughter,” Lilith said boldly.

“Yes I did. I handed her the ring. I spoke my statement.”

“But I did not hear a question. Nor an answer,” she clarified with a fastidious double blink. “And while this might be a re-proposal in definition, I don’t even call that you proposed in person the first time. You had someone else do the paperwork for you. Now then, are you going to Propose Properly?”

Aaron’s nostrils flared and his eyes raged.

“*Fine*,” he rasped. “Mary...”

“Get on your knees,” Lilith corrected him. “And address her by her formal name.”

A resentful prince fought off his anger and stared at Mary, as indifferently as he could manage. “Mary Melancholy, Lady Mary of the House of Satyre, the Kingdom of Blood...”

The feeling was palpable, if not to the outside court, then to the spectators inside. *Lilith* was not impressed, let alone Mary and Satyre. Lilith gave Aaron a look of contempt, comparable to a look she might

give before dispensing cold justice to an invading ladybug.

“Will you do the honor of being my wife?”

Aaron stepped forward and bended one knee. Slightly.

Mary returned the same tired look and sighed. She glanced at her parents and then back at Aaron. She softly whispered the event of a lifetime, barely discernible and muted by Aaron’s strong breathing.

“*Yeesbeedoo.*”

Aaron turned around and ran outside the throne room with the good news. “SHE SAID YES!” He ran outside of the palace and screamed to the crowds a war-cry of peace. “SHE SAID YES!”

The people’s voices boomed in response. Their thunderous voices grew in number and echoed to the point of rioting. Aaron continued to fan the flames of patriotism, declaring victory and celebrating the reign of two kingdoms in peace and in unity. For hours upon hours the people chanted in victory. As Mary listened to the deafening sounds of thousands of happy viewers to Aaron’s “show”, only then did she realize the full impact of her mother’s warning.

If she had even entertained the notion of rejecting such a generous proposal, war would have broken out—then and there. His people, their people, loved him enough to die. To kill. They wanted this fairy tale romance that much. Mary didn’t just accept Aaron’s proposal. She saved the very lives of her family, of her people and who knows, maybe all of Cadabra.

“You made the right choice,” Lilith said to Mary, touching her forearm in compassion after noticing Aaron didn’t bother making eye contact. It wasn’t the proposal Mary deserved. It was the one the people demanded.

Mary’s eyes welled up and she looked away to stop from crying. Nobody cared if a princess cried. She no longer had the luxury of crying like a little girl. A princess had responsibilities, after all. And besides, she realized as she blinked away the last remaining tears of her idealism—the same tears Aaron surely cried one tragic day so long ago—there is no such thing as a fairy tale happy ending.

Someone always has to hurt while others celebrate. If she had rejected Aaron, it would have been a tragedy for him. It would have been a tragedy for her family, for Aaron’s family. Either way, someone had to hurt. Why not absorb the blow, she figured. Better that she suffer than anyone else. Because that’s what happens in fairy tales. Pain, misery and suffering followed by one person’s everlasting victory.

The Happy Ending is an illusion, just the part of the story that we want to hear, while ignoring the less musical realities of it—we only hear the singing and the applause of the crowds.

## The Evil Princess

But Mary's heart wasn't the only one broken by the tragedy of Aaron's Happy Ending. Salem wept bitter tears herself, watching the scene unfold in her magic mirror. She felt Mary's heart rip in two as the dainty little princess excused herself to cry privately over a life-changing marriage proposal she barely got.

"I knew it. I knew it." Salem bawled, rubbing her soaked cheeks on the cat's fur. All the animals cuddled up against Salem that unusually drafty night, protecting her from the loving embrace of Royalty.

"This is how it always ends for me. It's like a running joke by now, you know? I never get to be happy." She combed the cat's hair so much that she began balling up his face. "Oh Catty, I just didn't expect it to hurt this much."

"Oh, darling," the cat said lovingly. "I don't know if it helps...but you do know her arm was practically twisted and she was forced to marry a man she didn't love?"

Salem skreighed, laughing and crying at the same time. "No, no, that doesn't help at all."

"But she liked you," the cat said, rubbing up against her arm. "That's what matters. You were able to connect with another person. Isn't that what you wanted? To love another human? Maybe there will be someone else..."

"No, no, I don't think so. Her arm wasn't twisted, you know. She had a choice. She made a promise to me. But it was all for nothing. But who's surprised? She did what any other person would have done. She made the smart choice. Who's stupid enough to bank on me anyway? Just a big huge disappointment, that's all I am."

Salem rolled over on her belly and hid her face in her folded arms. "I'm the wrong choice. For everybody. I'll never matter to anybody. She will. She'll be great someday. I'll just be a witch in a cave. That's all I'll ever be."

"Oh, no, no, don't say that," the cat said, by now lightly kneading on her back. "That doesn't even sound like you talking. Where's the Salem I know? The strong, the independent person? The one who stole the princesses' heart? Where's that girl?"

"Ohh Catty. You're sweet to say that. I don't expect you to understand. All you care about are your little kitty problems. Like no food, a full litterbox, napping twelve hours a day."

Salem laughed softly while snuggling her face with the cat's.

"You are my problem, luv." The feline said with a frown and a double blink. "I understand all too well. Because I can't imagine any human being loving you the way you deserve to be loved."

Mary Melancholy did have at least one more dialog with Salem, the

“witch” she regretted meeting for so many reasons. She finally brought herself to write a letter in which she expressed absolutely and with finality the point.

*Dear Salem,*

*I write this to you in the presence of the court, my father, my mother, and my future husband all of whom were humiliated because of my misconduct. I want you to know that I do not hold you accountable for the spell you put on me. It was my mistaken choice to go to your cave and put myself at risk. I realize that I have feelings for you, but that I confused my love of people, of my two kingdoms, with personal romantic attachment.*

*We cannot be together. You are a witch and I a princess. We are from two different worlds. Our two different paths in life are not destined to meet. While I sweetly appreciate you saving my life, this is the last correspondence we will have. I have a marriage to enjoy, a kingdom to rule and a happy ending with plenty of children in my future. I hate you. My life is wonderful.*

*Farewell and goodbye,*

*Yours truly,*

*Mary*

“Well, I guess that settles it,” Salem said, after reading the letter aloud and after a few days removed of the weeping that she was now denying the Golden Family.

“What? What are you talking about?” the vulture asked.

“The letter. Don’t you see? She doesn’t want me.”

“Did we hear the same letter?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Hello? It’s called signals, Salem!” the vulture said, flapping his wings in frustration.

“She sent you a half dozen secret signals in that letter! She’s still in love with you!”

“What? Get out of here!” Salem squawked to the bird.

“Oh come on, Salem!” The vulture beaked the letter from Salem’s hand flew it to a nearby lit candle for a better look.

## The Evil Princess

“I write this to you in the presence of the court, my father, my mother, my future husband? As in, I can’t talk right now! Mistaken choice? As in, I know I’m making a big mistake marrying this lunkhead? I realize that I have feelings for you? She’s confessing her love!”

“First of all, no way!” Salem said with a point of her bent finger. “She says clearly, *We cannot be together*. Two different worlds? Two different paths? ”

“Well-”

“And second of all, since when do you read, Buzzy?” Salem added.

“I don’t read!” the vulture said, shifting his head side to side. “I memorized the words. But for the sake of this pep talk, just suspend disbelief and assume I can read.” The vulture pointed to the letter with his claw. “It sounds to me like that’s what she’s being prompted to say. But you know that’s not what she feels!”

“That line about the *happy ending with plenty of children in my future*, that does seem very suspect,” the cat casually observed.

“Yeeeah! And the way she worded it at the end, *I hate you. My life is wonderful...* That’s code for ‘I Hate My life.’ Just drop the ‘you.’ As in without you, I hate my life. I hate my life without you.”

The vulture’s pep talk seemed convincing and so the animals stared back, as Salem thought it over.

“It’s just what people say because they’re afraid!”

“You know what she’s really saying, Salem?” the snake replied. “Come and get me. Snake Playa Manual right there. Seduction 101.”

“Tsssssk,” Salem slithered back at the snake, “I don’t believe you.”

“Salem, she said ‘Yours truly!’”

“Awww,” she snapped back. “See, that proves it. Everyone says that in letters, guys. It’s a polite salutation.”

“No, Salem, darling,” the cat assured her. “Not everyone. She’s a princess. She doesn’t *have* to write anything she doesn’t want to write.”

Salem seemed speechless as she eyed the beady little eyes of her friends.

“Do you know what the term ‘Melancholy’ really means?” the cat asked. “It means a life full of regrets. Don’t spend your life regretting, luv. Nothing in the past and future is more important than the present. Do what you must.”

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## Chapter 16

### Alackaday, I' Faith

*“Zounds Fen Mien”*

*“In the name of the Queen, I fight for what is right. I fight not for “truth”, but for decency. I fight not for my own beliefs but for the right of many to believe. I fight for my history, the legacy of the Queen, because without it I know not who I am or why I fight.”*

*“Alackaday, I' Faith”*

*“God and the Queen protect you. May they perform miracles on your behalf, the very magic of Queen Fen Mien I, so that your mother, sister and daughter may be protected in tumultuous times. As long as you hold this charm, no calamity will ever befall the women you love.”*

- Two Blessings attributed to a Forgotten King

The music was soft and the scene surprisingly intimate. Aaron knew that loud and palatial weddings were what the Golden Kingdom expected, but it was far from what Mary Melancholy and her parents wanted. Harps and soft piano keys played to start the occasion, their delicate tones gently calling out a shy beauty from her room. The plush blue curtains covered much of the wall halfway to the ceiling, while the munificent red carpet stretched for acres, welcoming the Golden Couple down the escaliers.

Outside of his element and a guest in the Crimson Palace, Aaron made the best of his surroundings as he took his position at the top of the staircase, preening. He cleared his throat, readying himself to make a pretty speech—a speech that the beautiful and innocent Mary deserved to hear after so many weeks of turbulence. He paid tribute to her melancholic colors, getting dressed up in a navy blue tuxedo with gold lining. He walked down the stairs slowly, slowing down to take in the lovely moment, a memory that would only happen once and last for the rest of his life.

Mary was still getting dressed—the best princesses of Cadabra took hours, even days to get properly dressed, or at least that was the rumor. Aaron smiled as he looked up to the top of the stairs on the other side of the atrium, where Mary would soon come down and embrace his arm, the two of them walking down hand in hand to the happy ending awaiting them. Perfectly in love, he would extend his hand to her and she would accept.

No, not perfectly in love. The two of them were barely even friends. Maybe Aaron made a few mistakes, as did Mary. Maybe it wasn't just Mary who felt terrified and uncertain. Maybe Aaron too, maybe they were both a little scared. But maybe it was a problem that could be corrected in time. Eventually, she could forgive him, the more he showed her what a good and patient man he could be. The more he compromised, the more he listened to her, the more arduously he worked to control his temper, the more she would come to respect him.

Perhaps she wouldn't love him for the first year. However, by the second year, her hardened heart would soften. She would see, she would sense, how uxoriously he could love her. If only she would give him a chance, if only she could bend just a little bit and see the kind-hearted and longing person he was inside.

No, the kind-hearted, sensitive and longing person he could be. She would see this side of him, one night, one unexpected night and fall in love with him. His clumsy affability would charm her one bright cheerful day and his compassion for people, his diplomacy and

empathy for the suffering of others, so much unlike her Red ancestors, would amaze her one very romantic evening. *Don't harden your heart, Mary. See the Prince for what he is inside, not the monster you think you see on the outside.*

Aaron looked up to the golden chandelier and above that, all the way to the painted angels on the ceiling. He could feel the love in the air, budding like a red rose, ever so subtle. As the sun will rise, so will romance blossom between a man and a woman who are intertwined so closely through family, locality and destiny.

The best men, the royal guard and the poets and artists of the House of the Opula waited outside as per Aaron's request. So that Mary might see his dedication, his preference for honesty over pizzazz. Money meant nothing to him. If only he could make them understand. Satyre and Lilith walked up to the front row, taking their seats for the auspicious "quiet" little wedding that was only minutes away. Mary had been getting dressed for ten hours straight, ensuring that the wedding dress was flawless. Virginal white, but with only a hint of blue and gold. The fashionable idea was that the melancholy would be tempered by the golden streaks, a metaphor for how Aaron's kingdom would complete the emptiness in her soul. The series of crystal buttons naturally symbolized her future children.

Satyre and Lilith look their place and eyed Aaron, even as Amram and Jaquie entered the ballroom from the other side entrance. Aaron felt more at ease around his own family but that is just what they expected him to do. So he did the opposite and boldly approached Satyre and Lilith. When he did, he held his head down, ashamed, nervous and obsequiously seeking a family blessing.

"Hello, my King," Aaron said strongly, but showing respect with a bow.

Satyre's eyes held tight as he snorted a response.

Aaron stood his ground and showed a rare sight: a slanting vulnerability in his eyes. "I just want you to know something, my Lord. I don't expect you to just like me."

Aaron bashfully met Satyre's eyes and flinched his way through the conversation. "I know I can be full of myself sometimes. I know I speak without thinking. But passion moves me to do what I do. I believe in doing what is right."

Aaron's honesty impressed Satyre who said nothing—never a bad sign. "I don't expect you to trust me," Aaron added. "I know that your trust has to be earned. All I can do is offer you a promise."

Aaron's voice cracked and he showed a rare glimmer of emotion, nodding his head as he spoke the sharper verbs of his speech.

## The Evil Princess

“That I will *protect* Mary. Above all else, I will *save* the Queen. Your daughter, my queen. I would walk through Hell to save her. I would have soldiers take my own life as a ransom before I would ever *surrender her* to anyone.”

Satyre listened and lo and behold his disposition softened.

“As long as there is breath in my body and a soul inside of me, I will *protect* her. Protect her body. Protect her name. And protect her heart. Never give her a reason to cry, never violate her trust. I will love her as long as I am alive. I will do my best to be like you and be a good, honest man.”

Satyre began to nod, impressed at the young prince’s resolve and earnest confession.

“Now please give me your blessing,” Aaron pleaded. “So she can see that *our way* is the right way. It is what God wants.”

Aaron figured a nod was all Satyre was capable of giving him and so walked back towards the staircase to take his place.

But Satyre always managed to keep a surprise buried underneath his wild hair and thick beard.

“Aaron,” Satyre whispered at an unusually high decibel.

Aaron turned around and listened.

“Here,” Satyre waived him over as he took off his armor and grabbed the shield piece protecting his midsection. He began pulling levers installed in his shield until a bronze and crude looking scepter fell out, previously lodged in a secret place. The scepter was amateur in nature but contained a marvelous gem at the top, one of rich oceanic blue, that made the scepter sparkle with hope.

“Thank you. Uh...what is it?”

“It is a scepter of Faith,” Satyre mumbled, erasing the hate ingrained in his facial features, at least for one moment. “The same one I took with me the day I became king. The same one I held as my daughter was born. All men who hold it, think they are unworthy at first. But as they age, grow in wisdom, they come to feel its power.”

“Magic?”

“Nooo, not magic,” Satyre scoffed. “It is a blessing from God. A promise that no matter what calamity befalls during the night, God will be with you. God will protect you. God will perform miracles and move mountains to protect us and the women we love.”

“Thank you, Sire.” Aaron did feel moved by the gesture and gripped the scepter firmly, nodding back at a suddenly mellow King.

Satyre continued speaking his heart, perhaps the longest speech the Warrior King had ever given in his life. “As long as you hold it, I know...I *trust*...that my daughter will be safe.”

Satyre then did something shocking, far more incredulous than ripping someone's face off with his bare hands—as was fairly common back in the day. He half-smiled. He actually, somehow, got half of his upper and bottom lip to stretch and form a benevolent expression.

He grabbed the scepter, still in Aaron's hands and touched it to his shoulder. "**Alackaday, P'Faith.** It means I surrender her to you. I no longer pray, because I have faith in you."

Mary looked at herself in the mirror, preparing to don her full bridal dress and suit up to wow the world. The most ambitious effort by both kingdoms saw a dazzling experiment, one that defied gravity while also shaming any and all non-millionaires. The traditional white wedding dress prevailed but came enhanced with 24-karat white gold coated silk, in addition to flooding the dress with patterns of sparkling flower heads of hand stitched embroidered white gold and platinum ingots in a bridal train that spanned two horses and took on a large floor encompassing circular shape. The bride's bustier was made from a combination of 500 karats of near flawless white diamond, on loan from the Diamond Empire and sparkling with every turn the red-faced and presumably blushing bride made.

What was truly astounding about Mary's Wedding Dress was the fact that it had a second bridal train "plain", suspended in air via strong whalebone framing and made of a combination of pearls, real ivory and rhino horn and the white furs and feathers of many fine but long extinct animals that didn't survive the change. The next layer swooped up one plain even higher made of glass and crystal beads, each of the nearly one half million pieces stubbornly crafted inside the frock and curved over the top of her head allowing the bride for once to see the end of her train.

Mary's dress was hugely heavy and was going to require ten additional trainbearers just to pull the three trains along. Why, five seamstresses died simply making the monstrosity, which helped in receiving critical acclaim from both the Red and Gold Kingdom's staunchest critics.

Mary's wedding veil was a two-cornered but three-tiered hat, looking as tall as a wedding cake and smothered in three rows of white peony flowers, goose down and immaculately tied white bows, carefully crafted by highly suffering slave laborers. Below Mary's hat lay the source of redness, surprisingly not Mary's crying eyes, but instead a mask of pure red taffeite, a gemstone rarer than diamonds and carved with great difficulty into a base opera mask that it might

## The Evil Princess

represent Mary's Red Kingdom façade, the one she created in melancholy, but one that her loving husband would remove, allowing her to see clearly.

That left only Lady Mary's heavy blue eyeshadow and blue blush, an odd combination, but one the Reds insisted upon that she might continue to bring the color of hope to the people of two nations.

Even in the midst of this romance and luxury, Mary felt nothing but despair. Yes, she did love the dress and that was the one saving grace of the evening. At least she would look stunning as she made the worst decision of her life and would always turn heads as she deteriorated into self-loathing shambles of a real woman. She looked into the mirror uncertainly, wondering for just a moment who she was and why society expected certain things from her. What made those things normal, what determined what was predictable? It wasn't so much a tragedy that her entire life was mapped out for her, but more of a mystery as to why events seemed to randomly occur in perfect symmetry, describing a story of irony, heartbreak and disillusionment.

Aaron waited for Mary's arrival patiently, no hurry in the world, completely calm and centered. He even decided to speak to his family and the extended family of the both bride and groom.

"As one is waiting for a wedding, one finds time to be reflective. To reflect on the joys of life. There is so much hate, so many instances of regrettable violence in life, it is nice to reflect on peace for a change. I know it is a custom to thank God for all the good that we have in life. It is the sign of a mature man to express thanks, not only to request the blessings of the divine. When a man is able to express gratitude for the things he already has, he truly makes heaven proud. So allow me to express to you what I am thankful for. I am thankful for my soon-to-be wife, truly a lovable and gorgeous creature the likes of which this world is not worthy of. She doesn't really keep me 'grounded' as much as he keeps me compassionate. In many ways, knowing her saved me from an utter destruction of soul. Her heart is that which can withstand hurricanes, calm tornadoes and quench forest fires. I am and always shall be madly in love with her, to the end of time and back again."

Mary could hear Aaron's voice resonating across the halls, through the walls and coming up from the very ceiling of her dressing room. The applause of the two families, no doubt impressed by Aaron's rhetoric, was loud and clear.

"I am thankful for the House of Opula. Sometimes when I get down about the world and its cruelties, I remember my family. King Amram and Queen Jaquie, mom and dad. I honor you. You are living proof that there are forces of good in the world; there are tidal waves

of great love still thrashing against the shore, hints of what paradise could be, if only everyone could see what they see in life. Sometimes you have to squint really hard to see grace, to see decency in the world, but sometimes you catch a glimpse of it.”

Satyre and Lilith seemed impressed by Aaron’s worship of his parents. It was often said, of Kings and Princes, that a man who was kind to his own family would be kind to his subjects, to his enemies and to the world over. It was a sign of divine approval because God only approved the lowly and meek. The humblest of men would look back on missed opportunities of greed, bloodshed and covetousness and call it wisdom, not weakness.

“I am thankful that I know what I want to do and know how to do it, therefore giving my life meaning. People are oftentimes so confused as to what they want to do in life. It is a sort of entire-life crises that never stops until a crucial day when you are *limited* by what you are able to do. From the moment I was a young lad, barely understanding the world, I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a philanthropist. I wanted to help transform the world into a more peaceful, a more compassionate place.”

Mary tuned out Aaron’s words, just barely audible, as she stared into the mirror fixing her bridal veil. Nothing he had to say was of any consequence. Not because she was cold-hearted, nor because she didn’t believe him—Mary did. That’s what everyone failed to understand about Mary’s judgment of Aaron. She pitied him, she knew of his capacity to love, to lead and to dream.

Dreaming mostly. He was a man who dreamt of so much, conjuring up ideas on how to transform the world into a paradise. A man who imagined a world not defined by faith alone and certainly not by money or the possessions money bought. Rather a world without boundaries, without kingdoms and empires, all united in love for each other. And in love for him, for Prince Aaron, the man who could talk some sense into these warrior savages. These vain princesses and egomaniacs. The one man who loved the world more than money. A man who could move the world to tears with a pretty speech and stop the fighting once and for all. They would unite everlastingly in honor of his vision.

Of that Aaron dreamt. And Mary knew what he dreamt and what he desired in his heart, the altruism and heroism he aspired to, all very worthy and admirable. But Aaron was a dreamer and imagined an idyllic vision of peace so perfect in description, so harmoniously promised, so emotionally convincing, that she knew deep down he himself would be incapable of creating it. Aaron would always be a

dreamer. Because the world just wasn't ready to love him enough.

Queen Lilith entered Mary's chambers smiling proudly at her daughter, the spitting image of herself once upon a time. "You look so pretty," she said, enjoying Mary's natural face despite the three-tiered hat, the red mask and the blue wig, not to mention the hideous three-tiered trail that would be carried behind her. Everyone said the dress was beautiful, but only Lilith thought the peripherals distracted from her daughter's real beauty. For a moment she wondered if the Golden Virgin girls might be sabotaging her daughter's fashion choices.

"Thanks..." Mary said before weeping rancorously, carefully wiping the tears from her face so as not to sully the blue makeup she had just powdered on her face. "I think that's the first time you ever said that."

"What? What's wrong?"

"I just always thought...I'd be a lot happier on this day."

"There, there," she said softly, rubbing Mary's back, careful not to ruin the fine lining of the diamond-encrusted bodice. "If it helps, you're making so many people happy."

Mary nodded, tensing up as if to say something gratuitous. But simply exhaled.

"Yeah. I guess I am."

Lilith sighed, feeling a tinge of regret. At least when she was forced into marriage so long ago, she remembered feeling happy. She remembered at least a few nights of excitement and wonder. This poor girl looked traumatized, sickened and awaiting death.

"Do I look okay?" Mary asked, sniffing up snot and trying to cover up her makeup blemishes.

Lilith stared at Mary for a long moment before shaking off her doubts. "You look beautiful. I'm sorry if I never told you that before."

She turned around ready to join the ceremony. But then, just as she reached the door she turned back around and found Mary's ailing face.

"Mary?"

"What?"

She stared again, trying to communicate something, but unsure of what to call it. "Nothing."

Then she spoke at her usual tone of prudence, with one odd choice of emphasis. "*If you want to be married...* come on down. The guests...they are impatient. But they can wait."

Mary flinched her tears away, wondering about her mother's odd statement. The choice was hers, right? She always had the option to

bow out, or at least that was the illusion her mother and Aaron gave to the people. That this was her choice. That she saw all other options and forsook them.

She looked into the gold-rimmed mirror, defined by its snakehead spiraling patterns and lone crown at the top, with red rubies on the side on one on the bottom. What would she look like ten years from now? Would her face be aged, terribly unhappy? If she were to write a letter to herself, from the future to now, what would she say? Would it be a dire warning or a nostalgic plea to resist doing what comes easy and instead persevere? Suffer for happiness. Perhaps suffering for what was good, or what was evil, was inevitable. Everybody suffered in their own way. It is what characterized everybody in every kingdom, wasn't it?

She stared deeper into the mirror, noticing a change taking place. The reflection of the room seemed lacking, as darker shades of grey overtook the glass. A black mist soon spread over the circle, alarming Mary. Just as she began to feel inward terror at a developing white mask, Salem's pretty pale face morphed into view and she gave her a smile, apparently standing behind her.

"Wha-? Salem?" Mary looked back and forth around the room but didn't see anyone. "Where are you?"

"In the mirror, silly."

Mary laughed heartily almost crying a second time. "That's really creepy."

"I know this is your wedding day," Salem said. "But I just want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, your wedding dress looks like a giant turkey. You know that, right?"

Mary laughed again. "Really? I thought it looked kind of weird at first. But the girls said it was very 'in' right now."

"Yeah, honey," Salem said in warning, "I think you should be very careful about taking their advice."

She exhaled and changed her disposition. "Look, I know that you *can't* marry me. I mean, there's no such thing, right? Witch and a princess. It's not supposed to happen. But I also know that if I don't say what I'm thinking I'm going to regret it forever."

Mary was tired of arguing with her and for once uninterested in all the rationales that felt instantly meaningless.

"Say what?" she said with a smile.

Suddenly, the door flew open and there stood Mother Supra, the Red Kingdom's Alpha Godmother, the special title hand-picked by Satyre. She looked just as any grey-haired old church bidy with a long grey dress would look and was already finger-pointing at Mary—the

good kind of finger pointing.

“Mary, dear? Are you almost ready?” Mother Supra began enunciating clearly so as to highlight Mary’s tardiness. “It’s time to begin the ceremony.”

Mary smiled at the woman, wide-eyed and panicky, trying to keep her naughty mirror secret hidden by inching closer to it—which Salem’s grinning face certainly enjoyed.

“Oh! Ms. Godmother! Hi!

“Is everything all right, child?”

“Ummm...”

Salem, from inside the mirror, looked to the side, trying to get a good view of Mother Supra. Mary nervously blocked her view, shifting her head slightly.

“My, don’t you look lovely,” Supra said, walking closer to Mary and moving her away from the mirror for a last-minute dress grooming session. “And you’ll look even better in that giant hat!”

Mary force-laughed in terror. “Yeah!”

She glanced at Salem, still inside the mirror and shrugged. The Godmother hadn’t seen the scandal yet despite Salem’s funny faces and sarcastic gestures.

Mary couldn’t help but giggle and covered her mouth, alerting the Godmother to the shenanigans.

“What’s so funny, darling?”

“Nothing.”

“I should hope not. This is a very serious occasion!” she said, pointing her finger again, this time in the negative sort of way.

Mary had a big smile painted on her face and nodded in mock respect—still hoping her earthy little secret wouldn’t be found.

“I know. I know. Very serious. I’m ready...almost. Can I please just have a moment to myself?”

“Very well, dear. But don’t take too long. Aaron is expecting you. Best not to keep a man waiting, you know.”

“Oh, don’t I know it!” she said signaling to the exiting God-mother.

“Don’t do it, Mary,” Salem said. She implored the princess with her hands and evincive facial expressions, telling the soon-to-be-Queen all she desired to know.

“I’m not saying to marry me instead. I wish that I could marry you. I wish I lived in a world where a witch could fall in love with a princess and live happily ever after. But I hope and you know, ‘pray’ as you call it, that you won’t run away from me. I hope to remain your friend, in whatever way you want me. If you want me to protect you, I will. If you want to go out on your own, I won’t stand in your way. I

just want to be in your life.”

“Wh-What are you saying?” Mary said, tearing up again, but this time with a delightful first—a smile, a long and fixating smile that didn’t go away. A melancholy princess crying tears of joy for once, a darling sight for the ages.

“I love you!” the mirror said to the princess. “You’re beautiful. You’re beautiful on the outside. And you’re beautiful inside. You’re beautiful! You’re the fairest in all the land!”

“But those are just words, Salem,” Mary said, always nitpicking the selfish desires of her heart, as she had been well-trained to do. “What about reality?”

“I can’t give you anything else...oh wait. Okay. There is one more thing I can give you. Flowers.”

“What?”

“Flowers.”

Mary felt something softly land on her head. She looked up and then grabbed a flower, a Blue Hydrangea. “Flower?” she laughed.

Just then, another flower fell from the ceiling, this time a Perennial Geranium, seemingly dropped from nowhere. No hole in the ceiling, no box of magic, just flowers falling from nothing. And there she saw another, a Delphinium, then a Brunnera, a Clematis and a Bluestar, more than she could keep up with! The flowers fell faster progressing from blue to red to green and even a few blacks like Dahlias and Lilies and before Mary could laugh in disbelief, flowers were filling her room, deluging her sad wedding with waves of scented happiness.

“Oh my Goodness! Flowers, flowers everywhere!” Mary said, shutting her eyes and twirling in the flower storm, loving the sensation of flowers covering her head, falling down her blouse and littering her perfect dress with such silly frolicking.

“I thought princesses liked flowers?” Salem said. “They were romantic and stuff?”

“Well maybe one or two...” Mary replied before a felicitous laugh.

Within moments, the room was filled with flowers, creating a swimming pool of floral enchantment. Thousands of colorful and sweet-smelling flowers, bathed Mary, rising to her knees and then to her waist, causing the Princess to giggle, snort and twitter in ecstasy.

Just as she began swimming in the flowers, she noticed an unusually large and scary looking black butterfly. “Oh wow! Cool!”

Mary raised her arm slowly and stuck one finger out, giving it a place to rest. “So pretty.”

She smiled at the little creature looking closely and more closely, until she noticed its little eyes.

## The Evil Princess

The butterfly began convulsing and slowly imploding in on itself, grotesquely deforming in a way until it began to grow and stretch and eventually transform itself into a humanoid figure. A giant-looking Mary looked down, awed by the tiny creature, metamorphosing.

“Oh jeepers. How did you do that?”

The butterfly carcass warped and skewered until it became a ball of human flesh. Salem crawled out from the mass, thankfully clothed, not that Mary would have minded.

“Just a magic trick?”

Mary looked at her in smirking disbelief.

“Well...more like magic than a trick.”

Salem waited until Mary’s adorable laugh calmed down, always longing to hear such a wonderful sound and then posed a daring question.

“Mary Melancholy...will you be my lifelong partner?”

Whatever fears and internal strife once held her back it was all cried away, as a beaming, laughing and weeping Mary jiggled her face up and down—a sight the lonely witch waited so long to see. “Yes, yes I will.”

After a stirring engagement song, Salem took Mary’s hand and led her into a twirl, leaving behind a poof of magical dust and electrical sparks lighting up the otherwise somber room. Both women flew away on a broomstick as magic flowers continued to fall. Only ecstatic singing could be heard in the distance, coming from nowhere, but blustering.

The wedding guests waited impatiently. As minutes progressed into hours, one awkward moment after another, faces of joy and expectation melted into frets and worries. Satyre and Lilith eyed each other in anxiety, while Amram and Jaquie looked appalled.

Aaron took it reasonably well, in that he only destroyed the wedding set, seethed with anger and surprisingly didn’t kill anybody.

“*Where is she?*” he screamed to Mary’s in-laws.

Lilith could only mutter to herself. “Mary...what have you done?”

When the Alpha Godmother entered Mary’s room, not a trace of the princess or the witch could be found. The poor old woman fainted in dramatic fashion, for never had anyone missed a royal Golden wedding.

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

Some said, of that night, that a witch's evil laughter could be heard all over the city and traveled throughout the kingdom, her burbling glee resounding and permeating the very air. Still, a few claim to have seen a portent of doom on the horizon, the silhouette of a witch riding a magic broomstick and now accompanied by the shadow of a stolen bride with only half of her sliced bridal trail blowing behind her in the winds of change.

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# Chapter 17

## He or She?

*“If Cadabra ever gets to the point where we ask what sex was Queen Fen Mien I, we have lost sight of everything our ancestors tried to build for us.”*

- A representative of the Diamond Empire on the myth of the Savior Queen

**A**fter a day of, well, shall we say “celebrating”, Salem and Mary took the time to have one calm and romantic dinner together, eating one of Salem’s animal-friendly recipes. Mary had no extra clothes besides a vandalized, tainted and partly soiled wedding dress, so had to borrow a black witch’s robe and hoodie from Salem, which only helped to give her life new meaning as the “Evil Princess.”

During this knee kicking, leg-shaking tense time, the calm before the inevitable and fast approaching storm of human drama, both non-

princesses thought it a good idea to slow things down and enjoy a few moments of peace, to quell tomorrow's worries.

After cleaning their plates and discussing Salem's undeniable cooking talents, Mary shared a deep thought while the two sat on the floor of the cave.

"These are the good times," Mary said.

"What? What do you mean?" Salem asked, typically suspicious of any innocent remark.

"What do you mean what do I mean?" Mary asked with a giggle. "Just what I said. Enjoy this time. It's a special moment that we'll remember for the rest of our lives. One day this moment right now will be a distant memory in our past. But it will always live in our minds and hearts. This is the high point. Whatever happens tomorrow, or next year, or ten years from now, nothing can ever take away this moment."

Salem seemed unsettled by the discussion, now sounding a bit paranoid. "Like what, things changing?"

"Things always change, yes. But I meant just what I said. We have one night of peace before the rest of our drama-filled lives. With family. People of Cadabra. Enjoy every moment, because that's what life is. Just a series of good moments, you know?"

"I guess it is," Salem said, a sense of morbidity coming over her face.

"Don't overanalyze it," Mary said, followed by a heartily laugh. "I just needed a, what do you call it...a segue! I have something for you."

"What?" Salem asked in trepidation.

"Just something simple for now. So you can't laugh!" Mary said. "Just continuing our hypothetical wish list for each other. You thought I forgot about that, didn't you?" She handed Salem a necklace made out of string and one lone blue gem, one that she grabbed from the palace, for no particular reason, except that she knew there was a slight chance she might end up in a cave. She also attached a lock of her hair to the necklace. "It's my own gem, not tainted by he who shall not be named. And with a lock of my hair. So that you'll always have a charm of me to remember."

"Oh...okay," Salem said, eyeing the necklace in awe. "Umm...well gee, I don't have anything for you."

"You don't need to get anything for me," Mary said with a smile.

"But I want to," Salem said, looking around the room. "Hey, you want a cat?"

The cat meowed in protest.

"Oh no wait, I got an idea. Wait here..."

## The Evil Princess

Salem quickly stood up and walked over to her shelf of magic spells. “Where is it...ah, there it is.”

Salem brought out the unthinkable—a real life voodoo doll, like the kind they used to describe in fairy tales or talk about when telling forbidden ghost stories around a campfire. She handed it to Mary and the princess’ eyes lit up at the prospect of handling something truly dangerous. Not something merely unwise or questionable, but absolutely banned in all kingdoms.

The voodoo doll, or gris-gris as the pedantic prince insisted on calling it, was conspicuously shaped as a person and with a familiar set of mini-clothes. Its body was made of green yarn with buttons for eyes and had little stumps for fingers and feet. Its dress was pitch black and its diminutive conical crown and wide-brim hat were unmistakably evil in nature.

Salem put the magic scroll in Mary’s hand and closed her fingers together. Mary’s heart raced as she gripped the doll tight, already loving its aura and unwilling to part with the perfect cave-warming gift for even a second.

“Wow! What is this? A voodoo doll?”

“Yeah but it’s not just a voodoo doll. It’s a special magic spell that travels with the poppet and from person to person. It’s a spell that anyone can cast. But it’s also one that my father shared with me a long time ago.”

“Oh?”

“It’s shaped like a witch in honor of our kind. But the actual power comes from the incantation you sing when holding it. Dad said to me one day I may need it because when I meet somebody, the world would be cruel to me.” Salem laughed, reflecting on the past. “He said *when* I met somebody...he always knew I would. I kinda’ wonder how he knew? Anyway...he said some day or night some-time...I may feel as if the world is ending, that there’s no hope left. And that’s when I should cast the spell. It’s a Resurrection Spell.”

“What does it do?”

“My dad said that when the incantation is sung all my ancestors would come back to me. In spirit, to help me in my darkest hour.”

“Oh my Dog, Salem! Why haven’t you cast it yet?”

“Because sweetie,” Salem said in grief. “Once I cast it, that’s it. That’ll be my family’s final message to me. I don’t know if I can live with that.”

“Well...do you want to do it together?” Mary smiled.

“You could introduce me...”

“Honestly, I don’t think I could bear to see them again. It makes my heart ache too much. Besides, it’s cheating. My family and I made an agreement that we would look for each other in the hereafter. I want a sign, damn it. Not another magic spell. Casting a temporary resurrection spell doesn’t count.”

Salem touched the doll that Mary excitedly held tight, straightening its lopsided hat. “For all I know, it could be a prerecorded message. And a message in a bottle is not worth ruining a perfectly good spell that could really help you.”

Mary stared at the doll in curiosity, its little black beady button eyes looking devious and its texture just feeling soulless and particularly blasphemous.

“Just take it,” Salem pleaded. “It’s the most valuable thing I own.”

“I love it, Salem!” Mary said with a big teary smile, holding the little omen tight and welcoming Salem into her arms with a hug.

“But...why would you give it to me?”

“Because I worry about you. If you’re ever in any trouble, just cast the spell and hold the doll to your heart. I have the scroll here that goes with it and you can just read it over in your spare time.”

Salem handed Mary a small scroll which detailed the mellifluous incantation.

“Memorize the first section underlined there. And then the rest you can kind of adlib later. But the chorus line is the most important.” Salem pointed to the chorus line and made sure Mary could make out the words. “The spell should be transferable. It won’t be my family coming back to you...because that would be weird and awkward, obviously.”

“A little...”

“But it would be one of your ancestors coming back. Maybe a great grandmother or grandfather. Or distant cousins.”

“Wow, really? Or Queen Fen Mien?”

“Well...if she was *real*,” Salem said with a shrug.

“And it really works? I mean, what happens?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. Dad might have just been drunk when he gave it to me. He wasn’t exactly *coherent* when he explained its meaning. But I’d like to think it’s real. I guess I hope you never have to use it. But I want you to have it just in case.”

“Thank you so much,” Mary said with a smile. “I promise...I will always keep it close to my heart. I don’t really want to cast it because it’s just so adorable. I want to keep it. And don’t voodoo dolls self-destruct when you use them?”

## The Evil Princess

“I dunno, probably. My ancestors were cheap. They didn’t believe in a lifetime warranty.”

Salem eyed the necklace and then put it over her head, just as tickled with her own gift. “Boy, I’m sure glad I found that doll!”

“Why?”

“Well, I don’t really have anything else to give you. Except a few potions and some really bitter herbal supplements that feel like a dull sword going down your throat...”

Speaking of bitter pills, Queen Lilith had made the long journey through the forest towards the Snake Garden, wearing a modest robe and head covering to withstand the bitter winds. Lilith had a demanding presence and even the watchmen animals stood back in respect. Lilith waited at the cave door, or lack of a door.

“Looks like someone has a visitor,” Salem said, as Mary watched her mother approach through the magic mirror, showing no particular expression, which was always an omen for mothers.

“Uh oh.”

Mary emerged, now wearing the color of a witch and timidly approached her mother, afraid to make eye contact. Lilith zoomed in on the girl’s eyes and half-smiled, amused to see the sheepish Mary hadn’t quite thought the plan through as far as finding a new place to live.

“I figured you might be here.”

“Well...yeah. It wasn’t planned or anything. I just sort of flew here. Unexpectedly. She has special powers.”

Lilith looked annoyed. “I know. I figured.”

“Right. Look mom, I’m sorry. I’m not sure what I’m thinking.”

“I’m not either,” Lilith said tiredly. “I just wanted to come and make sure you’re safe.”

“Yes. I am.” Mary said, finally summoning up a morsel of courage.

“So is this where you’re going to live now? With her?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t want Aaron. I don’t want to go to the wedding. I don’t want him. I can’t, I just can’t marry-”

“Yes, yes, I get it,” Lilith said. “Don’t worry. That ship has sailed. He knows.”

“Is he upset?” Mary asked bashfully.

“Uhh...let’s just say, I wouldn’t go near him right about now.”

“Ah.”

“Yes...” Lilith nodded in sarcasm.

“I’m sorry. It’s not about...you know...anything like THAT.”

Mary nervously grabbed her hair and rocking her head back and forth. "Like you know, weird...it's not that."

Lilith only tilted her head in confusion, wondering what her daughter was trying to think, let alone say.

"I can't be with Aaron," Mary said decisively.

"I know..."

"He hit me, mother."

The revelation caught Lilith slightly off guard and she blinked, holding a vacant expression.

"In the face. Then he grabbed me...and..."

Lilith shuddered in disgust, gesturing for Mary to stop talking.

"Ugh. Just...don't tell your father that."

"Why?"

She hesitated and stared. "You know why."

Lilith shook her head and continued. "Look, child, I really don't know what you're thinking. But come back home. When you're ready. If you don't want to marry Aaron, you don't have to."

"So...you don't hate me?" Mary asked sheepishly.

"I'm disappointed. I don't approve. But...as you know...if you don't want to marry Aaron, you shouldn't have to. There, I said it. Come heaven or Hell. You made your choice."

"I guess. So...what happens now?"

"I don't know."

"No idea? No great parental advice or anything?"

"No," Lilith said, shaking her head in confusion. "I don't know what happens now. You...you broke the rules, Mary. You went against the script. The story that was all laid out for you. What God wanted for you. What we raised you to do. What Aaron wanted you to do. You did what you felt had to be done. And now, nobody knows what's going to happen." Lilith frowned, but forced a smile. "I guess we're all going to have to wait and see."

"Life is soooo interesting, isn't it?" Mary asked, with a smile.

"It is. Just be careful, Mary. Be very careful. And trust nobody." She sighed deeply. "You should probably leave this place. I don't trust Aaron. I don't know what he's thinking."

"Salem says she can protect me. Against him. I trust her."

"Please be careful. I still care about you. As you know."

Lilith spoke stoically and walked away from Mary and the cave, just as unfazed. Mary's reply didn't merit any further comment and so she walked ahead, eyeing the forest animals who cautiously watched her. She watched them watching her in a bit of hauteur, never impressed by much of anything, even super-intelligent, stalker animals.

## The Evil Princess

It was to Mary's credit that anyone had ever impressed Queen Lilith for any reason. The usually unflappable queen, for once, was speechless on her daughter's wedding night.

Aaron didn't take the rejection too well. One might even say he took it personally. As a boy, he destroyed his toys once he realized their ultimate futility. As a younger man, it was his job to tear down evicted homes for their firewood. As a Prince, it was his decision to purge all royal records that concerned private citizen arrests of the Golden Kingdom, figuring it was all a waste of time. Whatever Aaron deemed confusing, frustrating, or troublesome he destroyed.

Sure enough, he destroyed the wedding set and destroyed his own groom outfit, his fantasy of happiness nothing more than a sick joke at this point. Whatever his crushed feelings, whatever his disappointment, it was secondary to the fact that a good woman had escaped. A good woman followed her heart and found her happy ending, as it should be, as it always was and always at the expense of a long-suffering man who never got what he deserved. It was all about his humiliation.

Whatever was left had to be destroyed. And that was the witch—every witch—still living in Cadabra, inside and out, beyond the borders and into the next kingdom. Aaron entered phase two of his God-embracing, Holy Crusade with a new campaign against witches the very moment his gold and blue tuxedo was ripped from his chest.

He offered rewards to the citizens of the Commonwealth of the Pink Sky and the Diamond Empire and appealed to their royal heirs to ban witches from public view, labeling them as “horrorsists” who sought to overthrow governments, silence God, seduce women and devour babies.

Surprisingly, his campaign was ill-received and new age representatives from the Commonwealth of the Pink Sky, in opposition to the Old Queen's orders, actually expressed their support of the witches' agenda—particularly the baby-eating, which seemed to address the continuing threat of overpopulation.

Aaron knew where Salem lived and where Mary was probably hiding. He rallied his army and let their presence be known, commanding them to walk in rhythmic and recurring steps, accompanied by clacks of their weapon. Whenever Aaron marched through a city, the drums of war could be heard miles in advance of his arrival. He wanted it that way, for the threat of Aaron's wrath was a terror only dwarfed by Aaron's personal wrath, a pestilence few would ever live to see, since the army resounded and reduced grown men to whimpering

babies. The army was godly, it had the voice of a god and its chants, stomps and clanks were deafening, calling out righteous fury and divine punishment to all those who would question the authority of a prince.

Aaron first paid a visit to a certain Madame Samantha, a mysterious woman that few people knew, fewer people cared about, but whom at least one person identified as a closeted witch. Madame Samantha lived in the Borderlands and always dressed in black, a definite giveaway as far as the Golden Kingdom was concerned. She also had short hair and refused to wear makeup, oftentimes refraining from public view and social gatherings, probably choosing to “cleanse her aura”, or whatever disgusting thing witches did in private.

Samantha knew trouble was on the way one day in advance of her date with destiny. She heard the roar of Aaron’s Army, hours in advance, their chanting and stomping growing by the hour, starting as rumbling quiet and progressing to deafening screeches of metal and broken earth.

Samantha paced back and forth for hours, trying to determine what to say to Aaron—everybody knew it was Aaron—to appease his broken ego, to avoid his fury and to assuage whatever humanity the witch had stolen from him.

The army’s rambunctious noise stopped and an eerie silence overcame Samantha’s home. For one full hour she waited in agonizing silence as Aaron took his time in walking to the front door and politely knocking.

“Who is it?”

“You know who I am. Open the door.”

“May I ask what this is about?” Samantha asked. “I am not properly dressed and want to know if—”

“If you are not *properly dressed* then that means you’re either a witch or a whore. Now open the door and confess your sin.”

Samantha ran around the room, making sure all witch-related items were carefully hidden from view. “Very well,” her voice almost cracked. “I’m coming out. Er, I mean, coming to get the door. Heh. That sounded funny, I know.”

Samantha opened the door and there stood a glum-looking Aaron, with an unusually peppy Rivulet behind him. And behind the two men, the legendary army of the Kingdom of Gold.

“So...let me guess. Some stupid girl broke your heart.”

“And how would you know that?” Aaron said, walking towards the black sheep. “Let me guess. Girls’ talk.”

“Why no sir...” she said with hesitance. I simply *knew*. For you see, I am a prophetess.”

## The Evil Princess

“A witch?” Rivulet asked, eyeing her strange looking furniture which looked much too colorful to be from God and much too animal-worshipping in appearance to be normal.

“Of course not,” she said firmly. “I only have one God. Queen Fen Mien. The sacred X, the image of her that we all hold dear. Just as King Satyre once gave you his own scepter, as a symbol of his trust.”

“How did you know that?” Aaron said, a bit intrigued.

“Might a witch’s power be to prognosticate the future?” Rivulet asked, his sword-shaped head never looking more cutting.

“A witch only prophecies lies. A prophetess of God foretells truth.”

Aaron turned around, stopping his casual inspection and stared Samantha in the eyes. “I am looking for a murderer. A witch named Salem.”

“Who did she kill?”

“She killed Mary, my once betrothed bride. She worked her magic on an innocent woman. She stole her heart. She blackened it. She destroyed all of our dreams and sacrifices of peace. All for...that. That disgusting relationship with a witch. In killing Mary, the Witch has made a death threat to me. To all of the Golden Kingdom and Cadabra. I have spoken to the other princesses and, more or less, everyone agrees that witches are a plague to our land. Their existence is no longer tolerated.”

“Could you not simply win Mary’s heart? Destroy the magic and not the woman? Haven’t you ever heard not to throw out the baby with the bathwater?”

Aaron chuckled quietly. “The great thing about babies, Madame, is that they all look and act the same. They are primitive creatures, selfish, violent and angry. It’s very easy to make more babies. Surprisingly easy for a man like me.”

Samantha flinched as Aaron’s voice seemed to rise in its threatening tone. “Now tell me, *witch*, tell me about your magical potions. That is the only reason I haven’t killed you yet. And sent your corpse to be repeatedly defiled by my army of lonely, witch-hating men.”

“I am not a witch. I serve the only God, Queen Fen Mein. If we serve the same God, Prince Aaron, how is it that I am a witch in defiance of your orders?”

“What’s your name?” Aaron asked with a smile.

“Madame Samantha, Prophetess, Independent Contractor. Why?”

“Because, *witch*. They say when you use a witch’s name to her face, the power of peace, the glory of God, is with you. Witches are secretly ashamed of their names and tremble when a man of God utters it.”

Aaron smiled at Samantha who kept a stone gaze. “It is the first step in conducting an exorcism.”

“I swear to Fen Mien, I am a believer in God. I am not a witch.”

“You know what the interesting thing is about God, witch? When you pray, HE never actually says anything back to you. Admit it. It never happens, right?”

“Well...” Samantha answered cautiously. “Sometimes God is silent for God’s own reasons. That doesn’t mean I give up—”

“That’s because God doesn’t answer prayers,” Aaron said with a sneer, moving in uncomfortably close to Samantha’s face. “That’s because God works through me. God no longer answers prayers because he speaks through the House of Opula, the Royal Golden Family. We interpret his will. We interpret his writings and create laws in the spirit of his word. So when you pray, you pray to me. When you beg, you beg me. When I judge you, God judges you.”

Samantha bit her tongue and tried looking as helpless as possible. “Fen Mien is, was, a she. I think it’s weird you keep saying He.”

“Well of course, *Samantha*. When Fen Mien departed this earth she abandoned her physical form. She now exists in heaven as a spirit being. Having no sex.”

“So why does that become a he instead of a she?”

“Because, *witch*, once a being ceases to be human, the default word is HE. Not she. Because certainly you agree, that women ARE genetically inferior to men. Do you not?”

Samantha grit her teeth and focused on the wonderfully green ceiling above her, sending all her hateful thoughts to heaven and unburdening herself of the anger Aaron was forcing on her.

“That is the way God designed our bodies, after all. Women are weaker. Men are stronger. Women are emotional. Men are logical. Women are compassionate, they feel sorry for everybody. Men have been blessed with the power to turn off our tears and to dispense justice, the way God destroys worlds every day because *he has to*. Women are designed to have babies. Their instincts, their attractions, are to be dominated by strong, masculine men who will give them genetically superior children. Men are designed to make decisions. To reflect the persona of God. That’s both scientific and godly. I believe Queen Fen Mien knew this when she was alive. Surrendering her inferior female form so that she could transcend human existence and evolve was her greatest sacrifice. Of course, if you were actually a prophetess you would know these deeper truths of Queen Fen Mien’s doctrine.”

It took everything in Samantha’s power to blink once and smile.

## The Evil Princess

“Of course I know that, Prince Aaron. You speak for God, right?”

Rivulet and Aaron stared at each other. “As a prophetess,” Aaron said, “I know you have special abilities beyond that of normal women. You have potions, godly charms, divine curses and miraculous powers. So what I want from you, in exchange for your freedom to live, is two things. One, a poisonous witch-killing brew, created by the legendary Bianca Natalie, the Heretic Witch of the Wilderness.”

Aaron proudly smirked at Samantha and lowered his visage. “Yes, I know the Witch’s Apocrypha. I am well-read. I know that Bianca is still alive and very much at-large.” And I also know that for the right price she will sell out any of her own kind. And I know that practically every witch living alone has bought a little bottle of poison, to protect themselves from other feral witches invading their territory. What a sorry lot. You can’t even trust your own sisters and brothers.”

“You seem to know so much more about witch folklore than I do, my Lord.”

“I need this since I anticipate Salem coming to kill me at any time now. Two, I also need a bit of a *love spell*, if you will. I believe they call it out in The Wilderness, the Gris-Gris, the Amulet Doll. The voodoo poppet that can cast an irreversible spell of absolute love and devotion.”

“Now why would you need a love spell, being such a charming man in person?” Samantha said with a smirk.

Aaron nodded and laughed. “Surprising, I know. But you never know when you’re going to need it. I know the gris-gris exists. I’ve read about it from the writings of Bianca herself. Sympathetic Magic you call it. Symbolic poppets used to change a person’s heart. The Witch’s Apocrypha says that a caster of spells can use a person’s lock of hair to create a psychic link between them and the subject. With a needle to the heart, you can cast a love spell and force them to let go of their inhibitions and feel the kiss of true love.”

“But this is beyond my capacity as a prophetess.”

“Right...but...you do know what I’m talking about. Don’t you? You see, we both believe in well...what we shall call the ‘Magic of God’s Science.’ I know magic really works. And I know you’re not as stupid as you look.”

Samantha tilted her head. “I can only say that I know a person who knows a person, who might be able to get their hands on these items.”

“Oh come on, you can tell me,” Aaron said with a grin. “You have it in your backroom, don’t you?”

“No, I really don’t. Because as the history books state, as I’m sure

you know, Prince Aaron, only a witch can create a voodoo doll that has the power to alter someone's body or mind, or affect the environment. Queen Fen Mien would never allow that."

"You have answered well, woman," Aaron said nodding in acceptance. "You really are a prophetess. Let the record show that Prince Aaron honored Madame Samantha for her fortitude and grace. It's just too bad you have that short haircut." Aaron snickered. "Otherwise, you would have been a perfect rebound girl for Your Royal Highness."

"You do flatter an old woman, sire," Samantha said with a perfect smile.

Prince Aaron walked away, passing Rivulet who remained still. Aaron turned around and smiled. "Good day, Madame. Let it be known to the people that Prince Aaron is merciful and never quick to make accusations. A woman must be proven to be a witch. Not immediately taken and tried."

Aaron left the house of Samantha, even as Rivulet cleared his throat and brought out his scroll.

"All right," he said, using a monocle to read. "Just a few questions to officially declare you free of witchcraft. If you don't mind, my lady?"

"Of course, sir. I don't want to be associated with any of that. Ask away."

"Have you ever made any sarcastic remarks?" Rivulet asked, meeting her eyes.

"Uh...no? I mean, no, sir!"

"Good. Sarcasm is usually an indicator of one being a witch. They are teeming with rebellious blood. The Eternal Devil Slanderer introduced sarcasm into Cadabra many years ago. Sarcasm leads to hysteria and that leads to fornication and adultery, orgies, blah blah blah, you know how all that goes."

"Right, I definitely know how all that goes."

Rivulet raised his brow.

"Or... I mean I've heard how that goes. Out there."

"Have you ever had any esoteric dreams?"

"Yyyyyaaahhh no, actually."

"Had to think about that one?"

"I have had many odd and eccentric dreams. But when God speaks through dreams the meaning is always made clear. There is never any doubt what is to happen."

"Hmmm, I see. And tell me Madame, what was the last divine dream you had?"

"It was about Prince Aaron."

## The Evil Princess

“Do tell.”

“Sorry. Unless Prince Aaron asks me I cannot share secrets from God about his chosen one.”

“Appropriate response. If you had said anything about Aaron’s happy reign and future prosperity...I would have killed you on the spot. God hates any type of insincere flattery.”

“I am aware, sir. You have...a very skinny head.”

“I do, I know. And that is the God honest truth.”

“Yes.”

“How many times have you been married?”

“None sir. I hope that my short hair doesn’t discourage any young suitors from taking a chance on me.”

“Well, let’s just say the man that chooses you...probably won’t be subjecting you to his unclean desires very often.”

“Huh,” she said, a bit confused.

“If you know what I mean,” he said with a creepy smile and another eyebrow perk.

“I definitely know what you mean. God pity me.”

“Yes.”

Samantha sighed in anxiety. How much longer was Rivulet going to play this game? Hadn’t she said everything correctly? Hadn’t she endured enough humiliation?

“Do you have an unusually large stable of pets? Rats, black cats, bats, snakes and so on?”

“No, sir. I fear an excessive number of cats might drive away all my *male* suitors.”

“Good girl.”

Samantha turned around and rolled her eyes, walking over to get a drink.

“Now finally, one more thing and we can wrap this up. Can you recite the Lord’s Prayer? Please do it now.”

“Nice try,” Samantha said with a smile.

“What do you mean? Don’t you know that witches are unable to utter the Sacred Prayer of Fen Mien?”

“I also know that if I were to fall for that one, it could be said that The Evil One allowed me to speak the Lord’s Prayer so that I could look innocent.”

“Oh my, oh my!” Rivulet said, laughing merrily. “You really are such a smart girl. Why if you only had longer hair I might request your company myself.”

“Oh dear, another missed opportunity for lonely-wife-in-waiting Samantha! When will she ever find a man?” Samantha said with a snap—not a sarcastic one less she give herself away.

“I believe we can dispense with the rest of these questions. I do believe you are off the hook, Madame.”

“Oh great, thank you! I’m just glad my name won’t be besmirched anymore.” She smiled at Rivulet and led him out the front door. “Now sir, I believe I am going home and look for a husband.” She shot him a pointy finger and a wink.

“You’re already home. Feeling lecherous?”

“Uhh...just loneliness. But I have hope. Someday a man will complete me.”

“Or at least *fill the void*,” Rivulet said with a smirk. “That can be said for certain.”

“Ah, yes. Yes, you got me there.”

“So long, Madame. You sleep well tonight. You are dismissed,” Rivulet said, walking away and towards the door.

“Oh thank you. I’m happy to help. Boy, oh boy. Now to get to work on scrubbing those dishes. Samantha, you silly girl, why do you wait so long to do the dishes? Because I’m lonely for a big strong man, of course!” She made a barf gesture in secret, far away from Rivulet who had already opened the door.

However, Rivulet suddenly froze in place.

Samantha instantly felt the tension increase and a chill ran up her spine. “What? I mean, something wrong, sir?”

Rivulet slowly turned around and shut the door behind him. He smiled. “I do believe I heard you talking to yourself.”

“What?”

“Witches are known to mutter to themselves, talk freely as if soliloquizing, as if entertaining an audience of invisible demons.”

“Oh...oh no, sir. No, I was just talking back to you. I mean, at you...”

“No, I told you that you were dismissed. Why did you talk to yourself?”

“I was...was just being friendly,” she said in a quieted voice.

“Witches often talk to themselves because of their great and self-imposed loneliness. They often talk to themselves as other people leave their homes. Their loneliness makes them yearn for the company of men...and women.”

“I assure you sir, none of that here. I only like men. Big strong, superior men.”

## The Evil Princess

"I'm afraid that's insufficient. I do believe it is time for a visual inspection."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"The Dark Lord, the Devil, always leaves a Devil's Mark on the body of a witch. She wears heavy clothing to conceal it. Roll up your sleeve and let me see your armpit."

"But...I mean...alone with you? Isn't that indecent?"

"I'm the one who decides what is indecent. Show me your armpit. So I can check for moles, birthmarks, scars...and of course, superfluous nipples. But we'll get to that a bit later. These are marks of Evil. And the only sure way to know if you are a witch. Because if I prick your Devil's Mark and it does not bleed then you have given yourself away as a witch."

"But...isn't there another way?" she sighed.

"There is an easier way to do this, yes," he said with a smile. "But I don't think you would prefer it at all."

Samantha reluctantly lifted her sleeve, exposing her hairy underarm to her accuser. Rivulet took a long and extended look before finding an unusual looking mole.

"Unshaven, I see. Little wonder you're still single," he said with a smirk.

"Is that a crime?" she asked with a tight frown, avoiding deadly eye contact.

"Against nature, perhaps. But it doesn't prove you're a witch. Just try to relax, good woman, while I administer the test. This won't hurt at all. I can promise you that."

Rivulet pulled out a large knife, sending shivers down Samantha's spine. He then gently pressed the retractable blade against the woman's mole, seemingly puncturing her skin. But nothing happened, not a droplet of blood.

Samantha screamed. "No, no, no, no—"

"*Now tell me, witch*, where are the two potions Aaron requested?"

"*I'm not a witch*," she said with tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm not."

"How about we skip all the pathetic begging and you show me where the potions are. Right now."

"No, no, I don't have any, I swear," she said with a tear rolling down her cheek.

"I was rather hoping you would say that," Rivulet said with a smile, gently touching Samantha's chin.

He walked over and opened the door, kneeling down to pick up a carefully concealed bag.

"This is my bag of tricks!" he said happily.

“Let’s see what toys we have to play with today. Maybe then you’ll be more willing to spill...oh...awkward choice of words. To share your secrets.”

Rivulet opened his bag and brought out an iron instrument, long and rigid, with two pairs of pointed claws at the end.

“This first one is called The Iron Spider. Isn’t that a catchy name? And this is what happens when you get caught in a web of lies.”

Samantha bowed her head in defeat and cried.

“Now then, if you still want to play this game. How about you do your Royal Golden guest a favor and direct him to your fire and cauldron? Iron works better when it’s heated. It seers and tears one’s flesh off as soon as it makes contact with her body. A preview of Hell to come. Now then...remove all of your clothes so we can continue playing this game.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m a witch,” Samantha muttered. “The potions are locked away in my bedroom.”

“Sorry dear,” Rivulet said with wide and excited eyes. “The interrogation hasn’t yet begun. And we have a whole night to kill.”

Rivulet did have his fun that night, whereas Prince Aaron spent the night clearing the besmirched name of Madame Samantha. He even called the Golden Family together, claiming that he intervened in her witch trial, claiming he found her guilty of no crime. He even made a statement to his writers, poets and messengers, to spread around to all Cadabra, that witches were not to be grouped together with witch trials of open and absurd accusations. For such loose-lipped slander would be misogynistic, hateful and a disgrace to Fen Mien.

As Aaron himself declared to respectful applause: “Let us never become so consumed with rage that we create enemies out of our friends, our wives, our daughters and mothers. Men who want power look back on the mistakes of their lives, group them all together and call it destiny. My friends, we still have a choice to go back and correct these mistakes, these injustices. It is what gives our kingdom character.”

As soon as Aaron stepped off his throne and consulted with Rivulet, he characterized his own color of gold. “Did you get the potion and voodoo doll from the witch?”

“Yes, Sire.”

Aaron nodded and stared at Rivulet, wondering his take on matters. As if reading his mind, Rivulet began some of the deeper matters of kings. “You know, a lot of people don’t read history,” Rivulet said in that strange syrupy voice of his.

## The Evil Princess

“They are unaware that the Red Kingdom and Gold Kingdom have been making peace treaties for hundreds of years. Generation after generation. But then, within a few years, another one breaks. Some say it’s because the House of Opula tolerates too much from those savages. Some say, yes some do, that Amram is too busy building palaces of gold and making deals to administer any punishment, the way Cadabra needs him to. To get rid of these barbarians once and for all. A treaty of blood may be all they are capable of understanding. What the people of Cadabra want most is for a Gold King to come along and take his leadership responsibility seriously.”

Aaron listened, staring despondently.

“Now all that stands between you and redemption is one lowly witch. Show no compassion,” Rivulet said strongly. “Send a message to everyone who defies you. Including your soon to be wife. Be cruel, be excessively cruel. Because if your people sense you are weak, they will *never* follow you.”

Aaron took Rivulet’s words seriously. But later, as he dug through a large gore bag of human remains, he came across Madame Samantha’s carefully peeled facial skin, a soggy mask of vacant human expression, looking quaint without its eyes or mouth.

He then remembered what she said about forgiving Mary rather than killing her. What if there was a way to swallow his pride, what if there was a way to love Mary more than her mistake?

He dumped the gore bag into an open grave dug in the cemeteries of the borderlands, right by the Garden of Nehustan and exclusively dug for Madame Samantha. On the tombstone it was written: “a good woman and non-witch as decreed by Prince Aaron.” He determined to honor Samantha’s memory by forgiving Mary. By resisting the primal urge to kill her, as his father rudely suggested and instead to welcome her back into his arms. The perfect portrait of a strong and understanding husband, indeed, the very nature of God himself, or herself, or whatever the hell Fen Mien was supposed to be.

Besides, in Aaron’s mind, always considerate of honor and good reputation, no one deserved to be buried in an unmarked grave. No one deserved to have their deeds and lives erased from the annals of time. Even a witch, even a liar and a perversion of nature, deserved to be honored. That was Prince Aaron’s decree. Nobody would ever be forgotten in Cadabra. They all served as examples. They were all good people in their own way. Every single life mattered.

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## Chapter 18

### Gold Always Wins

*“If there were real justice in Cadabra, those individuals who lack intellectual honesty would be banned and severely punished. The pure ignorance and harm they have spread has gotten out of hand.”*

-The Honorable Dr. Leo Panthera of the Common Wealth of the Pink Sky

Aaron entered the enchanted forest, third time the charm and took out his sword bracing himself for the kill he deserved. “*Salem*. Come out. This is the part where you die. Come out!”

He glowered and gripped his sword tightly, squeezing the base as if it were her neck. “I’m here to kill you!” He took a swing and spryly returned the sword to his center. “I *win*. I always win. You are going to lose. Witches always lose.”

## The Evil Princess

At the sound of silence, Aaron began thrashing and chopping the garden, so viciously turning his rage on the plants and flowers. Yes, he cruelly dismembered those little vines and beat the flower heads down without mercy. He bent over and raised his sword high, striking the pretty flowers with all the force he could muster. He whipped them so hard chlorophyll spurted out all over his head, ah, the green blood of plants. He wailed and wailed until there was nothing but squashed grass and maimed ferns in his path. Smite the plants, he did and there was hardly any soil left unturned. He looked for a nearby baby tree to slice, alas, there was none to be found.

But wait. Then he spotted his destiny: a cave, one very much like the cave Salem called home. He walked over to the cave, ready to swing and taking out a few rebellious weeds along the way. When he reached the door-less cave, he bellowed out her name, but to no answer.

He overthrew the witch's dinner table and broom set, shortly after slicing down the drawers of her bookshelf. He journeyed into the kitchen and struck his sword through the case holding her pans and utensils, taking the time to stomp on each plate, breaking one and all.

“Come out and face me!”

He looked around the room frantically, slightly paranoid about what direction the witch might come. He jerked backward and stared down in holy terror...

Only to discover a black cat rubbing peacefully on his ankle. The cat purred, looking up at him, as if to welcome the stranger.

Appalled, Aaron took back his foot and punted the feline into the opposite wall, causing a painful meow to screech across the room.

Just then the vulture flew atop of them and flapped his wings. But Aaron grabbed him by the neck, yanking him down to the floor.

Aaron saw a stray rat and aimed for its little face, stomping all along the floor but missing. He swatted away a menacing bat.

A group of fast-thinking snakes wrapped themselves around each other and then around Aaron's arms trying to subdue him, but the prince flexed and pulled, sending the snakes flying across the cave-like rubber bands.

The animals faltering and whining, Aaron dominated the room. He went over to the fallen bookcase and grabbed Salem's book of scrolls with her family portraits. He looked at each one, the girl's mother, father and sisters and smiled...shortly before tearing them to shreds. One by one, he tore them all, defacing every last memory the witch ever had. In his mind, it was fitting justice for robbing him of everything he held dear.

Whatever the witch owned, next to nothing and soaked in poverty, he would take all of it. He looked over at a pile of firewood and then walked over, rubbing his hands together for some gristle. The prince went over to the cave's only light source, a group of fast-burning red candles and took one.

He then walked over and spread the candle flame to the firewood. Using the witch's own collection of cattail and cedar bark, he fanned the flames until each log was aflame. As the fire grew, he took one flaming log and carried it over to another part of the cave, eventually filling the entire area with smoke and growing fire.

Everything would burn, everything would die. The witch he toyed with and his nearly stolen bride would suffer.

The prince narrowly escaped the spreading fire himself. Shortly after he left, an influx of hacking animals ran out, saving only themselves and not a single recipe or spell book. Everything Salem ever had in life was gone.

Except one.

Salem and Mary returned to the scene via express broomstick, Salem in her usual black regalia. Mary dressed unusually unassuming, even modest, having borrowed one of Salem's purple sweaters and skirts for the afternoon trek.

All that met them upon their return was terror, smoke booming from the cave with the distinct smell of burnt, crispy destruction. By now, with black smoke escaping by the seconds and flames reaching the outside of the cave, Salem's hope dwindled.

"Oh no...my babies."

"What-What happened?"

"I don't know, I don't know," she said, holding her head and wheezing in grief. Salem ran into her cave, pillowing the flames behind invisible shields and pushing her way through the carnage. She looked everywhere, even at the pile of rubble formerly her treasured books and spells, but couldn't find a living soul.

Mary waited outside, shaking and holding her elbows. Something seemed very wrong but Salem was too busy calling for her animals. Mary couldn't join her inside the inferno and so she waited.

She watched as Salem ran through the cave and out again, hacking and puking, but finding nothing.

"Kitty! Where are you? Where are you? Talk to me!" she yelled.

Salem ran out again and spotted a succoring sight: a group of sickly animals, walking, surviving and banding together.

"Guys, you're alive," she sung, relieved. "But where's kitty? I can't find him. And he's old..."

## The Evil Princess

The vulture squawked, shaking its head and downcast.

“Oh no, no. Kitty! You’ve got to be here somewhere. Maybe...he ran away and is hiding in the garden.”

Salem desperately searched, running father into the forest and yelling a lungful for her missing cat.

Mary followed behind, unsure of what to do. “Is he okay?”

“I don’t know,” Salem squealed. “Can you please help me look for him? I can’t find him anywhere...”

Mary nodded uncertainly, always afraid to be alone in such a treacherous looking forest and unequipped to stave off even a troop of angry snakes and rats.

She wandered around in the garden and beyond, wandering into the forest, trying to put herself in the mind of a cat, a talking cat and apparently a hungry cat, or at least that seemed the gist of his motivation.

“Well...where could he have gone? Maybe back towards the field? Or the pond?” Mary lamented to herself, sounding a bit like a witch and the farther she went, the more foreign the territory became.

She recognized nothing by the time she hit a briar patch dead end. Only then, when she realized she had nowhere else to go, did an angelic voice come upon her.

“My Lady Mary.”

She gasped as she beheld Prince Aaron in front of her, accompanied by several of his men. He escaped his army and traveled lightly on foot, no doubt to find her and no doubt already having disposed of Salem’s abode.

“Aaron...hi...” she said with an awkward half-smile.

“You may refer to me as Your Majesty.”

Mary looked around her setting, curious to see if there was anywhere to run or any escape. Alas, there was only the face of scorn.

“I knew I’d find you here. Coming back to see the witch.”

“Umm, Salem? Can you hear me?” she cried out loudly but to no avail. “Now might be a good time to cast that spell...”

“She’s not going to help you. She’s as good as dead.”

“What...are you going to kill us both? Why? Why can’t you just leave us alone?” Mary asked, fighting back tears and struggling to meet his burning eyes.

“No, I’m not going to *kill* you. I’m going to take you back. And you’re going to attend your wedding. Our wedding. And I’ll marry you while wearing a locket of that dead witch’s hair.”

“Aaron...”

“That wasn’t a request, princess,” he said with a growl.

“The answer is NO!” she screamed.

She bent forward and caterwauled, in between tears and pants.

“I will not marry you...I don’t love you! Maybe everyone else loves you and maybe something’s wrong with me, but I don’t love you. I will never love you and you can’t make me.”

“Yes, you will!” Aaron screamed back, inching closer.

“I love her! I love *her*, Aaron!”

“You love *what*?” he asked, almost desperately, showing his boyish confusion.

“I love Salem! It’s not a curse. I love her.”

“*Why*? What could you possibly love about a witch?”

Mary closed her eyes and stopped crying. She sighed away her grief and then began laughing. Giggling at first and then chortling and grabbing her tummy—a witch’s black heart might be proud. “Because. She’s *evil*. That’s why. She’s way more evil than you are. She’s more demented and perverted and sick in the head than you will ever be.”

Her words injured him and he grit his teeth, turning his head only for a moment.

“Stay back!” she said, watching him come closer. “You can’t always win...you can’t get what you want!”

“Sometimes that’s all there is in life,” Aaron said. “A man who takes what he wants. Or a man that suffers and waits like a fool. Am I a fool, Mary?”

Aaron shoved himself against Mary and grabbed her skirt, ripping it apart and exposing her blue granny panties, which to Aaron and his men was quite amusing.

“Noo!” Mary screamed attempting to run, but only ramming face first into a guard’s shield.

“Sometimes I think it really is the witch’s curse. The voodoo spell,” Aaron said evenly, pulling out his shirt from his pants and unbuttoning it. “But the more I think it over...it’s you. Isn’t it? You’ve probably spent so many lonely nights reading fairy tales, lusting after your literary romantic heroes, that your ideals are far too warped for just a good normal man in the real world. Why marry a good honest man when you could have such great fun screwing a witch. Girls with low self-esteem, go figure.”

“Somebody help meee!” Mary screamed again, hoping someone would hear the cry of one lonely princess.

“But I forgive you. I am big enough to forgive you and not *give up* like my father says I should. He says I should just kill you, you know. And I could. I could take the easy way out. You know he has killed women before. Women who were disobedient.”

## The Evil Princess

“*What?*”

“But I won’t go that route. I love you more than your sin. I can be merciful. I can be understanding. All I want, Mary, is to save you from certain death. And in order to do that I have to make you understand. Even if it hurts. Whenever I speak, I want you to hear the compassion of God.”

Mary stared in fear and backed away, her eyelids frowning and anticipating the worst.

Aaron pulled apart his shirt, exposing his hairy chest and muscular pectorals and invading Mary’s territory, staring holes with his manic eyes. He pulled his shirt off and walked closer to her, his bare chest not inches away from her face.

“*Please don’t do this...* You’re not like this, Aaron. You’re not...”

“Yes...I’m going to do something that every stupid little bitch princess like you deserves.”

Aaron unbuckled his belt and smiled, slowly pulling it off, lap by lap and staring vacantly into Mary’s fretting face.

“I’m going to spank you. It’s called submissive training. Because I love you enough not to kill you.”

“No,” Mary said, trying to inch away from him. She turned to Rivulet and begged his mercy. “You don’t have to do this...”

Aaron slid his belt off and snapped it tight, walking towards her. Mary cowered and covered her face. “Take off that ridiculous witch garb. Take off your underwear. Show me all of your naked shame. Because I own it all. Assume the position of an obedient wife.”

“No, no, no!”

Aaron whipped his hand across the shoulder. Her blood-curdling scream sounded throughout the forest, but not one of Aaron’s men turned their head. They were all oddly mesmerized by the scene and watched in holy reverence as Aaron administered discipline, correcting his wife-to-be.

“I *said*, take off your clothes.”

“Please don’t...” she murmured, right before tensing up and preparing for the second strike. This blow lacerated her face and knocked her head first to the cold ground.

Rivulet tried to break the awkward silence with a bit of droll humor. “You know it’s like the kings of old used to say, Mary. Sometimes rough sex is like bad weather. But if a storm’s coming, you might as well relax and enjoy it.”

Mary’s shriek was silenced by her tremors. In desperation, screaming, she ripped apart her witch robe as ordered. But Aaron’s belt struck swiftly across her back, then again upon the poor girl’s chest

when she turned over. Never satisfied, always a destroyer of “lost causes”, the prince made sure to tear her hoodie and blouse completely off, giving her a full-body tanning of broken blood vessels.

“You know Mary...there's a thin line between pleasure and pain,” he said, right before giving her another slap. “They are on the same scale...of human emotion.” And another. “You might even say that without pain, we could never truly appreciate pleasure. One simply does not exist without the other.”

He whipped her again and again, ripping off every last piece of clothing for his convenience and for the viewing pleasure of his army. “Without first experiencing punishment, you will never appreciate what love is.”

Repeated lashings were heard throughout the forest, amid laughing, amid quips and adages of the Old Kings.

“Love me.” Slap.

“*Love me.*” Two more slaps and then a long pause before the third one landed, echoing throughout the forest. “Please, Mary” he said, almost shedding a tear. “For the sake of your own life...*love me.*”

Fen Mien herself only knows where each blow landed. Every bone-chilling smack he gave her—indeed, his men lost count that night—silenced her further until the screaming stopped and she curled up into a muted ball of welts, cuts and bruises.

As the night glowed and nature seemed to silently weep, he beat her bloody blue and then left her there to live—allowing the witch to come and see the strange fruit of her labor.

Salem was relieved to find her old cat alive a good distance from the gardens and all the way into the briar patches, the opposite direction of where Mary went. The cat was in great pain and lying on its side making only a pronounced and long whine. Every few moments he would squeal loudly, as if unable to move and warning Salem to stay away.

Salem fell to her knees. “Ohhh kitty. What’s wrong? Huh?” She reached into to touch his belly but the cat quickly nipped at her finger, telling her to let him be. “What’s the matter? Oh, you poor thing. Here come on. I’ll take you somewhere safe.”

She scooped him up from underneath, lifting his body carefully and taking a long walk back to her cave. The cat meowed loudly and affectedly as they approached the garden. Salem was already nearly crying, her voice cracking, as she reassured her old friend. “I wish I knew what you were saying...poor boy. Poor boy.”

She didn’t like the extra bitter cold chill that came with the breeze. The silence was ominous.

## The Evil Princess

“Mary? Mary are you here? Mary? Oh gee, now what?”

A worried Salem put down the cat and hollered out for Mary, walking around the expanse right before the cave. It had now stopped smoking, as everything had burned inside.

Then she heard a sniffing and coughing in the distance, like a mouse or a bird. She ran over to the noise and uncovered an assemblage of leaves.

“Maaaary?”

There the princess lay, on her side atop the cold ground with her face hidden in the grass. She was clothed and clutched the torn hoodie on her body, struggling to keep warm.

“Mary? Are you okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“Look at me. What’s wrong.”

“No...don’t...”

Salem gently pushed her face away from the grass and towards her looking for her eyes. Her eyes were blackened and her face groggy. Her once lovely face, was bloody and bruised—a series of contusions that stretched from her forehead down to her feet and every delicate crevice in between. Neither Mary’s virtue, nor intimacy, nor dignity was spared in Aaron’s vengeance.

All Mary could do was smile at Salem, until she shut her eyes in apology.

Salem slowly took her own hand to her mouth and bit down hard on her fingers. She erupted into tears and grabbed Mary’s hand. “Mary...oh no. Mary. It was him, wasn’t it? I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mary whispered.

“It is. It is my fault. I said I would protect you. I failed you.”

“You didn’t fail,” she said, gently touching Salem’s face. “It was my own fault. I said things I shouldn’t have said...”

“No. No. NO.”

“He told me I should try to enjoy it...” Mary whispered with twitching lips. “He made me say it. That I enjoyed it. He made me say I loved him. So I tried. I tried really hard. And after a while...it really worked. The pain started to go away.”

“NO, Mary, stop. Please stop talking,” Salem said with a pained sigh. “Please stop...”

Salem’s pupils instantly tripled in size, filling her entire eyelid, then turning devil-red. “I’m going to kill him. I swear to all things unholy in Hell, I’m going to kill him...”

Salem raised her arms, ready to cast a spell—no six spells, six death hexes—chanting to herself and shaking her fists in ire.

The witch spoke an archaic language, very ancient, which meant the death hex was incredibly cruel and daunting. Her pupils completely disappeared as magic dust fell from the sky, like snow.

“Homina homina...onimum...dominum...” she muttered.

“Salem,” Mary whispered.

“Dotheov Skeeraaaaa skeeera skeeera zibberini zibberini...”

Mary couldn’t help but laugh, a tender laugh, but a hearty one. “Zibberini? Is that a pasta?”

“Mary, please, I’m in the middle of a hex. A death hex. I have to be very careful or else I might accidentally turn him into a pig or something. But I really just want him dead.”

“But...” Mary said, her voice growing more tired by the second.

“I really need your help right now. I want to go see my parents. Maybe get my bruises looked at. Maybe rest. Can’t you cast a spell another time...and take care of me for now?”

Salem’s pupils came back and she looked at Mary who was smiling—smiling even in all this adversity. Salem reluctantly stopped with the spell. “Yes. Yes, I can do that.”

“Your kitty needs you too. I need you. There is just too much to do...to waste any more time fighting.”

“Okay. But I swear I’m not done with him...”

Mary covered her mouth politely and beamed. “Shhhh. Shhh. It’s going to be okay.”

Salem tended to Mary’s wounds. For a few more hours, Salem swore a blue streak, or a black streak, to be accurate. A black streak was when a witch’s swear words were so heinous and vile they rocked the tombs and brought tears to wandering ghosts. But hours later when Mary finally cracked through Salem’s vitriol, all they found underneath was grief. The two exiled not-princesses cried in each other’s arms, not a title to their name, certainly not any gold lent from Aaron’s kingdom.

But Mary’s condition worsened and her bruises became darker as the nights progressed, prompting Salem to consider drastic action. Perhaps she would take her to the Outskirts of Cadabra or even as far as the undiscovered Wilderness, hoping some doctor-medicine man hybrid could nurse her back to health. When Mary volunteered to go to her father’s throne and asking for help, Salem’s ire could only be measured with rationality. Asking for help, even begging, had to be the

## The Evil Princess

sensible choice. Like her warlock father always told her, “Sometimes you’re just screwed, baby. And sometimes you got to suck down whatever’s on the table.” It was a bawdy quote that Salem didn’t particularly appreciate, nor did her mother, the Black Magic Solitaire, like it, as it was obviously a reference to her questionable cooking skills.

But in this case, dad’s wisdom prevailed.

Salem borrowed a horse figuring Mary was too weak to take a broomstick ride. That is to say, she borrowed his back. Salem always cast a spell before riding her favorite black stallion, turning his “neighs” into Cadabra English, to make sure he wanted to ride and that she wasn’t exploiting his natural shape as all the other humans seemed to do. The horse was an agreeable fellow and though he listened to Salem’s sob story for a half an hour, of course the old coot was going to say yes. Horses are all gentlemanly and that’s a stereotype that all Cadabra knows is true.

Salem rode the stallion, holding an injured Mary close, as they made the trip to The Crimson Palace, looking as stoic as always. Every wall was pure white but intentionally splattered with red paint, as if to remind the people that freedom required blood. The Crimson Palace itself seemed empty, hollow and bereft of joy. Little wonder the “blue” princess came from such a godforsaken place. Barely two stories and made mostly of copper and bronze, Satyre certainly had nothing to boast of, nor did he see any value in building a throne for tourists. Whatever he had, was his people’s. Whatever furnishings god gave him, he shared the wealth. Despite his viewpoints, he always insisted that he was never “one of them”, speaking of the Pinkians and their long list of ridiculous rules and community-owned properties, not to mention that ridiculous Blood Moon prediction. Satyre was just a man, tired of fighting and now as far as he knew, missing a daughter.

Salem carefully stepped off the horse, eyeing the Crimson Palace, feeling a degree of trepidation. It wasn’t in her nature to beg or even to ask. A short time ago she would have sent a whirlwind forth to destroy the little place, cackling about how delightfully evil it felt to taunt royalty. A mission of peace and request was foreign indeed. She helped Mary from the horse’s back to her feet and then unfastened the saddle.

“Thanks, Mister Horse.” The black stallion had no name nor did he desire one, but he sure didn’t appreciate the term “Blackie”, so Salem’s ironic name game was a bit inappropriate for the time being. Besides, she could barely make a wisecrack to herself, let alone others, at such a tumultuous time.

The guards saw Salem and Mary approaching, eyed each other and gave the two women some incommensurate looks. But ultimately they acquiesced and let them in without questioning. After all, Mary was never officially denounced or disowned. She was still the Princess of the Red Kingdom, however despised in the public eye.

Satyre had been sitting on his throne for hours. Just staring. Queen Lilith found his staring into space, sitting on his throne, clutching the arms, quite vexatious and so often excused herself to the courtyard. However, this time she waited with her king, the two of them having nowhere to go and little reason to do anything but stare into space. War was imminent, their daughter went missing and at the center of it all was one...

“Witch.”

Satyre and Lilith saw Salem and Mary approaching in the distance, glanced at each other and remained aloof.

“So...” Salem said with a little strut. “I never knew kings and queens just sat on the throne all day long. Staring. Good to know.”

She was ignored but Mary’s bruised and battered face captivated attention.

“Look, we’re here-” Salem started to say before an interruption.

“Mary...” Lilith said curiously. “What happened to your face?”

“An injury. Falling off a horse. I was hoping my wounds could be tended to.”

Satyre became provoked and grabbed his throne arms tightly, squinting his eyes. “Why are you here? Why do you need my help? You’ve made your decision.”

“Because I’m *hurt*,” she said. “Where else am I supposed to go? The Outskirts?”

Before Satyre could answer in haste Salem interjected. “Can I say something here?”

“NO,” Satyre barked, barely sending the witch a disapproving face. “I know who and what you are. I am speaking to my daughter.”

“Am I still your daughter?” Mary asked, looking into her father’s eyes. Satyre stared back, intense as always, but couldn’t bring himself to answer.

“If you want me to go away...” Mary said sadly. “Just say so. And I will.”

Satyre said nothing so Lilith chimed in, politically conscious as always. “Go to the doctor,” she said. “Treat your wounds. Just please don’t overstay your welcome.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

## The Evil Princess

“Oh boffo! Thanks for not being awkward and weird about it,” Salem said with a pouting face. “I was really hoping there wouldn’t be a schmaltzy moment here. Because I’m all out of chicken fat.”

Satyre didn’t get the reference and gave Salem a quizzical look.

“...Never mind. Just screw you! That’s what I meant.”

“Just let it go, Salem,” Mary said quietly. “Walk with me. Please.”

But Salem couldn’t contain herself. “Hey, she’s the one who wanted to come see you. I respected her wishes. Me personally, I would have been just fine going to the Outskirts. I could probably find some crazy shaman doctor there to heal her up and throw in a second head for free.”

“Salem, now is not the time,” Mary said again.

“What did you do to her?” Satyre finally asked, turning as red as his own walls.

“Oh?” Salem said, holding her hands on her hips. “You think I did this?”

“These injuries are not from a horse and carriage accident,” Satyre said, gritting his teeth and already tasting witch blood.

“Yeah? Maybe you’re right. I’m the only one here who loves Mary. Ain’t that right, King Blood?” She snarled and sent Satyre a nasty look. “This seems like a ‘million dollar wound’, if you know what I mean. Not from no horse.”

That expression Satyre understood perfectly, as there was only one family with that much gold. “I don’t like what you’re implying. Aaron...”

“Please, please!” Lilith said. “I don’t want this palace turning into a spectacle. General, please escort my daughter to the doctor.”

A soldier walked over to expedite the escorting of Salem and Mary to the doctor’s chambers.

“Thank you,” Mary said.

But expecting Salem to calm down and cooperate was like expecting a pot of boiling water to suddenly chill. “No, no. You know what? Screw tact.”

Salem shoved the guard’s arm away and began pointing at her in-laws. “Yeah, I’m a witch. I cast spells. I’m evil. And I’m in love with your daughter. So get over it already.”

Satyre shook with anger and Lilith rolled her eyes in embarrassment, as was predictable. But Salem was just getting started.

“Does nobody talk in this family? My family, we all hated each other three weeks out of the month. We all yelled until we were red in the face. We used a bunch of four-letter words, five letter words, six letter words and words I didn’t even know what the hell they meant.

We broke out the voodoo dolls. There were drunken fights and puking everywhere.”

She shook her head and laughed. “But you know what? Then everyone felt better. We got it all off our chest and then we forgave each other. Because in the end, that’s what family does. Or is supposed to do.”

Salem almost listened to Mary’s quiet requests to cooperate, but not before turning around one more time and speling.

“You know what? If this is how you treat your own daughter? When she’s been hurt? Then I guess I love her more than you ever did. So sssspffft!” Salem got the last raspberry in before starting to walk with Mary.

“Oh my goodness,” Lilith said, quite appalled. “That was quite theatrical.”

Salem turned back around and quickly blitzed the king and queen. She sent an invisible shield to block the oncoming guard.

“Salem!” Mary screamed

“Here!” Salem said, grabbing her magic mirror from her side pouch and giving it directly to Satyre, who took it in his hand.

“The mirror never lies. Look and see what your own wife is afraid to tell you.”

Salem and Mary finally left the throne room. Satyre’s raging eyes looked down, intrigued at the magic of the mirror, which was responding to his degree of concentration. Like a mood ring, the mirror seemed to reflect his own temperament and show him only the darkest visions that he would ask for, the violence and scourge he knew the world held for him. The longer he looked into its tinted glass, the more he began to see vivid colors and ethereal scenes of life taking place.

He watched the story unfold, as gritty and horrific as life would have it. A tender voice screamed while whipping sounds persisted amid such demonic laughter.

*“Aaron! Don’t... Oh God... it hurts! It hurts!”*

*“Tell me you enjoy it. Say you love me.”*

*“I lufffff yyyooooooooo! Oh God stop!”*

Lilith shut her eyes in chagrin. Satyre’s face crinkled in torpor, his eyes glued to the mirror taking in every horrid detail. His body shook as if he himself were wounded in battle. This is what peace looked like—a mauled woman crying out for mercy.

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## Chapter 19

### Misery Loves Company

*“Please shake my hand. Unless you are opposed to it for philosophical, political, religious, lifestyle or miscellaneous reasons.*

*No? I’m insulted!*

*Sir, I say, Sir, you have challenged me to a duel, sir. I demand satisfaction.*

*Unless of course, you are merely expressing philosophical, political, religious, lifestyle or miscellaneous disagreement and if that’s the case I sincerely apologize for intruding upon your rights!”*

- Galileo deWolf III, an independent Cadabra Satirist

Within hours, Satyre's army of one hundred approached Aaron's camp. Satyre led the frontlines, as always, a death wish and a lust for blood, with little tolerance for men who couldn't kill with one blow. The sounds of their boots and the clanks of their weapons weren't deafening, certainly not like the oncoming tidal wave of Aaron's army, numbering one myriad. Satyre would be lucky to gather up three hundred men with a draft. Years ago, the Reds flocked to war and readily volunteered to die in the name of blood and freedom. But over a century of fighting and losing loved ones over territory and stockpiles of gold Amram was never going to share, proved fruitless. When Satyre renamed his kingdom the Kingdom of the Reds, he himself set the example for tolerance and understanding and showed the people how to hammer their swords into plow blades.

But to approach Aaron in such a hasty and impulsive manner seemed suspect. Aaron was stationed at Gadabout Mountain, approximately halfway between the Crimson Palace and the House of Opula. It was a mountain not officially owned by any kingdom but often used as a place for making guilt-ridden sacrifices to God. The unusually high peak of the mountain helped men of valor to feel intoxicated, while the delicious goji berries were high in protein, thus allowing all of its inhabitants to truly be High and Mighty.

Aaron saw the army approaching but gave Satyre the benefit of the doubt, since the soldiers appeared to be traveling at a leisurely pace and not crying out the names of any deities. Any suspicions he might have were quelled when Satyre came in walking distance of the Gold Heir and nodded at him, signifying a formal introduction was to come. Aaron had sent a few feeler letters to Satyre's messengers, informing him that it was time to discuss the abandoned wedding.

Formal Cadabra etiquette requires allies to shake hands, or at least do the respectable "Plague Handshake", which was a symbolic wagging of fingers, but one that avoided actually touching another person's hands for fear of sexually transmitted disease transmitted through hand-to-hand contact. The simple explanation being that sexual deviants never washed their hands and thus disease followed them wherever they went. Rivulet, the king's guard, was a proponent of this handshake, not necessarily for the illogical risk of transmission, but only because he hated touching poor people for highly personal reasons. Or not so personal, except that they were poor.

Satyre approached Aaron for the handshake and Aaron extended, a bit haughty, as the entire kingdom knew by now that Satyre had disappointed all of Cadabra by not delivering his daughter in the marriage peace treaty.

## The Evil Princess

“So...King Satyre,” Aaron said. “What sort of marriage negotiation did you want to discuss? You know she rejected me.” Aaron tightened his lips, abhorring the thought. “Rejected me. For a witch. I am not feeling very consolatory today.” Aaron smiled. “Let me guess, does Mary have a lovelier stepsister mopping the kitchen?”

Satyre punched Aaron square in the face, knocking him to the ground. Aaron, a strong man in his own right, shattered like glass when feeling the wrath of Satyre’s leathery callous-filled hand. Soldiers of Satyre and Aaron’s guard agonized over the blow, each one turning to the next in line, wondering what to do. To their credit, they did shake their hands nervously rather well and did a first-rate job in dropping their jaws, expressing outrage at the incident.

Satyre grunted and snorted, an angry pig in slop, a desperate insanity in his voice, as he kneeled to the ground to pummel Aaron repeatedly in the face. Each bone-crushing blow came so naturally, as if the turning of a windmill and Aaron’s face spewed blood like a fountain before Satyre even thought about what he was doing.

Aaron’s eyes turned up and inside his head as he lost consciousness but Satyre’s hands, now likewise chaffing to the point of blood, hammered Aaron’s face as if warping a piece of stone into sculpture.

His beastly noises were all that was heard through the night as guards stood awkwardly, each one unsure of how to proceed in such a politically delicate situation.

Satyre shoved off his armor as he stood up, wrenching Aaron’s body forward and then dragging him by the hair.

The soldiers began to scream, both sides clamoring for resolution. Some readied their swords, while others held them back with their shields. Red and Gold soldiers alike prepared for war, neither one eager to throw the first fatal strike.

“Tell me you enjoy it!” Satyre screamed, spitting all over the lad’s face. “Tell me you enjoy it!” He lifted Aaron by his hair and grabbed him by the shirt, pulling him smack against his own grisly face, which to a barely conscious Aaron must have felt like falling face first into a briar patch. “*You hurt her. My only child. I’m going to kill you.*”

Satyre’s eyes flared and stretched as he spoke to Aaron’s bloody face. “I’m going to kill you slowly. I’m going to tear your jaws apart and feed your meat to my dogs.”

The Red King grabbed Aaron’s hair and began chopping into his face with his other fist, a series of fast skin tearing blows, pummeling the lad’s face into something reminiscent of cherry pie.

The prince was silent but Satyre's own gasps could be heard throughout the night. Satyre's whole body shivered from the stress, his hands feeling like fireballs and his own bones reeling in pain.

Desperate voices from the soldiers became vociferous and his own guards approached him, trying to grab and lock his mighty arms.

"He is killing him!"

"Someone stop him!"

"To stop him would be an act of treason!"

"Should we fight?"

"Attack!"

"Save the King!"

"Retreat!"

The voices of the anxious soldiers grew to a fever pitch, as more soldiers marched in closer to the huddle, ready to die, right then and there.

Rivulet quickly took center stage, halting the soldiers from making a decisive leap into battle.

"SATYRE, STOP," Rivulet announced, loud enough that his voice echoed. "PLEASE. YOU CAN'T DO THIS. NOT HERE. NOT LIKE THIS."

All eyes were on Satyre's bloody hands. If he went for a weapon and a kill, this was truly the end of one kingdom, if not all of Cadabra. The clanking of metal and Rivulet's pleading voice finally caught Satyre's attention. The old man took a deep breath, recovering from a wheezing exhale and looked at the line of confused men.

"Listen," Rivulet whispered, hoping the soldiers couldn't hear his next statement. "I'm not going to tell you not to kill him. I know that's out of the question. But I'm telling you this for your own sake. Take him to your palace. Take him as a political prisoner and tell everyone what happened. Then do as you will with him...but with the support of the other kingdoms. You kill him now like a barbarian and you turn everyone in Cadabra against you."

Rivulet's sinister tone of voice alarmed Aaron who could barely open his groggy eyes in disbelief.

"Sire, don't kill him!" one of his soldiers said.

"Surely we will go to war!"

"I am a King," he said, dropping Aaron to the floor. "I am a Greater King than Prince Aaron."

Madness in his eyes, Satyre gnashed his teeth so hard he began drooling. He let the concoction of he and Aaron's blood drip into his own snot and drool, creating a ghastly sight of barbarian rage.

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Aaron's bloodied body did nothing for him and there was so much more torture to dispense.

But Rivulet was right. To kill Aaron in an unmarked territory would be politically incorrect—well, murder usually was—but to not formally execute Aaron as a war criminal could draw criticism from the surrounding kingdoms.

Satyre had nothing more to say at Mount Gadabout. “I could snap your neck like a chicken bone. No. I'm not done with you yet.”

He looked up and onward.

“Rivulet, tell this news to your King. The rest of you...come and follow me, all of you. I'm taking him to my palace as a hostage.”

Rivulet promptly left to deliver a message of blood, while the rest of the soldiers had no choice to follow Satyre back home. Since he was sparing Aaron's life for the time being and they were not formally at war with the Kingdom of the Reds, nobody knew the protocol. Amram didn't specifically authorize a siege. However, Satyre's decision to drag Aaron by the shirt, leading his already convulsing body across the earth and stone, would certainly not sit well with the powers that be. This was a bloody mess on hold, everybody clutching their weapon and waiting for an announcement of death, or an apology.

Considering that Aaron's face started looking like an abstract painting rather than anything human or royal, an apology seemed the most distant of options.

A few of the soldiers chattered and bickered, as they followed Satyre back to the Crimson Palace, like metal-cladded lemmings, eager to die, but only when it was clear what they were dying for and for whom.

“Is he taking him back?”

“They stopped fighting?”

“Does this mean Aaron and Mary are getting married?”

Unlikely as that wedding was at this point, the reputation of Mary Melancholy had to be a determinant factor in holding back the violence of Aaron's army. While nobody really liked Satyre and while Mary had been vilified to public opinion, many old fuddy duddys from both kingdoms still rooted for her. They figured she was stressed, commitment-phobic, or maybe she felt unworthy of Aaron's great love.

The scandal across two kingdoms was so vociferous reporters and artists named the situation “Maaron-gate,” an amalgamation of both royal names.

It was probably for the best that Lilith was away at the private fountain, de-stressing from all the drama because the most socially inept and shameful drama was yet to come.

The doors inside the Red's Hospital Ward began rumbling. The doctor heard the noise and inquired to Mary, who was being treated for ailments. "Are we expecting thunderstorms tonight?"

"Uh...I don't think so..."

Suddenly, the doors caved in and collapsed into large shards of wood, as a massive foot came kicking through and crunched the remaining beams into firewood. Two rocky hands pulled the rest of the door off its hinges and shook violently.

Satyre held Aaron by the neck and trailing the two were hundreds of soldiers eagerly awaiting an order.

Mary and the doctor backed away as Satyre drew his sword and prepared to deliver a death strike, preferably straight through the boy's heart and probably so he could eat it, or some type of similarly barbaric ritual.

Satyre's voice boomed like thunder and his guttural sounds filled the building. "*There,*" he said. "Is this the woman you struck? So shall you die, looking at her face. *Look at her face, boy!*"

Mary walked forward, her eyes shutting in disappointment. "Dad."

He looked at her, still holding his sword against Aaron's chest.

"Stop."

"What?"

"Why are you doing this?" Mary asked.

"He hit you. I saw it all. Now he's going to pay the price."

Satyre looked at Aaron's slits-for-eyes, his bruises and contusions warping his once handsome face. Aaron's pupils reappeared, his eyelids finally opening and showing some signs of life.

"And give me back my scepter!" Satyre said. "Where is it?" he asked, grabbing Aaron by the neck and holding the sword steady.

"Renn muh pawcket," Aaron mumbled through his puffy mouth.

Satyre wasn't the least bit shy about touching another man too close to the center. He put his sword down and reached into the boy's pants, tearing them apart and leaving him in undergarments. He found the scepter in the torn clump of fabric and grabbed it with a strong clasp. He grabbed his shield from his bodyguard and screwed the scepter carefully back into the shield on its hollow bottom.

Mary walked into the center of the commotion, following her father and shaking her head. "And what good will it do, dad? Killing him? Just to prove a point? Just for revenge?"

"Because he is not a real man. And he's a coward!"

## The Evil Princess

“Yes. But I’m the one he hurt. Not you.”

Satyre left the shield with the guard and walked back over to Aaron seeing red.

“If you do this...you’ll accomplish nothing,” Mary said. “You’ll start a war. And a war after that. When does it ever end?”

“He broke a bond. He destroyed the contract. The penalty is death. Torture followed by death. And more torture. And a rather gratuitous mauling of a corpse. Or should I say, ten maulings.”

“You kill him now and you teach only revenge to these people.”

Satyre shook off her words and grabbed Aaron by the neck.

“What’s my honor...compared to the lives of innocent people?” Mary said softly. “Is it worth it? Is this what we’ve built all these years?”

“YES!” Satyre shouted.

“NO!” she replied. “If you kill him, it will be murder! A murder that I can’t approve of. A murder I will have to publicly *apologize* for. Please...please...don’t add to my humiliation.”

Satyre gradually stopped burning an eye-hole through Aaron and looked back at Mary.

“What is any of it worth? If good looks exactly the same as evil? I never asked you for anything, dad. I’ve always done what is expected of me. I won’t even ask you for your blessing because I know you’ll never give it. All I ask is that you please spare him.”

Satyre stared at his daughter, flabbergasted, but still clutching Aaron’s windpipe.

“Spare him for me,” Mary said. “If my life means anything to you at all...please don’t kill him.”

“Where is this coming from?” Satyre said with a huff. “The witch?”

“You. You and mom are the ones who taught me that peace is all that matters. That peace is God’s plan. That everyone is tired of fighting. If you kill him, it’s all for nothing. It’s all lies.”

Satyre grumbled something in response. He tilted his head and stared at Aaron as if ready to strike. But then he relented, slowly unhanding him and letting him fall to the ground.

A vacant expression on his face, Satyre bent down to meet Aaron’s eyes. “You owe her your life.”

Aaron was conscious and barely able to speak but he certainly said a mouthful.

“Rrrrrrhank rou!”

“*Thank her, not me.* Her mercy is the only reason your head and crown isn’t decorating my wall.”

Aaron's monstrously inflamed face peered over to Mary. Barely able to sit up, he made sure Mary saw his eyes. "Rrrrhank rrrrou."

"Thank you," Mary said to her father.

"Don't thank me," he said in rage. "I've done you one favor. Now take that witch and get out of my kingdom. Don't ever come back."

Mary's eyes welled up and her lip quivered. She couldn't bring herself to nod but she bowed in shame.

"You love this witch..." He shook his head in disgust.

"You've abandoned your faith. You've abandoned your God. You've abandoned your family."

Mary wept quietly as Satyre stormed out of the hospital ward, just as poor Alpha Godmother entered the room having missed most of the fight.

"Oh dear! Did he fall off a horse or something?"

"Please tend to his wounds," Mary said.

"Raaahhhoooo..." Aaron said, leaving Mary to a chorus of thankful lispy maunderings as she ran out of the palace in tears. Grief, the reward of every noble intention.

Salem waited in the tower, having heard of unfolding drama and her father's escorting of Aaron to the ward, she decided to skip the live show but to read the reviews afterward. However, when Mary came back she seemed drained of all soul. "Hey. Feeling better?"

Before Mary could answer Salem held up her cat-in-a-bandage. "Look who's up and around?"

The cat remained silent but looked playful and alert.

"Depends on your definition of better," Mary said tiredly. "My father just beat Aaron halfway to death. I told him not to do it. And then he disowned me and told me to leave."

"Oh. Well, sorry I missed all that drama," Salem said, putting the cat down. "I could have provided color commentary. *Uppercut! Oh look at Aaron go down! That's gotta hurt!*"

"Salem..." Mary started softly, followed by a loaded pause.

"Uh oh. Whenever you use my name it's always bad news."

"I really don't know what to do here," Mary said. "How can I leave my family? How can I let two kingdoms go to war, all over me? Maybe I won't marry Aaron, but maybe...maybe we should cool it for a while."

"Cool it? So...so what? I guess a promise from you doesn't mean zilch. Is that what it is? You promised me. You promised me you

wouldn't..." Salem sighed and exhaled long and hard. "And all because of Aaron? So he reacts and you follow his lead? What, did you fall in love with your abuser?"

"No, not Aaron. My father. It's everything. My beliefs. My responsibilities. My entire worldview. I don't understand your way of thinking, Salem. I don't even know what to do to make you happy. This relationship doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that," Salem said, folding her arms. "You keep making excuses. All that crap about being family. Such a *liar*. Don't ever use the word *family* with me again."

"I deserve that. I know. And I know I'm full of it and am just like everyone else who disappointed you. I know. It's what I do, Salem, I fail. I disappoint..."

"No, no. Here's what you do. You keep running away from your problems. Keep running home to mommy and daddy and waiting for them to fix everything. That's what you do."

"I'm sorry!"

"Yeah, I know." She mock-smiled. "You say that a lot, don't you? You're sorry. You're sorry. You're sorry you're such a chicken and are always hiding your feelings for me. Well, I can't keep doing this either, honey. You know?"

Both women fought back tears, neither willing to be the weak one, the one so easily broken because there really was nothing better going on than this simple relationship.

"I can't be the strong one all the time," Salem said, tightening her brow and raising her voice. "I can't keep brushing off every last bitchy thing you do to me. I can't have you jerk me around like this. I'm a mean ole' witch, Candy Cane. So just tell me it's over and mean it this time. I'm tough. I can take it. But I can't have this back and forth thing going on. I hate being lied to. I don't want to be with someone who's going to do that all the time. Okay?"

"I know. I'm sorry!" Mary said, the first to roll a tear.

Salem stayed strong, turning away from her face. "So just go. Or better yet, I'll go. I don't like this stuffy place anyway. It's too 'red.' Red is an obnoxious color anyway."

Salem stormed out, grabbing her kitty and marching away.

Mary reached out to touch her hand, but Salem snapped back, losing her grip. "Get away from me! You spare Aaron's life and have the nerve to break up with me? Hell, no! You know what your problem is? You're like the flu, Mary. You make my stomach hurt. You give me sniffles. You give me fever. But in the end, you're just way easy to catch."

Salem ignored another “I’m sorry” exclamation from Mary and stared her down cold. “Yeah, maybe someday, a long time from now, you’ll find yourself alone and with not a friend left in the world. And then you’ll be sorry. Then you’ll wish you had given this thing a chance. You’ll finally stop running. You’ll want someone to love you, to take care of you. And I’ll be gone. And you’ll be melancholy and miserable.”

“*Yeah! Yeah!*” Mary sang back. “Because that’ll be something new, right?” Mary bawled, running away from her first love and, as always, hiding her face from the world, that Cruel World with its constant demands and volatile emotion.

But Mary and Salem weren’t the only ones feeling weak and despondent at that moment. King Satyre had been watching everything, still possessing Salem’s magic mirror and treating it as his new favorite forbidden toy. He did feel a quiver of illicit excitement, knowing he was dabbling into magic, practices explicitly condemned by every priest and god.

Away from the commotion, away from the honor and humiliation of the public stage, Satyre had a chance to observe his daughter and the witch in their time of mourning. He felt godlike himself—what it might be like to look down on the depressed souls and feel their pain and insecurity, the very life he created, only to see it regret its own existence. Never before had he ever seen his daughter “away from him”, in absence of his commanding presence. Without a god, without a father and without a girlfriend-witch, apparently, as she opted to stay in her quarters inside the Crimson Palace, telling Queen Lilith that she ended her relationship with the evil witch.

Though Mary stayed with her family voluntarily, Queen Lilith had officially declared her a prisoner, confining her to the dark and quiet quarters she desired already, in hopes of placating the angry Gold kingdom and reassuring her own kind.

Not that Mary had any intention of going out, or seeing Salem again. Instead, she cried for days, sleeping and barely eating, stuffing her face in a pillow as a hobby. She looked terrible, even by a father’s standards, her makeup smearing all over her wet face.

It was the sort of harrowing sight a parent ought never see, realizing deep down all of this grief was the consequence of his judgment. He had not only deadly weapons but great power in his words. His condemnation of Mary’s choice was the equivalent of a lashing, something less than Aaron’s violence, but equally brutalizing.

He felt a pang, a twitch and shot his eyes away from the mirror.

He wondered for a moment if God really was communicating something to him, requesting that Mary be a sacrificial little lamb, little lamb, little lamb—some sort of test of faith. Or was it possible God had been silent and his own superstition of witches drove this mission?

He looked back into the mirror, the mirror seemingly following his drifting mind and giving him a brand new scene to look at.

Salem was there, sitting in the corner of her cave and burning incense, alone again, naturally and wiping away her tears. She was talking to herself again, self-identifying witch behavior for sure.

However, her soliloquy hit uncomfortably close to home for Satyre, a man of great faith and even heavier doubt.

“Heya mom, dad,” Salem said, trying her best to take the usual whine and snark out of her voice and speak honestly to the universe, hoping somewhere out there in the collective consciousness, a certain warlock and a black magic solitaire were on file and accessible via some type of intergalactic transfer system.

“I know you’re long gone and all...and you’ve never talked to me ever since you died. I don’t expect you to answer me now.”

Salem laughed away her agony. “But hey, I really could use a sign right now. I thought this was what I wanted. I thought I had a plan. Now, I don’t know what to think. I don’t know how much longer I can go on before I just...”

She shrugged, temporarily forgetting that ghosts don’t have much use for emphatic gestures. “Give up? I can cast a million spells...I can fly and got the telekinesis up to the wazoo.” She sighed, throwing her hat to the floor. “But since I lost the resurrection doll, I can’t even bring you back from the dead for one lousy conversation! Like an idiot, I just gave it away to some pretty girl that came along one day. And now, I still can’t find someone to love. What good is any of it, then? And why won’t you answer me—*dammit!*”

She toppled over the incense tables and yanked her hair. Only her black cat heard her pain and proceeded to assume common cat reassurance protocol: he snuggled his little cat head up against her knee. He kneaded on her shoe. He drooled, just a bit, to show he cared. He even nibbled on her ankle, a little love bite, which she looked like she needed about now.

Satyre put the mirror down and contemplated all of what he had seen, not just in the magical scene unfolding, but in his entire life. The blood. The valor. The honor. Indeed, what did it all mean when his only daughter was kept as a willing prisoner under his roof? Everybody wept and bled in heart that night. Meanwhile, a man like Aaron walked home free, destined to find another wife and a better opportunity,

always landing in roses.

But Aaron wasn't looking exceptionally well at the moment, given his swelling cheeks, broken nose and protruding puffy sores around his eyes. A mess of a man and looking like a human barbecue plate, his facial expression remained distinct.

His eyes glowed in bitterness and malcontent. The rhythmic and terrifying sound of his colossal army sounded and to Aaron the sounds of their marching, always in sync and in perfect cohesion, became a hypnotic trance. Their stomping, clapping and spear-clenching sounded a lot like drums, while their whispers of admiration among the soldier for the Prince's great sacrifice sounded like base.

Aaron himself was the perennial superstar, riding on his horse and gripping his sword for the whole journey, a phallic reminder of his unlimited power. He felt absolved. He was the Cadabra Idol who gave the people every last extreme emotion they craved, whether it was cruel and excessive violence, or unexpected compassion. Whatever Cadabra was or was to become, it resulted from him. His efforts bequeathed action. He was not merely a man, but a symbol to the people, all of the people of every damned kingdom under the sun. He was the alpha and the omega, the very pulse of humanity. He inspired others to step up. Women everywhere wanted to have his babies. Men everywhere wanted to die for him, surrender their wives and let him impregnate their worthless incubator bodies with his royal seed. That much was obvious to Aaron. The princesses from two other kingdoms and even those freaks in the Outskirts all wanted his body. That's all of any of these meaningless people talked about, was the length and girth of his Royal Member, of that there was little doubt.

The fact that his face was bloody and bruised from Satyre's beating was nothing to be ashamed at, for when Aaron bled, he bled for the sins of the people. He said this would happen, that evil ones would pierce his face and humiliate him, but that it would be for his glory. For he loved Cadabra so much he allowed his body to be sacrificed so that everyone might grow in knowledge of him and his self-sacrificing spirit. He was the Good Son, the very Face of God in human form, that is, the lesser known Male God, the masculine version of Fen Mien I that many Gold churches were already teaching from the pulpit. Aaron suffered his bruises so that the people of Cadabra could be saved.

And all that was well and good. There was just one small thing.

Rivulet's horse rode briskly after a heel hit from the spurs, keeping up with Aaron's steed. He had been tending to Amram's fury over the past day, making sure to let Satyre's act of war known. Upon rejoining

## The Evil Princess

the Guard, he found Aaron's apparent retreat perplexing. It certainly did not seem to be the "Gold Standard" customary reaction for those who challenged the all-powerful House of Opula and their widely publicized, military-industrial complex that kept Cadabra profitable. Rivulet smiled in cheeky admiration.

"You're welcome, by the way, Your Majesty. For saving your life."

Aaron did a quick side glance to Rivulet, not bothering to give him a full turn.

"If I hadn't broken Satyre's trance, you'd be dead right now. It was too late for the soldiers to save you. He had you by the throat. But...I knew that if he took you to see Mary, *she* would spare you. Women. They don't tolerate violence well, you know. Not when they know the ugliness in front of them is *all their fault*."

Aaron frowned and flared his nostrils pulling in the reins harshly and making the horse feel his own inward pain.

"Of course, most kings would not have accepted what happened," Rivulet innocently remarked, smiling so hard he gave himself hideous looking dimples. "To be saved by a *woman*. To be upstaged by a witch. To be beaten and dishonored by an old man. But not you. Not you."

Rivulet grinned in pseudo admiration and nodded towards Aaron, all in good faith. "Perhaps this will be your legacy. Aaron, the Tolerant. The King of Good People." The more Rivulet talked, the lower his voice became, soothing the king into a hypnotic trance of inadequacy and overcompensation.

"The king who turns the other cheek. The king who sacrifices his own reputation for peace. Mmm, quite a change."

Aaron's face vibrated in rage as his eyes, barely discernible through his battered face, shot daggers—not at Rivulet who only spoke the uncomfortable truth—but at the road ahead. The road to progress. The road to peace and tolerance.

"Well. Come what may," Rivulet said with an avuncular laugh. "They may not appreciate you today. But *tomorrow*, their grandsons and granddaughters will look back and appreciate your non-violent resistance. I am sure of it. History will remember you **KINDLY**."

That word, kindly. Aaron never cared for it and Rivulet used it only as an obscenity. The rhythmic stomping of the soldiers, combined with the pounding and looping word "kindly" finally jolted Aaron into full pullback, stopping the horse from taking another hoof forward.

He stared ahead, hot with envy. "Turn around."

"Oh? Whatever for?" Rivulet asked, rolling his head piously.

"This is all Salem's fault," Aaron said.

“She stole her from me. She warped Mary’s mind with her magic. Her fucking little voodoo doll. I’m going to do God’s will and punish her...severely.”

Aaron yanked the bit on his horse and bit his lower in expectation. “Until she begs to die.”

Rivulet nodded in satisfaction.

“That seems fair. Oh, but one thing. Are you sure that you can handle her by yourself? She does seem to have some trickery up her sleeve. One man cannot defeat the Devil alone, can he?”

Before Aaron could reply his men, having overheard the conversation, interjected with patriotic sentiment the likes of which only joined the orchestra of marching feet and clanking weapons.

“We will all serve our prince!”

“Aaron is not a man but a God!”

“Aaron is the Son of God!”

“The witch ought to beg for His Mercy!”

“Cower in fear at the foot of Aaron, the Divine King!”

“God in the form of man!”

The soldiers hollered to the point of rioting, intent on killing somebody that night. In perfect procession and organization they turned out and set a path backward to claim the glory Aaron had lost.

Aaron half-smiled at his men’s allegiance, then back to Rivulet for one final thought.

“There is no God. But they will worship me. They can *believe in me.*”

## SONG 7

### “NOT A MAN BUT A GOD”

**We’ve waited and wasted, worried and wheeling  
We wept while we wandered with you  
Wallowing, wondering, wailing on a wall  
Wanting your wisdom to work through  
When we were waving and when we were walking  
When we went wicked with war  
With a wink and word, you warbled to the world  
Wonderful White Man, our Lord**

**Not a man  
But a God  
Respect Prince Aaron’s great name**

The Evil Princess

God is not dead  
God speaks through Him

Faith is forbidden, so flailing and farfetched  
Frail and flighty we figured  
Fighting for freedom but finding fantasy  
Faithfully frocking dead fixtures  
Funny when fortune falls flat on the floor, we  
Fall faint, flip over and fret  
Forgive us forever for forsaking our Father  
Finally firm, we won't forget

Not a man  
But a God  
All hail the Prince of Peace  
He's proved himself  
Come, worship Him

Change is coming so cherish the chosen one  
Charge for his cherubic charity  
Challenge him not, the chastest of chaplains, why  
Choose to chew on his chivalry  
Chiming aboard chariots and chains, we chase  
Cheeky charlatans who chastise us  
Chill them, choke them, char them, chuck them until they  
Chant in chance please circumcise us

Not a man  
But a God  
Aaron's greater than your hate  
Larger than life  
We believe in Him

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## Chapter 20

### Burn the Witch (A Love Story)

*“Death settles everything. You win all arguments. You lose all arguments. And your opponents finally listen to you.”*

- Attributed to a witch named Agnes

**S**ALEM!  
The name bellowed and reverberated through the stones of the witch’s cave. Salem hadn’t heard the thunderous approaching army, because Aaron had the ideas of taking only twenty-five of his most trusted men, commanded the full army of one thousand to wait an hour before leaving the campsite.

The moment the word was spoken, the animals developed a sour feeling in their stomachs. The cat, having just taken a dose of magic dust, spoke freely.

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“Oh dear. Maybe...maybe you should hide. Maybe we should all run away,” he said sinking lower to the floor.

Salem however, only looked provoked at the thought, the audacity of the man to not only return to her home but to use her name.

“Hide? Naaw, that doesn’t sound like me. Kick the guy’s ass and feed it to him, that sounds more like me.”

Salem casually walked outside her cave, expecting the worst and met the angry faces of one thousand armored men, quite short of her initial guess.

“I’m insulted, guys. Only a small praetorian circle to protect the Prince? What...my devil powers not doing it for you anymore?”

Salem ran outside and sprung into the air in the range of three men tall, surrounded by green flare and sparks. The unnatural act elicited some gasps from the superstitious soldiers.

“Oh bring it on!” Salem shouted to the men below. “I need to take my frustrations out on somebody. That’s going to be you, Klots.”

Aaron smiled at the threat, standing a safe ten men behind Salem’s kicking range. “You know it’s sad,” he announced. “In another life, perhaps even in this life, we could have been best of friends, Salem. That is such a pretty name.”

“I would never be friends with the likes of you!”

Aaron nodded in acceptance, still smiling. “As you wish. But I promised the people of Cadabra I would kill all the witches. They’re afraid of you. Me, not so much. I know you’re just a woman with a few tricks up her brassiere. But you do cast quite the love spell, I’ll give you that.”

“Maybe you should be afraid of me, choir boy. I’m a heathen. I’m the Devil’s Whore, haven’t you heard?” Salem’s pupils disappeared and her eyes went black.

“We don’t negotiate with horrorists,” Aaron said, not falling back as the other soldiers, who were cowering at her magic. “Besides, what can the Devil do to me? I come bearing the power of God.”

Aaron’s men, tremble though they did, launched into an attack. They charged Salem with their swords but tripped over their own feet when the grass below materialized into a shifting carpet.

Salem looked over to her left, eye-dragging a loose boulder about three yards in size over towards her. She motioned with her hand, making a grabbing and holding motion and readied to bowl. With the first step the boulder moved out and the second step it moved down, taking it to the third step where it moved back and then the fourth step where it came crashing down.

Unfortunately for Aaron's men, the boulder rolled straight into their pack, knocking each one down except for the spare prince.

One soldier tried to sneak up behind her, but Salem lowered herself to the ground giving him first shot. He swung his sword slowly, giving her time to gesture with her right and left hand, invisibly swatting his sword and shield away. Defenseless the man cried out and made the X-symbol.

"The Devil!"

Salem made devil horns with her index fingers and stuck her tongue out. "The devil? I taught that kid everything he knows!"

She pointed two fingers at the man and within seconds his head had warped and mangled into that of a pig's. The soldier oinked in horror, running in circles and rolling around in the dirt, because after all, what else could one do at that point?

Salem's new broomstick was a few minutes late in joining the melee but arrive the little wooden tyke did and it started beating another soldier over the head with the dull end of its shaft.

"Help me God!" another soldier screamed, which only provoked Salem's impatience.

"You are such a weird little man," she said, as she blew dust into his face. He began shrinking, inches by seconds, into a dwarf, then even smaller into fairy size.

The tiny soldier shrieked at a set of new obstacles: a giant cat looking for a scratching post, a hungry rat eyeing a big piece of cheese and a towering red-eyed vampiric-looking bat monster whose vengeance knew no bounds.

Another soldier screamed as he ran at Salem from behind waving his deadly club. Another second and he might have killed her, of course, since she froze him in time with a raised palm, she had plenty of time to dream of a suitable punishment.

She folded her arms and blinked, giving the soldier a brand new wardrobe:

A darling genie costume with pink bra and panties and holding a purse. The soldier shouted holy terror, running away with bouncing man boobs.

Mary had been watching the scene herself through the magic mirror her father surrendered to her. Laughing and applauding at every strike, she watched intently as her heroine fought valiantly, as great a warrior as her own father.

Having vanquished most of Aaron's guard, she eyed Rivulet next, always delighted to beat an ugly stick-man.

## The Evil Princess

Rivulet stood his ground and grabbed a black book, forcing her to look at it. He began chanting an archaic language, summoning the power of God's wrath.

"Show respect to the good book, witch!"

"Oh please," she whined. "Does that ever work on anyone?"

With a head tilt, the book jumped away from Rivulet's grasp and opened up, slapping his face repeatedly with its thick and torn pages.

"I command you, Devil, come out of this disgusting witch!" Rivulet cried to the heavens.

Salem's anger boiled to the point where her present shape as a hot punky witch wasn't enough to contain her. She took a deep breath and held her breath until she started turning green. With every tense moment, her body began expanding, reaching paranormal, then demonic and finally mythic proportions.

Salem had always wanted to turn herself into a dragon, as most witches learned this spell in their rebellious twenties and considered a bragging point among the most jocular members of the coven. But Salem was never one for picking up all the details. Whereas most witches persevered until they got it right, Salem seemed satisfied with a half-ass job. Therefore, when she tried to transform herself into a dragon to battle Rivulet, her form came out strange and underwhelming—looking for like a giant purple eel with a handsome face and makeup, more so than a terrifying dragon.

"Now you have to do deal with me, tubehead!" the eel cursed. "Oh, that is, me *and all the powers of Hell!*"

Her evil cackling only lasted a moment, as she quickly realized the spell only half worked and a giant eel with a dull mouth, fairly big breasts and fishy-eyed expression didn't look so menacing.

"Aww dammit," the eel said. "I must have forgotten the four fire drakes or something."

Still, the eel made use of its huge tail and swatted five men off their feet, crashing hard to the floor.

Rivulet tried to run away but Eel-Salem caught him in her mouth and electrocuted his body, leaving him a smoking, hair-frazzled mess.

"Have mercy..." Rivulet whispered.

"I'm not done with you by a long shot," the eel said.

"I have always been kind to witches, you know."

"Oh?" the eel asked in disbelief. "Well, your bad luck, because I have always been randomly bitchy to rich Gold Family soldiers. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to turn you into a newt."

"Your magic can't transform me if I have faith," he shot back.

“Aaactually it can. The only reason it wouldn’t work is if you’re dead. Which is an offer I’m definitely willing to consider.”

Rivulet suddenly extended his hands, sending a handful of garlic into the eel’s eyes.

“Seriously? Garlic?” the creature roared. She or “it” laughed so hard, the scaly body began losing shape.

A giddy Salem lost concentration at Rivulet’s poor mythological understanding and within seconds lost her mass. She slowly began shrinking back down into her human body, certainly not as powerful as a dragon, but still easy on the eyes.

“Now look what you made me do,” she said, still grinning. “Your lame ass vampire remedy was so funny I lost the dragon spell.”

“That was supposed to be a dragon?”

“Don’t be a douche,” she snapped back, extending two fingers and knocking Rivulet on his back. “I have dyslexia, it doesn’t always work perfectly. I thought the eel thing was plenty scary.”

Salem took her time as she walked towards Rivulet pounding her fist into her hand, her licorice nails never looking so intimidating. “Oh, I’m going to enjoy pummeling you, banana-head. I think I’ll make something extra special for you.”

“Don’t eat me, please...” he said with a faux begging face.

“Eat you? Nah, but maybe I’ll turn you into a psychoactive toad. For purely vengeful reasons of course...”

“*Salem. Such a pretty name.*”

“Eh?”

She turned around too late. As soon as she rotated her body around, Aaron had tackled her to the floor.

“Aahh! Get off of me!”

“Quickly!” Rivulet told Aaron, who was struggling to pin her arms down with his knees.

Rivulet handed Aaron a bottle of red witch’s potion. He pulled out the cork and brought it to Salem’s tightening mouth. “It’s time for one last kiss, Salem,” Aaron taunted.

He reached down and pried her mouth open, forcing the bottle head down her throat.

Salem gagged and glugged, tearing up. She couldn’t spew it back up on account of Aaron shoving the bottle neck down her throat.

“What...what is this?” she said after ingesting the whole bottle.

“Are you a fan of wine, little witch?” Rivulet said with a creepy smile. “This one goes down really hard.”

“Mary told me you don’t eat meat,” Aaron added.

## The Evil Princess

“Don’t worry. There are no animal products in this one. Just a ‘little bit of poison’ to soothe your Hell-bound soul. A specially made poisonous blend, created by one of your own. Bianca Natalie. Ring a bell, Witch? And this potion was surrendered to me willingly by one of your own comrades. Well, I should clarify it took a few hours of *convincing*. Want to know what’s in it? Authentic witch guts blended with holy water, acid and striga. Its properties are oaky, full-bodied, floral, acidic...and just enough varietal flavors to render a witch powerless and...*kill her*.”

Aaron relented and stood up, allowing Salem to jump to her feet.

She stood up and started spitting. She spit so hard she sent Aaron flying several yards away and landing hard on the ground.

Just as she gathered her footing, her knees gave out and she crumbled to the floor. “What...what did you do to me...what was that...”

Weakening by the second and her vision blurring into fog, she began crawling away, using every bit of strength to try and make a futile escape. “Aaagghh...” Salem choked and struggled to speak, purple tar rising in her throat like bile. “You didn’t...”

“I did,” Aaron said proudly. “I win. I always win. All you will ever have in this life is my compassion. The compassion of the upper class. How does that make you feel, you poor, dirty, wretched girl?”

Salem coughed and began heaving, holding her guts in pain. “You couldn’t...beat me one on one...you had to cheat.”

“I think witch brew versus witch power seems fair to me. But...” He grabbed her by the chin and stared into her eyes. “It doesn’t matter anymore. You’ve taken something from me. Now...I just need to see you die. And I’m going to stuff your corpse and keep it in my bedroom so you can see, for the rest of my life, the taming of Mary Melancholy. Every single night I’m going to let you watch while I break her. How do you like that? That’s the closure I need, for losing the one true love of my life.”

Aaron shoved her face down into the ground, meshing Salem’s own puke and spittle with chunks of mud.

With every bit of life, Salem tried to telekinetically grab her broomstick. But Aaron stepped on her hand, crunching every last morsel of hope.

“Owwww. You...you...”

Rivulet couldn’t help but dance and shake his fists in glee pondering the possibilities. “Oh what to do now,” he said with a smile, looking at Aaron. “You know, sire, a *good* king would surely let the poor witch go. He would be merciful. He would feel pity.”

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

“But I will be a *great king*,” Aaron said. “Start a fire. Wait until the rest of the army arrives, so they can all watch it and report to the farthest ends of Cadabra.”

Rivulet smiled at Salem, his excited and beady little eyes becoming so thin they looked like needle points. “It’s just like old times. Your repentance ceremony is going to be so lovely.”

Aaron stroked Salem’s hair, as if comforting his fallen foe, or even a recusant family member. “You know Salem, they say Love is like burning coals to the soul. Love is a ring of fire. And heartbreak...well, heartbreak is the greatest burn of all. It’s like being smoked alive. I want you to feel my pain. To understand how much you’ve hurt me.”

Salem heard him loud and clear but merely shut her eyes. Nothing more had to be said. Aaron had won, as his family usually did.

To the fainting witch’s surprise, Aaron suddenly stopped his harassment in favor of humming a sad little ditty. Considering that Salem was quite the chain-singer herself, he knew the irony wouldn’t be lost. But whether this was one last taunt to a fallen competitor, or his own self-pitying lamentation to royal unhappiness, only Aaron himself knew.

*Somebody stole my gal  
Somebody stole my pal  
Somebody came out and took her away  
She didn't even say she was leaving today  
And Gee! How I hoped she would come to me  
Throw her arms around me and comfort me  
And see her broken hearted lonesome pal  
Oh Dear Lord  
Somebody stole my gal*

Mary panicked, finally getting out of bed and grabbing her head in desperation. “Oh no! No! Salem...Mom! Mom!”

Wearing only her mid-calf lace and knitted blue nightgown of sorrow with a scoop neckline, unfortunately unnamed, she left the room and the magic mirror behind, the last image being Aaron’s crooning face. She found Lilith a short distance away and fell to her knees.

“Mom! It’s Aaron! He’s going to kill Salem! He’s going to kill her!”

“Calm down, child. What did you see?”

“He fed her poison.”

“I’m sure she can handle herself,” Lilith said torpidly.

## The Evil Princess

“No, mother, no! You don’t understand! He fed her poison. She won’t get away. He’s going to kill her.” Mary grabbed her mother’s arms and squeezed, crying and gagging. “You know he’ll have no compassion...he’s going to torture and kill her.”

“It is out of your hands!” Lilith said. “Your father is not going to send soldiers up for this. Salem made her own choices and now she has to pay the price—”

“If you won’t help me then I’ll have to go alone!”

“You will do no such thing,” Lilith said. “If Aaron is that violent that’s the last place you need to be right now.”

“Please let me go. Let me go!”

“No. You have no battle training. No weapons. You can’t do anything. I’m not going to sacrifice my only daughter because of a tragedy. Guards are standing at the gates. You will not leave this palace tonight.”

“I can reason with him.”

“With him?” Lilith said indignantly. “No, you can’t reason with *him*.”

“Mom, I love her. I do. I can’t leave her like this. I have to try.”

“Let it go,” was all Lilith could think to say.

“You’ll meet another...uh, *somebody*. But you have to let this one go.”

The thousand-man army of Aaron had arrived and Salem heard the unnerving decibel-crunching march herself, as every last man came to taunt her and take a seat for the witch burning event of a century. Their sadism has been whetted for weeks. Aaron’s war on witches was the talk of all Cadabra and people from four kingdoms had begun crying bloody murder for bloody murder.

These people wanted blood. It had been months since they had killed anybody and felt downright impotent at the lack of brutality. They were trained for war and for weeks they waited impatiently while they were humiliated by Mary and watched helplessly as their leader was beaten by a Red and inferior King. This spectacle was long overdue. Besides, this was no innocent woman, they figured. This was a genetic freak, a sickening mishap of nature preying on the youth, doing god knows what to them inside their loathsome caves. This was an evil deviation that required immediate destruction from the human species, for the betterment of all humanity. To protect the children and their mothers that might well be seduced into devil worship. To contradict such a humanistic attitude was nothing less than sacrilege against common decency, regardless of whether “God” played into it.

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A soldier heralded the announcement following an exuberant trumpet call. “Let it be known that the Kingdom of Gold is the heart and soul of all Cadabra. We have the largest army of four kingdoms. The greatest wealth. And we accept great responsibility for this blessing of power. We have made it clear to every corner of Cadabra that anyone who would plot against our children, our women and try to harm their innocence would not be peacefully tolerated. The Kingdom of Gold will not provide any safe havens for witches who threaten our people, nor will we allow such complicit support from anyone else. After ongoing negotiations with the three royal houses, Cadabra stands united against witchcraft and black magic. Now behold what happens to those who would corrupt our children.”

Salem waited as Aaron’s men laid firewood all along a stake and doused it with extract from rock strata. She was held carefully by four soldiers and bound by rope.

They brought her in front of the assembly to look upon her fate.

“Burn her!”

“Burn the witch!”

“Rid Cadabra of this pervert!”

“Kill her in the same of God!”

The crowd of a thousand cheered and Aaron looked on in approval. Upon receiving Rivulet’s signal, they took Salem over to the stake and bound her tied hands to the tree. Tearing her black shoulder top apart and down the middle, they exposed her nakedness to the rest of the sibilating onlookers.

“Strip her bare,” Rivulet said. “But let her keep her witch’s hat. To remind us that she is sub-human. Nothing more than an animal. Deserving of no mercy, based on her sins.”

Only Aaron remained stoic amidst the party atmosphere. He never took his eyes off Salem. He wanted her to look into his face as every last inch of her body singed in the fire. The humiliation by the men may have been uncalled for any other woman, or even another witch. But for Prince Aaron’s tormentor, it was the least of which she deserved.

“Awww...” Salem said, groggy and eyeing the soldiers who began rubbing firewood together igniting small but volatile flames. She shrugged in indifference. “Well, I guess that’s that.”

Mary knew there was no way to let it go and knew that whatever Salem’s fate had to be, it had to be hers too. She was the reason Salem suffered, continually suffered and figured she didn’t want to live in a

## The Evil Princess

world that would treat an innocent so poorly. She waited until Lilith had retired to her bedroom, always a separate quarters from Satyre and separated by 50 yards—alas, that’s an entirely different and tragic story which cannot be expounded upon here—and snuck away from the palace, taking with her only a tiara, hoping its presence could somehow command the respect or at least the attention of Aaron’s “royal” army. There were no guards situated inside. Getting out would be the hard part, but she figured perhaps her name and reputation, or even her feminine wiles, could bribe the guards into cooperation.

To her surprise, when she tiptoed out to the front palace doors she saw no one stationed at all. The guards had either been sent to their quarters or were indisposed—a major break in royal protocol.

Mary was confused but relieved. She struggled with the large lock system of the doors, moving the oversized bars and latches with great exertion. Upon unfastening the padlock, the door creaked open, making considerable noise that should have alerted somebody. Nevertheless, a blessing was a blessing. She happily ran outside without a scratch and with nary a question, running as fast as she could to save her true love.

Lilith watched from the lattice windows, as a little girl scurried about in the night, looking about as helpless and foolish as one ant taking on an army. She watched as Mary shrunk before her eyes, running further into the courtyard, then into the night, until there was no trace of movement left.

She walked over to Satyre’s bedroom, kicked the door open and glared at him. The King tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep, let alone hear what his wife had to say.

“You old fool. You sent the guards home. You knew she would try this.”

Satyre mumbled and turned away, grabbing his blanket. “Let it be, woman.”

“You are a cretin. An ignoramus of the lowest esteem. And a jabberwocky of astonishing stupidity.”

“It has been suggested once or twice.”

“You are an addlebrained, clodhopping twit. I’d just as well have married a warthog. A disgusting, smelly, violent and bloated warthog.”

“I’m sure there’s a gaseous warthog somewhere out there who would be happy to take you, woman. Now leave me be.”

“You have sentenced your daughter to death. You know that?”

“If this is how she wants to die, then let her. She is not a child,” Satyre answered.

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

“She can’t bargain with Aaron. He will kill them both. You know that?”

“Did I not try to kill Aaron with my own sword? She spared him. Not me.”

Lilith huffed and puffed until she stomped her feet and proceeded to leave, in extreme discourtesy, one might add.

Satyre mumbled, his words trailing off into quiet prattle, until neither Lilith nor the guards could hear him.

Only Fen Mien herself, as the old expression goes, knew what Satyre said in a rare moment of weakness behind closed doors.

“She wants protection from a witch. Then let her magic save her. Let her magic save us all.”

It was all the old king could do, to give Mary the freedom she begged for and which she used to travel to Salem’s abode, figuring the stake must be set up near the proximity. The distance was long and she had no idea if she would make it back in time. But she had to try something. She clutched the magic mirror, hoping it had one fantastic spell left inside of it, all the while praying to whatever God might listen to her plight.

Meanwhile, Aaron was fanning the flames of his hate and warming his hands all the same, inches away from Salem who was just starting to feel the burn on her feet. He stepped closer to read her official condemnation as a kingdom dissident.

“You are sentenced to be burned at the stake as penance for your crimes against children, against Cadabra and against God. Let it never be said that I didn’t light your fire.”

The mob laughed, jeered and whistled, craving more entertainment.

“We are doing the work of God,” Aaron announced, having memorized a witch eulogy. “We are cleansing our land of heretics, witches and devils. Those who would corrupt our daughters and sons. Those who would kill innocent people in the name of their ‘Mother Earth’. May we deal with them harshly on earth just as harshly as God will in Hell.”

To justify the brutality, the soldiers brought out a Gold Kingdom priest who was more than happy to sing about the witch’s trial and execution, in a particularly lovely singing voice in a robe of heavenly white mixed with solid gold.

**SONG 8**  
**“BURN THE WITCH”**

From the bowels of perversity  
Comes a creature so foul  
What will you say when your child  
Is caught during her prowling?  
Will you show her your compassion  
Or look the other way  
Or protect your dear young ones by  
Killing before they're prey

Burn the witch my people  
And do the will of God  
If she kills your children  
How can you blame your God  
There is no tolerance  
For those who have no God

Don't feel sorry for what is cruel  
See through her fake wall  
She who molests your children is  
Not a woman at all

She's the Devil in disguise – Look  
A demon possesses her soul  
Those who are subhuman  
Deserve but fiery coals

Burn the witch my people  
Uphold the word of God  
Those stealing innocence  
Will not be spared by God  
If you let a rapist live  
You'll too be judged by God

Ignore her cries, she feels no pain  
It's all an act of craft  
She has hurt so many others  
And all she did was laugh

**What will you say to families  
Whose children rot in Hell  
Let the flames consume and burn her  
And breathe that dead witch smell**

**Burn the witch Cadabra  
Call the Devil a liar  
If you side with baby killers  
Please join her in the fire  
There is no mercy for  
Witches without a soul**

**Burn the bitch my soldiers  
Protect your wives and child  
She deserves this torture  
If God's name she did revile  
If we do not kill her  
She'll just come back again**

**Burn the witch make her scream  
She has been judged by God  
Watch her die, abuse her  
It's war approved by God  
Burn the witch, burn the witch  
Make sacrifice to God**

“Aaahhh...” Salem groaned, feeling numbness in her feet and searing pain traveling upward. “Okay this hurts...this hurts...”

The mob of soldiers noticed green mist rising up and green-colored flames starting to spread. Salem may have been dying, but she was dying a witch's death, not merely a woman's.

“Look! She really is a witch!” one said.

“Burn the demons out of her!” another cried.

“You die so interestingly, Salem,” Aaron said, steepling with his fingers.

“Screw you...Aaaah...” she gasped and squirmed, as the flames rose to her legs.

“I was nice to you. I tried to reason with you. But you took what was mine. I am Aaron of the House of Opula, the Kingdom of Gold. God speaks through us. And I love Mary more than you ever will.”

## The Evil Princess

Salem took a break from groaning to laugh heartily right in the prince's face. "You're an annoying monkey boy is what you are. Seriously, do you ever shut the hell up?"

"This is what you say with your last words? Why not beg for forgiveness? Why not ask for God's mercy?"

"I don't want God's mercy," she replied. "I don't need your God's forgiveness. I am who I am. I am Salem of the House of *My Big Ass*. And I've been killed way better before!"

"Really?"

"Yeaah! Aaaaahhhh!" she moaned in pain again as the fire spread and green mist filled the sky. "No woman in her right mind would ever be with you. King? Don't make me laugh!"

"Keep talking. It just makes the pain worse."

"You will never be a king. You'll be dead in a year," Salem prophesied with a cackling face. "Your own men don't trust you. Everybody knows you're weak...aaahhhh!"

"Repent of your evil ways, witch! Beg forgiveness and scream God's name."

"No way..."

"Say God's name," Aaron commanded. "Just say you believe in God."

"God is a whiny little bitch just like you...Aaaahhhhhh!"

Aaron came dangerously close to the flames, sensing her rebellion, craving nothing more than to hear his name come from her dying lips.

"Salem...please. I don't want to see you die. Just say maybe there is possibility that God exists. Maybe there really is a loving God somewhere out there."

"No..."

"After all, look at the marvels of creation around us. How can we believe that a superior intelligence, a loving creator, didn't make all of this for us? Just say it. God probably exists. There could be a loving God that cares about you."

"Get the hell out..." she muttered, shutting her eyes in pain.

"All you have to do is say that God might exist. That there is a slight possibility he used evolution to bring about our people. That intelligent design is possible and that no one can disprove God. That's all you have to say. If you repent and humble yourself just a little bit...you can get out of here alive. We can all go home."

He smiled. "*And all you have to do is say my name. Because God works through me.*"

Desperate, dying and exhaling rapidly, Salem opened her eyes and met his. "Uhhh...okay...your name...is...A-A-A-A--"

He listened and smiled, turning his ear to hear.

“Assssssssshole. Prince Asshole is your name. All hail Prince Asshole of the Kingdom of Golden Feces! If God is with you why can’t you even win the heart of one lonely princess, huh? Maybe your all loving God is too busy taking a wizz!”

Aaron glared, but Salem laughed hard, a bit wickedly, her witch cackling ecstasy helping to deaden the pain just a trifle. “Oh yeah and your mother sucks eggs in Hell!”

Mary ran as fast as she could and feeling a strange floating sensation in her legs and feet. She thought for a moment that she was flying—that the magic mirror lent her special abilities, that she might intervene in Salem’s witch trial and somehow cover a distance far too great for any lone woman to run. She ran as fast as she could, clutching the mirror and gaining what little speed she had, praying every last prayer left inside her breaking heart.

Meanwhile, the witch trial was still underway.

“What is happening to her?” a voice cried out. “She’s not burning.”

“Oh...gross!” another screamed. “Your Highness, look!”

The fire had reached Salem’s head but instead of roasting her flesh, her facial features began melting into a liquid-like substance. Her eyes sank down into stretchy oblong figures and her skin started turning gray. Her skin lost all elasticity and dark wrinkles quickly developed, as if melting into a mask, an ugly hideous witch face that terrified children in fairy tales. Green smoke and mist still radiated from her body and before long no color was left inside her—only gray muck with distorted eyes and a mouth that was still whispering, like shards of dry pottery her mouth broke open to deliver parting words.

“What is she saying?”

“Disgusting witchcraft!”

Rivulet, intrigued at the sight, addressed Aaron. “It appears as if our witch is melting, sire. What a world, mmm?”

“Her magic can’t save her from death. Fight it all you want, Salem!” Aaron said to the clay face still breathing. “You have nowhere to go but Hell.”

“Burn, witch! Die faster! Feel the grace of God!”

“*Ohhh...ohh it hurts...It really hurts...*” her voice was clear, but seemed to come from the ground, a disembodied statement haunting the area outside her crumbling mouth.

“She’s still alive?”

## The Evil Princess

“You are quite a pest, lady.” Rivulet said. “You can’t even manage to die right.”

“Listen,” one soldier said to Aaron. “She speaks her dying words.”

*“Mom...dad...Sissie? Do you hear me? I could really use a drink right about now...got some bad news...I’m just about done here...looks like we’re going round and round the cycle again...but don’t stop looking guys...we’re all going to be together again real soon...you promised me right...you promised me...”*

“Look! She prays to devils!”

“The Devil will not help you!”

“You deserve this and everlasting fire, baby killer!”

*“Think happy thoughts...send me some happy thoughts, guys,”* Salem whispered, her voice stuttering and weak.

*“I could use them now. Camping at night with my parents and sister...la la la. Casting my first spell...la la...cooking for my animal pals...and Mary. Above everything else, Mary. I forgive you, Mary. I can’t stay mad at you. You’re just too pretty, too sweet, too good to die hating...”*

Mary arrived upon the scene, just over a half hour of frantic running. She almost ran passed the location, until she stopped to investigate the screams resounding throughout the forest. She did a double take upon seeing a group of gathered soldiers, all huddling over smoke. It couldn’t be a good sign. But she also heard what she thought was a woman’s voice. Maybe there was still time, maybe she had a prayer left.

Speaking of which, she felt a queasy feeling in her stomach upon realizing that the whole distance from the Crimson Palace to the Garden of Nehustan had been covered in a remarkably short time. Perhaps a smidge of magic was on her side today. Or maybe God herself, Queen Fen Mien I, was looking out for her. She looked behind her and then forward, remembering that the first time she traveled the distance, in those lightweight blue walking boots, she walked for hours. How could she have covered that distance in such a short period of time?

“Thank you, Savior Queen,” she said, looking up to the air. She began frantically breathing as tears rolled down her cheek. It was the first real prayer she ever said aloud—not internal begging, not muffled under her breath. A real prayer to whatever was up there listening. She wondered for just a moment if her mom and dad once had a similar catharsis, once upon a time in the prime of their day, when all hope was lost. Is this the same utter despair that everyone experiences once in a lifetime? Is it an act of cowardice, a final hands-flying-in-the-air tactic

to absolve the believer of all guilt and suffering? Was it the retreat of a rational mind, like her own childhood friends might tell her and was this only a peculiar waste of breath and time?

Mary cried and put her hands through her hair, realizing that whatever was to happen was due now. If she was to die today, she would die today. Die doing the work of God, doing the duty of a good princess. Promoting peace. She would make Cadabra's founders proud.

She sighed loudly, feeling and thinking the same thing: *I can't do this.* Mary's whole body was trembling, thinking of the horrors of abuse that awaited her should she show her face in front of Aaron's camp. She wasn't just begging for Salem's life—she was asking for the same treatment. Daring Aaron, a savage king-to-be, to do his ugliest. Maybe Lilith was right. Maybe this was a mistake.

### **“A Prayer to Nothing”**

My Savior Queen:

I don't know who you are. I have never met you before, or at least you've never wanted to meet me. My parents tell me of your legend, but you well know that the children of Cadabra have no faith left to give.

***I know.***

I want to believe. I want to believe in something or someone...and yes. It is only because I am all out of options. I don't know how you got me here in time. I know for a fact that the journey from my palace to Salem's lot should have taken a lot longer than it did. Why did you help me? Why did you bring me here? Just to die? To humiliate me more? So I could personally watch the suffering I've caused? You know I can't do any magic on my own. You know Aaron will kill both of us if he gets the chance. And oh my, he's going to make it hurt so much.

***Yes, he will.***

I just hope you have one more trick up your sleeve. I need you. Good or evil, right or wrong, you can't let this happen, can you? Let an innocent woman die for my mistake? I hope whoever you are, wherever you are, that you are kind. That you would step in and do something to

help those who are suffering. To reach Aaron's black heart. Or give me just a little more time or reinforcements..."

***I can't do that.***

I know. I don't really know who I'm praying to...or even what I expect you to do. I just know that I can't do it. I can't. I don't have the courage that all of these other strong women have. I'm not smart enough to think of some brilliant master plan. I'm not feeling it. The courage. The eerie sense of calm? The will to stand up and fight? None of it. Really, God? You can't even lend me just a tiny bit of adrenaline or something? I prayed...I'm praying now. What else is left to do?

***Then I guess there is nothing else left. But to die. To be a victim. To beg for his mercy until the pain is so unbearable that he lets you die. Just a weak little girl who was foolish to question the will of her husband.***

Yeah, I guess so. I guess that describes me perfectly. I just wish it didn't have to end this way.

***But this is how it must end. Isn't it?***

Yes. I don't know. No...NO. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe you don't know what you're talking about. You know, if Salem is strong enough to suffer all of this for me, then that should tell me something. That maybe...maybe I can suffer it too. She showed me that it can be done. She's the one who showed me I didn't have to be this way. That I have a choice.

***Who do you think you are, Mary? You're a princess. A damsel in distress. The helpless woman who depends on others to rescue you. Your so-called "hero", a witch, was your only hope. And now she's dying. It's OVER.***

No. No. It can't be over. Not yet. I owe Salem more than that. I owe everybody more than that. I'm tired of being a spectator to my own life. A bimbo, a dumb little girl who waits for other people to save the day. I'm tired of praying. I'm tired of asking powerful people to do me favors. I'm tired of waiting for a sign.

***You are not the hero of this story, Mary. You can't even use a weapon. You just can't win.***

Then maybe I'm not the hero. Maybe I never will be a hero. But I won't stand by while other people suffer. As long as I have blood in my veins, I have blood to give.

***You're just going to embarrass yourself.***

I have to try something. Because there is no one else who can save her now except me. And so help me, if YOU won't help me through this...then I'll do it by myself. I'll die trying. I'll die for a purpose. I'll die screaming, telling people to listen, *dogdamn it*, because at some point they will have to listen! They will have to change! And so help me, maybe it's time I show YOU what a "Loving God" is supposed to be doing.

***Maybe you're all I have. Maybe I have faith in you, Mary Melancholy.***

Mary looked up at the sky and huffed. She took a long pause, shutting her eyes and inhaling deeply, as if ready to walk through a fire—perhaps not an exaggeration of her fate. She rushed over to where she heard the commotion and saw Aaron standing, just a few feet away from a burning stake.

"Oh God...I'm doing it. I'm doing it. I deserve this. I deserve whatever happens to me. I deserve this...all they can do is kill me...all they can do is kill me...all they can do is kill me...well, torture me and then kill me, technically speaking..."

Mary took another deep inhale and exhaled with a loud, cracking scream. "STOP!"

The soldiers turned at her, gnarling at the intruder. Their testosterone was burning and her feminine appearance was an unwelcomed sight in the midst of the fire. But as she addressed Aaron and moved closer to him, they stood down.

"Does she have to die here? Like this? What crime is she guilty of?" Mary shouted.

"She is a witch," Aaron said, still watching Salem burn. "In case you haven't heard, that is crime enough."

"*Mary is that you? You came back? Come closer, Mary...I want to sing with you...*"

"What? You're not making any sense!" she cried to Salem, barely able to look at the horrific scene.

"She is a heretic, Mary," Rivulet replied. "Perhaps you should flee the scene before you commit a crime as well."

## The Evil Princess

“No, let her watch,” Aaron said with a nod. “Let her watch the witch die a slow, painful death.”

“Aaron, please stop. This isn’t right. Please call this off.”

Aaron smiled but remained fixated on the fire.

“Please! I’ll do anything!”

“I’m sure you would,” he said with a sneer.

“Name it. Just let her go!”

“Say my name. And say you love me,” Aaron replied, turning towards her and meeting her eyes.

“Fine. I love you, Aaron. I’ll marry you. Just please...”

“Like you mean it.”

*“I love you, Aaron! Please!”*

“That was nice to hear,” Aaron said with a bittersweet smile.

“Maybe if you said that months ago...everybody could have gotten what they wanted. But now it’s too late.”

Mary groaned in disgust.

“Now your words are meaningless. My father was right. Some women just can’t be trained. Sometimes it’s all a lost cause. I guess they call it a genetic abnormality. But I have no more love for you, Mary.”

Aaron suspired and looked up to the sky, feeling a new sense of empowerment and destiny. “For generations now, your barbaric Red family has been breaking peace treaties with us. And it stops here. We will no longer tolerate an insane kingdom, just as a king would not tolerate an insane wife. Just like I said, I’m going to kill her. You. Your entire civilization. So just sit back and enjoy the show.”

But Salem’s voice continued to echo.

*“Mary? Thanks for coming. Isn’t this such a great party?”* The strange and affected voice laughed, sounding less like a woman and more like a disembodied spirit.

*“I’m glad you came. But you need to go now. Get out of here...before they get you too...”*

“I’m not leaving you, Salem!”

Mary grabbed Aaron’s arm. “Please do something!”

He pulled back and scowled. He slapped Mary’s face with a vengeance, sending her crashing to the floor.

“Enough! She disrespected God. What did you expect to happen?”

“I expected you to have some basic human decency,” she mumbled to the floor.

“Decency doesn’t win wars,” Aaron said.

“No, but decency is what will make your people love you.”

Mary cried and gestured with all her heart, not bearing to look at Salem's flaming remains a minute longer. "I'm sorry for what I've done. But for your own reputation, please...make this stop."

Aaron shook his head. "Reputation? Listen to the crowds and the name they chant. They sing my name. They *love* me, Mary. The people of Cadabra aren't stupid like you. They know I'm the one who's been wronged here. And they hate you for it."

Mary looked down, her nose sniffling and dripping blood from a strong left hand. "Maybe they do. But no matter how many people out there love you, I know who you really are, Aaron. I know the way you treat people, the way your family treats people. And you're going to have to live with that, knowing that at least one person out there knows the *real you*."

He rolled his eyes.

"From the moment I met you, I just knew," Mary said, standing up and maintaining angry eye contact. "Nothing about you was real. You just didn't *understand* women at all. And you were way too much of a *coward* to impress me."

That did it, that finally picked at Aaron's mind enough to send her back an angry glance.

"Yeah, that's right," Mary taunted. "That's why I will *never* love you, Aaron. You're a selfish little boy. You will never understand love. And the people of Cadabra can love the idea of Prince Aaron all they want. But nobody will *ever really love you*. The man behind the myth. Because there is *nothing* there. You're empty inside."

Aaron started pacing, taking in her words like a sword to his heart.

"And I will tell the world about you!" Mary screamed. "I will make them hate you. *They will all hate you!*"

"You love her? Huh?" Aaron replied, "Go make love to her corpse."

Aaron's anger suddenly melted away into hearty laughter.

"Hey...what do you know. Laughter really does heal a broken heart." He walked over to his soldiers and gave Mary her final moments with the defeated suitor.

Mary's tears rolled as the smoke cleared and the green mist dissipated. The heat dwindling, Mary ran up to Salem's scalded body, untying the strands. The witch's skin, once looking like gray clay now looked like darkened rot-meat, purple, blue and white in complexion. Like a corpse that had been excavated, drained of all soul and humanity. Mary loosened the knots and Salem's body fell to the ground.

She knelt down and turned her over, looking at her withered sunken face, just barely covered by a witch's hat. Her face was swollen and monstrous but her eyes still had a glimmer of life.

## The Evil Princess

“Oh Salem!” Mary cried. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

“Mary? Mary, are you really here?”

“Salem? Are you...alive?”

“Gee, I hope not...I feel like crap.”

Mary laughed, even amid a stream of tears. “Always a jokester.”

“To the end,” she mumbled. “I just wanted...see you...laugh one more time. Every syllable is like a symphony...a harp...Mary...”

Salem’s face began contorting into a familiar expression, something like a smile, resembling the woman Mary once knew. But she suddenly became self-conscious. She raised her grotesquely thin arms and covered the lower half of her face with the parched hat. Only her vulnerable eyes were left in view and a green tear rolled down her eye sockets.

“I’m...I’m ugly. Don’t look at me.”

“*What?* What did you say?” Mary asked, holding her bony hand.

“Don’t look at me. Mary...I want you to remember me...as someone strong. Someone funny...someone beautiful like you said...not like this.”

“Oh Salem!” Mary cried. “You *are* beautiful. You *are* strong. And you do have freaky cool superpowers, yeah. But that’s not why I fell in love with you.”

Mary choked up, her tears falling upon the witch’s cheeks. “I love you because you talk to animals. You treat them like they’re your own children. I love you because you still talk to your parents every night even though they never answer you. I love you because you sing when there’s no music, even though everyone around here thinks that’s such an unhealthy thing to do.”

The princess laughed, stroking the rubbery face and snuggling their foreheads together. “I love you because you’re loyal to your friends. You’re ready to take on the world to protect the little guy. I love you because you put me in my place whenever I’m being a total psycho, but you’ve *never* given up on me the way everyone else has. I love you because even though you call yourself evil, you’re actually the kindest and most honest person I’ve ever met.”

“You...love...me?”

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” she said, kissing her hand one for each repetition.

The soldiers overheard everything and were becoming disgusted at what they deemed a sickening display. They booed and hissed, accusing Mary not only of witchcraft but of necrophilia.

“I love you because when I’m with you, life is beautiful. It’s unpredictable. Salem, I believe in you. My whole life I’ve never believed

in anything. Never felt anything real. But you're what I believe in. You and only you."

Mary gently took the hat away from the body's hand and reached down, taking her decrepit face in hand.

"I don't know how to save you. I don't know how to take the pain away. But I can make sure that the last thing you feel in this world is true love's kiss."

Mary reached down and kissed the witch tenderly on her cracking grey lips, holding onto Salem's cheek with her hand and holding onto tight to the lip caress.

The soldiers roared in disgust. A few mimicked vomiting noises while others stuck their own fingers down their throats to force themselves to vomit, demonstrating their righteous indignation.

"Kill her! Kill her with fire!"

"Blasphemy!"

"Stupid bitch! Right in front of a king?"

"Will somebody please kill her, already?"

Salem's eyes opened and she began looking around, hearing the voices of judgment. Mary released the kiss and shut Salem's eyes. She began whispering into Salem's ear. *"Concentrate on me. We're alone right now. Listen to my voice. Feel my fingers on your lips. Feel my breath on your forehead. My skin touching yours. Are you with me? You and I are in a dark room, hearing each other's voice and we're going to stay this way, loving each other, forever...and until the end of time. This moment belongs to us."*

Salem hummed softly and crinkled her mouth into a smile.

Aaron watched the whole scene unfold, showing no particular emotion but certainly in deep thought. Rivulet decided it was time to take action.

"It appears the witch is still breathing. Still capable of kissing your former fiancée. Kill her now. And the Princess. If you want any respect from your people, you will not tolerate such disgrace."

Aaron stood still and grabbed his chin...until he decided to grab a soldier's sword. He walked towards Mary and the fallen witch, pulling back and readying for a quick beheading shot.

Mary held her lover's head tight and braced herself, shielding Salem's face with her arms, only one silent prayer left.

*And then there was black. Nothing but an endless sheet of black, no color, no moonlight, not even a single fleck of a star. No one seemed to have noticed the dark and cloaking expanse that was slowly covering the sunny sky that afternoon, leaving the entire scene ethereally drained of all color and shapes. Everything disappeared into nothingness, or so it seemed to Mary, who found herself also cloaked in darkness.*





## Chapter 21

### Dead Princesses

*“The Red Moon is inevitable. It has been an observed Cadabra phenomenon that has happened at least once every one hundred years, according to records existing from the End of the Magical Kingdom of Fen Mien I. There is nothing divine about its coming. It is simply what we call a syzygy, or lunar eclipse. People often misinterpret our understanding of scientific actuality by saying we prophesy a Blood Moon. That’s not the case. Our predictions are always perfectly timed. Besides, you will notice that most people denying the Red Moon’s scientific reality are people who don’t understand science, don’t read the history books detailing these accounts and are mainly just religitards.”*

-Attributed to Pinkian Scientist, Dr. F. Faddle.

**W**as it black magic? Was it another Blood Moon, a rare total lunar eclipse, that Pinkian scientists had supposedly documented years ago? Or was it a miracle from Mary's God? Whatever it was, the sky went pitch black that tumultuous day, setting off a panic among Aaron's army. They felt around fervently in the dark, searching blindly for whatever surrounded them—skin, grass or a weapon. They looked for a candle or a torch to light, as moments ago these luminaries had burned brightly. But nothing was in sight for Cadabra itself was in mourning.

As they hollered and talked among themselves, Mary became conscious, all too aware that this wasn't Heaven or Hell, just inexplicable blackness.

"*Mary...this is your chance,*" a voice cried in earshot but coming from no particular direction. "*Use the spell.*"

"The spell?"

"*The voodoo doll. The Resurrection Spell you were told about. Hurry. It's your only chance.*"

"Oh, that one. Okay..."

Mary reached into her nightgown and took out the voodoo doll, which had been secured inside the gown's bust support, right next to her heart, as promised. She gripped it to her chest and held on tight as the melody flowed from her lips.

## **SONG 9 "DEAD PRINCESSES"**

**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  
He loves me, he loves me not  
He loves me, he loves me not**

**Once upon a time, a long-haired princess cried  
So the prince took her to a bar But the patrons raised a stink,  
when blondie tried to sing  
And they buried her, bloody body in tar**

## The Evil Princess

Did you hear of the girl who married a beast  
She broke the enchantress's spell  
But when he turned human, she felt less like a woman  
And the servants ate Flambé Mademoiselle

What about the mermaid that so loved a prince  
A sea witch told her to leave home  
But her new dancing legs were not enough for His Grace  
And the sun scorched her till she turned into foam

Someone told me about a sleeping princess  
Visited by a prince out of hell  
But when the prince paused and rejected the Special Sauce  
Into a tub of deadly vipers she fell

I read in the news 'bout a woman abused  
By her wicked step mother's love  
But what they don't tell you at all is that at the ball  
This princess had her eyes pecked out by doves

The legend goes, there was a woman in white  
Whose reflection was the fairest muse  
But she fell for a ploy from an evil decoy  
And at her wedding burned alive in hot iron shoes

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  
He loves me, he loves me not  
He loves me, he loves me not

You were once so beautiful and fair  
Your wedding was perfect with styled hair  
But he didn't show, the prince stole everything  
You went to your grave saying his sweet name swearing  
Now it's time for you to rise, for which I cast this spell  
Princess, the years have been hard on you

**But you're still so lovely  
It's time to remember the pain and make him pay  
Pay no mind to your flesh falling from decay  
Time for you to walk again, for which I cast this spell**

**Your heart's broken, hanging from your chest  
Your body rots with maggots bone to crest  
Blood and tissue dripping onto your nipples  
Skin folds tear off from atop your lovely dimples  
No time to get ready, for tonight I cast this spell**

**Your smile has no lips just perfect teeth  
You hold your brain politely with your sheath  
Your ribcage is gaping above your thin waist  
A hole's through your abdomen, your stomach misplaced  
Don't be afraid of dying twice, let me cast this spell**

**Come  
Come out  
Come my lady  
Come out princess  
Come out of your tomb  
Only your eyes survive  
Through the bloodshot red I see  
Determination to take sweet revenge  
You're my only prayer, work your magic, let me cast this spell  
He loves me, he loves me not  
He loves me, he loves me not**

Mary had memorized the Resurrection Spell and sung with all her heart, as she clutched the voodoo doll close, holding it for every last breath of the incantation. She sang with more bravery and passion than she had ever sung before and felt every muscle in her body tense up as she delivered the final notes. While singing, she thought about Salem, about Aaron, about her parents and about the people of Cadabra—even the people beyond the border of her own color. When she finished the musical incantation, she opened her eyes and heard no change in the wind.

However, her eyes dilated as she looked into the sky. The moon had turned as red as blood, perhaps an anomaly of space involving the moon passing directly behind the earth into its shadow, aligning in a

perfect syzygy. Or perhaps it was a sign from God herself, signifying that the heavens saw Red—at least for that day—and God saw the purity of Mary’s broken heart.

The soldiers screamed at the top of their lungs seeing nothing but blood and certainly interpreting the event as divine vengeance.

“What has happened?”

“Oh my God, my God!”

“It is a miracle!”

“I can’t see!”

“It is the judgment of God!”

“Save us! Repent!”

“Run away! Run away!”

“The world is ending!”

“Sire,” Rivulet whispered to Aaron, after finding his arm in the dark and clutching on. “We need to calm the men down. The Pinkians once wrote of a Red Moon event just like this. They call it a scientific anomaly. It’s not the wrath of God. It’s not a supernatural event. We have to remain calm. It will pass...”

Aaron agreed but the men had already run screaming into the night, the all-encompassing night, which seemed to have no beginning and no end. Their screaming only intensified into guttural screeches, as tremors underneath the earth shook the ground. Thunder rolled and the harrowing sound of earth splitting open sounded for what seemed like miles across.

Fast-thinking soldiers replenished the missing light by lighting rows of flaming torches around Aaron and his army. It was enough to light the darkened sky but all the vantage point it gave them was that they could, at last, see the horror taking place—the earth not only ripped open but bodies were being regurgitated from the ground, particularly the memorial tombs and the cemeteries just passed the Garden of Nehustan.

Aaron and his army watched in dismay as the corpses landed, still dressed in their favorite princess outfits with lace, satin, bodice, the ball gowns and the wedding veils. They wore the same lovely red dresses they were once buried in and held the same jewels and frills, minus only the adoring smile. They were not merely corpses of those forgotten, but were the bones, rotting flesh and maggot-filled cavities of princesses. Their diseased, gore dripping bodies fell to the ground following the quake. Age old black blood and decaying organs spilled out of every crevice soiling their faded dresses. But their faces were still surprisingly human-like, as if the emotion of betrayal stayed with the lifeless remains, stubbornly returning as a ghost. They were women

double-crossed by princes and kings who claimed to love them, who promised them riches and a kingdom in return for their hand in marriage, before falling victim to chicanery.

Aaron and his men stared, jaws dropped, scared constipated at the bizarre scene. Of course, that bit of disturbing imagery was secondary to the moment when the heads of these dead princesses turned swiftly and eyed Aaron in demonic, red-eyed malice very much responding to movement, if not too much alive.

“What the f—?”

“They’re coming back to life!”

“*Did the Pinkians document anything about this?!*”

“I don’t know, who the hell ever reads history textbooks? They’re boring!”

There—one thin princess stumbled forward, her frame perfectly starved, her feet wedged and bloodied into those tight heels. She walked 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 wore 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 sparkled above her long flowing hair, of no particular color.

And her lovely face—her lovely rotted face shivered with anticipation as flesh ripped apart from her skull. Decaying muscle tissue dripped out of every cavity. Her neatly applied makeup matched the red maggots that dined on her disease. Age-old black tar splattered onto the ground leaking from Madame’s gaping neck. Her ribcage burst apart along with the waist-training corset until her intestines began to cross-stitch with her lacey frills.

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

Her stubborn attempts to stand on what was left of her legs created a dastardly sound, a sort of scraping rattle that became louder by the moment. Her bone hands trembling, her eyes boiling with red savagery, she focused on the object of her affection.

Her mouth unnaturally widened and her perfectly even teeth bit down repeatedly in anticipation of a century-long awaited meal. Her lurching head didn’t turn but seemed to hang to one direction, then

## The Evil Princess

another and then dropped forward with no resistance. But her demonic red eyes never stopped staring straight ahead.

She danced 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.

But then, there was another. Another dead beauty rising to her feet and wobbling forward, scraping her barely intact feet against the floor until she could stand. She wore red too, a carmine red, once a royal member of the family but betrayed by a certain rich man who claimed to love her. Her heart literally ripped from her chest and exposed, stuffed inside her gore-laden cleavage, she outstretched her arm, desiring the engagement ring she was promised. With her other arm, she began viciously striking out, her bony fingers resembling claws.

Three pairs of skinless trembling hands rose and began to stretch and clench. The next dead princess wore crimson, combing her exposed brain still desiring to style the perfect hair. Her arms and hands were slashed apart, as if eaten alive even before her body had the chance to decay. Her genitals had long been forgotten, disemboweled in fact, as only an empty gashed hole was left behind, her cervix disgorging at the top. She hit herself in the groin with her clenched skeleton hands, still feeling a spinster's frustrations ages after the love story came to an end.

A fourth corpse followed behind, wearing chestnut and magenta, this one still unable to see because of a sphere harpooned inside her head, stretching from both sides of her temples and through her blood-sputtering eyes. Her once bountiful breasts had been dismembered with no luxury of a scar or stitch to hold in the entrails. But even then, she walked in great confidence. They all did, their red eyes glowing with insidious desire and their mouths gaped open in rabid hunger.

Then a fifth corpse emerged, clothed in maroon and scarlet, half of its head burnt off, but still with dainty waving arms, scratching in air, readying for a kill. Then a sixth, a one-legged mahogany-draped corpse that dragged itself along with the others, perhaps the weakest of the bunch, but with just as much to prove. It grabbed its dismembered leg and trekked on, hopping forward and chattering its teeth, swinging its new weapon back and forth.

Sepulchral rasps of rapid gurgling became louder until it began resonating from the ground up, echoing those horrid scraping sounds and fueling more stench of rotting broken hearts. More red dead princesses crawled out of their caskets and stood elegantly on their feet, before following the first group who was rapidly progressing. By the dozens they rose, eventually increasing to over one hundred, until a

horde of dead beauties began running into each other, falling over their own bones and struggling to reach free walking space.

Within minutes all the formerly dragging corpses stood tall, fixing their balance and pushing their legs forward finally getting the extra space they needed to organize and stand united. Their mouths unnaturally wide and hanging, their teeth biting down in greedy anticipation of fresh human flesh, they set their targets on the living and contorted their faces to show the raging hunger they felt within.

The sight was enough to send Aaron's men into full retreat.

"Retreat!"

"Black magic!"

"Run! Run now!"

The dead mademoiselles began clamoring to Mary. Their ravaged faces eyed her in desire, the blood percolating and shooting out of their mouths, undoubtedly their attempt to speak words to her.

Mary cowered, holding her head away from the lurid sight, which became more frightening as the black sky revealed nothing but a growing number of escaped monsters. She shivered and surrendered her milky white wrist to the rabid bunch, allowing them to take whatever blood they wanted, whatever might appease their irascible and victimized souls.

But to her surprise the monstrous beings only tilted their heads in wonderment, watching Mary, even as more corpses lined up behind the first ones, surrounding Mary in a demonic circle of nefarious evil.

Mary was speechless and fretted, her eyes wide open and taking in the scene. Just then, a little rub piqued her ankle. There Salem's cat waited, nuzzling her as if to send a message.

"Cat? You're Salem's cat, right?"

"Or is Salem my Human?" the cat teased.

"What's happening, Mister Cat?" Mary said nervously.

"Darling, I don't think you understand," the cat said. "That spell Salem asked you to cast was an act of necromancy, a final resort, passed down by ten generations of Salem's ancestors. A spell to cast only when all hope is lost."

"The Resurrection Spell? I didn't quite think it was...you know, that literal. I thought it was more...metaphoric?"

"These poor girls are not here to hurt you, but to *serve* you," the cat said. "You are the *bokor* who summoned them. You are the Priestess, the Voodoo Queen, the one they have come to defend in your darkest hour."

"Oh my Dog..." Mary said, eyeing the dead princesses in understandable ambivalence. "But what do I do?"

## The Evil Princess

“You will become what you must, darling,” the cat reminded her. “A conqueror. An avenging angel. Aaron’s men will not stop fighting until you and Salem are dead. You must fight for your life and defend Salem’s honor. But first, you must believe in yourself in order for them to listen to you.”

“I hate fighting...” she said sadly.

“We all do. But sometimes it’s necessary to save the ones we love. Salem’s last act of love was to stop Aaron’s rampage so she could save you. The army of the undead is ready to listen to you. The one true, deserving evil princess who is fit to lead them. Pick up the mantle.”

She saw Salem’s hat on the ground and took it, figuring it was the charm that the terrible creatures responded to, their red eyes following the witch’s hat as Mary pulled it down on her head.

“Okay. Let’s take down those who threaten us. The golden-iris people you see.” Mary shut her eyes in resignation but finished with a nod. “Just please...” Mary said softly as she tugged it down on her head and assumed the position of a shy major general. “Try not to kill anyone...or you know, kill anyone too viciously.”

Mary said so uncertainly, shaking her hands and tensing up as the army of dead princesses walked away from her and began chasing Aaron’s army.

In the darkness, the soldiers could hardly see where they were going and couldn’t run far from their cadaverous opponents. Just as Aaron’s torch burnt out, one of his men lit another fire...only to discover ten rotting faces clattering their teeth in expectation.

“Unholy Devil! God protect us—!”

Before the soldier could finish that sentence, a blackened corpse bride had lunged out at his face and tore open his throat with her teeth, spitting out his blood and gobbling up his larynx.

“Devil! Devil!” cried another one, making the divine symbol of the X, only to have an X carved across his face by a princess’s sharp fingernails, which ripped his pink cheeks clean from his face muscles.

Another man was taken down by the force of five dead heroines jumping on his chest and tearing out his organs as easily as would rummage through dresses.

Roodabeh was the most let down of all the bitter princesses and tore at the hair of a soldier, knocking away his helmet and scalping him alive. His flesh peeling off his head, she dug straight into his brains, feasting on every vile thought the man ever had. She was insatiable for scalps and sought the follicles and foreheads of many more, taking own two runaway men with particularly thick and lush heads of hair.

Zemire had a particularly rapacious appetite and went straight for the hearts of the soldiers, biting away their armor and then aiming for their unprotected chest. Two got away, but one wasn't so lucky and watched in paralysis as undead hands tore through his uniform and skin, ripping out his beating heart. Never one to waste a good meal, she devoured the man's flesh, starting with his gaping wound and suckled down every last shot of black tea. Her thirst for tea never relented and so she chased down three more warriors who looked juicy and helped herself to a bloodbath of fine living cuisine, chomping one in the throat, the other crunching deep into his cheeks and delivering an infectious kiss of death and the final one—the one that tried to run away—she went for the heart, tearing his still beating heart out from all the way behind him at his shoulders. Pulling it out in reverse, along with a handful of other spilling gore, she ate his beating heart, watching his body convulse until he fell motionless to the ground.

Rusalka, when alive, had her legs melted together via soldering iron, leaving an unnaturally molded tail that was difficult to fit in a casket. Now alive, she used her rotted, bony and sharpened deformity to her advantage and dismembered two soldiers with one strike of the sharp end, which acted as a caudal fin. To another man who dared to run, she jumped into the air flopping back and forth until she landed atop him, crushing his bones. Before the death blow, she grabbed the distant descendant of the Original Prince and cried a siren's song into his mouth, the sickness of which quickly ate the man from the inside out until the lower half of his body dissolved into bloody, foamy residue. Her red eyes glowing like candles and her hair still wavy and keeping near-perfect volume, surprisingly, she jumped into pure dirt, burrowing her way inside and came out on the other side of the muddy soil unloading her starved teeth into a soldier's crotch, then eating her way up from his waist to his stomach and chest, until his body split in half, his head and spine still clinging to her dead bony hands.

Talia brought her own weapons and started hacking a soldier's face apart with a spindle as soon as she remembered how to swing her one good arm. She struck another warrior with the same bloody spindle and cracked his head open. Then the beauty fell overtop both corpses and hammered the spindle deeper into their heads, creating a fountain of brain matter. Just as two soldiers withstood her biting attack and fended her off with a shield, she summoned up ten vipers from her open ribcage to come out and devour the man. The vipers lunged into their air and attacked the men's faces, carving away facial features, gobbling up organs and leaving little but an empty bleeding face of hair and blood.

## The Evil Princess

Zezilla grabbed her glass shoe and used it to slice at the feet of soldiers who were running away from the carnage. She severed their heels and toes and welcomed murderous doves from the sky that began pecking out the eyes of some unlucky army men. One soldier whose foot was severed had no better fate than to squirm in cowardice as Zezilla danced towards him chomping her teeth and preparing for a kill. She grabbed her broken glass shoe and sliced her adversary all over his face ripping away at his skin mask and pulling it clean off after loosening the ligaments—only to see a set of facial muscles screaming back to her. She took her time in devouring his eyes like gumdrops. But she left his face of tendons and tissue intact, still screaming, still begging—as she chewed each finger one by one until there were none.

Bidasari, the most feral in all the land, used her burning hot-iron shoes to stomp on the heads of escaping soldiers mashing and melting them simultaneously, leaving a trail of human slaughter and rolling eyeballs all over the ground. When she killed enough escaping men on the floor, she chased the ones still standing, burning through their shields, through their swords and through their heads, growling in rage as the hot iron melted everything in its path, incinerating skin, bones and charcoaling bodies with just a touch.

Mary finally brought herself to stop covering her eyes and look at the carnage, if for no other reason, than to accept what was already happening in her name. Something seemed strange about it—not just the fact that a hundred dead princesses had risen from the grave, well of course not that, but that they all seemed to be wearing red colors. And something else about their bodies and facial shapes seemed eerily familiar.

“They look like me...” Mary said in queasy uncertainty, squinting her eyes at the carnage.

“They do, sort of,” the cat said. “That’s an odd coincidence,” he said.

As Mary looked on, watching the girls eviscerate Aaron’s army in much more vicious ways than she anticipated, a crippling sadness came over her—an all new depth of melancholy that she had never felt before.

“Oh my...” she said, tightening her eyes and cringing.

“They’re my own people. They’re Red Princesses. When Salem gave me the spell the magic curse transferred over to me. These are not her ancestors but mine. It resurrected my ancestors. They were all buried here, in borderland cemeteries. Murdered by kings and princes. Broken peace treaty after broken peace treaty.”

Mary shut her eyes and cried to herself.

“This is why they couldn’t let it go. This is why they couldn’t stop fighting. It wasn’t about God or holy wars. It wasn’t about politics or money. It was just fathers fighting to avenge the deaths of their children.”

Mary clutched the cat closer to her, the only friend she had left and the only one who understood the same revelation. “The House of Opula must have been doing this for generations. They never owned up to it. And their blood was crying out from the grave. The Kingdom of Blood...oh my...why didn’t we see it before?” Mary closed her eyes, knowing full well she couldn’t stop the vengeance now even if she tried. “And my father was the first one to forget.”

Every torch that Aaron’s men burned gave only shadowed glimpses into the carnage happening all around the forest, the garden and the caves. Aaron’s men tried to fight back, but the number of disgruntled princesses crawling out from the ground only multiplied in number. A thousand men of the Prince couldn’t withstand a hundred angry dead females stalking the men, their hearts bleeding down the aisle, their kisses deadly and wrought with venom.

The most courageous of Aaron’s men fought back striking the princess corpses with their swords or spears. Succeeded though some of them did, they quickly discovered a princess corpse minus an arm and a leg wasn’t any less daunting. One unfortunate soul chopped a head off of a princess’s body only to discover the head reanimated on its own and the body continued clawing at his genitals. Before the man could even scream in fright, the head had latched onto his gonads while the body used the cavernous crotch wounds to reach inside and disembowel the poor lad, spilling his innards to the floor and feasting.

Once so beautiful, once so trusting, the empty shells of these former women struck back and it was all too much butchery for Mary to witness. The poor dear shut her eyes tight and closed her eardrums with her fingers, quivering her lips at the thought of the war—such brutality served in her name. Maybe it was necessary, or not, but certainly nothing to take pride in. War was Hell, violence was the opposite of whatever her reign was supposed to be to the people of Cadabra.

Everywhere the army ran to, the dead princesses chased them, eating their bodies and entrails in petrifying gluttony, behavior that was certainly unbecoming of a lady. A hundred corpses walked on ahead tearing the Golden Army apart and storming them until the remaining line, less than fifty men, ran clear out of the boundaries of the Gold or Red Kingdom. They barely escaped with their lives, the rest of the some nine hundred odd men weren’t so lucky.

## The Evil Princess

Rivulet, assuming a contract had been out on his skinny head for some time, was determined to avoid comeuppance. He wisely eschewed the cemeteries and progressed as far along as outer boundaries, nearer to the Gold Kingdom's territory. However, he underestimated encountering one lone grave that night, one marked grave filled with a desirable corpse with an honorable reputation. The disfigured corpse wandered over to his hiding place and spotted him. It tilted what was left of its facial shape, trying to determine if any memory was left. Apparently, some bad vibes persisted because the creature growled and hissed, increasing its stumbling speed and following Rivulet to a stone canyon. The creature's face already scalded off and only possessing a functioning mouth, began chomping its jaw and clacking its teeth together in recurring patterns. Recurring little thoughts and actions—as if it was taunting him. As if it *remembered* him.

He hastened his escape, throwing his blade at the walking corpse, then his armor and sword but to no avail. He saw the top of a cliff and looked back at the fast approaching faceless ghost. He groaned and ran farther to the edge of the canyon, accepting his options might well be narrowed in the face of widespread darkness, resurrection and unmitigated revenge.

He held out the Holy X symbol to the teeth-clenching monster and backed farther towards the doomed edge, realizing quickly it was either eat or die and neither scenario looked pretty for him. He fretted when he noticed the creature making the same X symbol back at him, as if mocking his faith.

Stuck between a rock and a dead misshapen woman's hard place, he opted for one last joyride. "It's just my imagination...you couldn't possibly know who I am," he said with a nervous glower. "You're not a person at all, just an act of magic. You're not even a princess...are you?"

Rivulet looked down towards the steep drop onto hard rock, figuring there was little chance of survival, much less escape. "I won't give you the satisfaction." He smiled and leaned out, falling backward off the edge, falling to his assumed demise.

But the walking faceless demon seemed unsatisfied. It growled around the scene for a moment, no longer sensing Rivulet's syrupy voice. But, almost as if rejecting the deal, the faceless zombie hissed in burning rage. With a three-step running start, it jumped off the cliff's edge to follow Rivulet into Hell.

Rivulet, falling fast, tried to keep his eyes closed and his mind preoccupied to avoid the pain. Finding a prayer somewhere, he was able to reach a state of peace and tranquility, a release of anxiety and a welcoming of nirvana.

But a drop from heaven awoke him. He opened his eyes and looked up a bit curiously...

Only to be greeted by a giant mouth just inches away from his own, screaming bloody murder and festering disease.

“Wha-? No-! No-!”

The faceless zombie couldn’t smell or speak but it sure knew how to work those sharp teeth. The monster continuously bit its way closer and closer to Rivulet’s squirming face.

The pipehead braced himself for a death chomp...but only to feel a hard crunch on his back. He had landed roughly, breaking something in there, but was still very much alive. What do you know, the fall didn’t kill him after all. On the other hand, the dead reanimated creature had been knocked up and over on its side, its head being squished by a nearby rock.

Rivulet took a nervous glance upwards and downwards, determining if he could move and if it was safe to get up.

He started to smile. “Well, someone up there likes me.”

He tried to move his legs and summon the strength to get up...but not before a familiar missing face fell back on top of him and roared.

“Egads!” he screamed, for once justly terrified.

Rather than chomp away, however, the monster thought it best to communicate a deeper thought.

“Acckkk...acckkk...” it struggled to say. “Aacckkk aackk...acckkk aaaaaacckkk!”

Apparently, the dead pile of bones, still with a sharp set of chompers, said something to taunt Rivulet, letting him know it was taking extra *special delight* in its next meal.

“No...no...it can’t be you...you couldn’t remember me...you’re not a princess...” he said, shaking his head quickly.

“Acckkkk-aaaaacckkk!” the thing said, holding its jaw wide open as if grinning a sick old crescent shape of deranged satisfaction.

Only the shadows knew what happened next, as one dark towering figure overpowered the other, rising to the top and plunging inside, feasting on the fallen one and pulling out an explosion of shapes from the convulsing heap below. The screams echoed throughout the stones and the surrounding hills, truly a voice of coerced repentance.

Aaron had barricaded his body from the onslaught by running to the back of the line of soldiers, using his valiant men as living shields.

He wandered to the farthest ends of the garden, holding his sword tightly and swinging at invisible foes, sweating profusely.

## The Evil Princess

“Don’t kill me...don’t kill me...”

He turned his head to the side listening to a creaking sound. When he turned his head back into position—there he saw it. A smiling cat head grinning widely and showing ferocious teeth.

“HELLO AARON.”

“What the hell?”

“I HAVE COME FOR YOU,” the cat head said, revealing more of its strange body—wings, horns and a serpent’s tail.

“A familiar...” Aaron said, recalling the legends of “familiar” creatures he had once heard about in school.

“SURPRISED TO KNOW WE REALLY EXIST?”

Aaron backed up farther until he tripped on an unusually slimy tripwire.

“WHAT’S WRONG? DON’T YOU BELIEVE IN MAGIC?”

Aaron shuddered and exhaled little childish screams as he made it to his feet and ran in the opposite direction.

“YEAH, YOU BETTER RUN, YA BIG UGLY!”

He ran so fast and hard, desperate to save his own life, he met back up with his soldiers backing away in the opposite direction towards him. His remaining soldiers did a double take as Aaron ran past them, shoving them out of the way and stepping on their bodies to escape. His fainthearted weeping was clearly audible and comparable to the daintiest of princesses, leading to a chorus of royal laughter.

“There goes our brave leader!” one heckled the prince as he ran as recklessly as a frightened dog.

“Coward!”

“What are you afraid of? Death? Run faster, O Brave King!”

“Pray for your soldiers to protect you!”

Aaron ran ahead with all his might, feeling the brunt of their cutting remarks all along the way. “I am not afraid! I am NOT afraid!” he screamed back to them, holding his heart and panting hysterically.

His steps so wide and reckless, he fell over his own shoes and landed face first in the mud, leading to another chorus of laughter, who had enjoyed every minute of his humiliation.

Elsewhere, the “familiar” disbanded, with Salem’s animal menagerie coming apart and taking a bow for their shadow cast illusion that scared Prince Aaron silly.

The bat was slightly miffed at the rat for cheesing up the dialog. “Did you really have to call him a *big ugly*?” the angry bat asked.

“You could have given us away!”

“What? I was improvising!” the rat protested. “What else was I supposed to call him? A dirty rat? A snake? A vulture? A pussy? We’re running out names here!”

“Why would you call him a pussy?” the cat asked with a self-satisfied little purr, he clearly having given the best performance. “A pussy is a beautiful thing,” he said, licking himself in happiness.

Every person who knew the “Real Aaron” might have loved to hear of a ghastly fate, but all anyone knew for sure was that he escaped alive. Probably to run home to his palace and to organize a siege—although hearing him explain to his father what the Gold Kingdom was up against would surely be a hoot to watch. The sad fact is that sometimes the villains of an epic love story never get the comeuppance they deserve—sometimes they simply go back home to their thrones, to their money and back to controlling the lives of the innocent. It is why the revolutionaries and the fugitives of Cadabra are so keen on sharing public incidents such as this—because as the old expression goes, “Someday Queen Fen Mien’s eyes will open and will feel the desolation that has occurred in her name. Someday, retribution will come and a woman’s scorn will rage against those who would hurt her children.”

With most of Aaron’s army on the run or being devoured like a snack buffet, the large army of angry dead princesses began to return to Mary, filling up the garden quickly and waiting for her next order.

Brain matter chipping off, hearts bleeding freely and bony frowns galore, the undead army unsettled Mary who smiled apprehensively and nodded. “Umm, good job.”

The cat ran back up to Mary, who was relieved to see him.

“Okay...uh...now what should I say?”

“I have no idea. I don’t reckon a game of fetch would be appropriate.”

“I don’t know what to do...”

“Well...there is one more thing you could ask for,” the cat said. “I don’t know if it will work...but what do we have to lose? If Salem counts as your family, there may be a chance her wounds could be reversed and she could live again.”

“You think she does? But we’re not family...I mean not officially.”

“You think the Devil considers the exchange of bodily fluids as a family relationship?” the cat asked.

“Oh you think so?” Mary replied excitedly. “Because we’ve done a lot of that.”

The cat tilted his head and looked to the ground, a bit flustered.

“Oh...” Mary said with a blush across her face. “This is a little awkward...”

“Yes, a bit.”

Mary nodded and walked over to a nearby hill to address the ex-princesses.

## The Evil Princess

“My dear friends.”

The dead looked confused and collectively shifted their heads in a number of disturbing ways, trying to understand Mary’s words.

“I mean...my followers. Actually, you’re more like...my cousins? Umm, hello. I am your family. Not that you care or uh...not that we can really have a traditional family reunion. Since you’re all dead and uh...I’m alive. Well, not that it’s like segregation thing. We’re all equal, I totally get that. I really want to say, I like what you’ve done to your hair. I really have a problem with split ends...but you girls do it so well! I mean, even now, like, hundreds of years later I can see how-”

The cat became nervous and rubbed his face on Mary’s ankle, nabbing her attention. “Perhaps you should cut the speech short, darling. Just get to the point.”

“Ah, right. Good idea. Look, I’m sorry to have summoned you. But I needed your help. I know that you were not treated well. I’m sorry for your suffering. But you know you can’t continue on like this. You deserve to have your dignity back. So I ask you, return to the graves, not as victims, but this time as angels. As heroes. You have served Cadabra well. You have served your family well. Now I ask you please...”

Mary started tearing up. “If any of you ever once believed in love... please use whatever power you have left over life and death to bring back my one true love. Not a prince, but a witch. The witch I love.”

Mary pointed to Salem’s twitching body and struggled to finish. “One who was unfairly treated like all of you were. But who may still have a fighting chance to live again. The one who repeatedly risked her life for me and for any decent person who ever met her. The witch who has and will always have my heart. Now and forever.”

The army of dead princesses looked at each other for a long while, their sad eyes, or in some cases eye sockets, absorbing the command. They looked back to Mary for a time and bubbled forth blood from their mouths, communicating something, something hopefully positive and not along the lines of brain eating. They walked over to Salem’s corpse and began huddling over her, shifting their hands and arms quickly. Dozens joined in the huddle, followed by more, until a hundred of dead princesses writhed against each other and over the witch’s body, forming a wall of wiggling corpses.

Mary tensed up and shook her hands. “Oh! It looks like they’re eating her!”

“Well, I hope not,” the cat said, quite concerned. “That would sort of defeat the purpose of the resurrection.”

The princesses all began opening their mouths wide letting their spirits out in unison, the ethereal mist assimilating together and forming a large green cloud. The green cloud rained glowing fairy dust on the earth, instantaneously sprouting vines and flowers, which attracted unusually large butterflies.

Princesses began “popping”, their spirits and life force leaving their reanimated bodies, which quickly crumbled to the ground and dissolved into dirt. Hundreds of popping princesses followed suit, each one dropping their jaws open right before exploding into crumbles, until the entire army dissipated. They literally littered the garden with huge dirt hills, the likes of which were so grainy and swallowing, it sent Mary and Salem’s animal clan retreating to higher ground.

Mary turned to the cat and shrugged helplessly, but the cat countered with a paw to her hand.

“Look!” he said, directing her attention to the electricity shooting forth from the ground. Salem’s corpse was still intact, slowly starting to spin in a circle. Her rotating body increased in speed turning faster and shooting sparks. Her hair flew as freely the wind as her gray body began filling again with color.

*“When two groups of people come together and find common ground, two faiths come together. And that’s when a miracle happens.”*

Mary remembered her mother’s words and seem to hear them just the same, coming from the right side of her. She turned to her side, almost expecting to find the Queen watching. Seemingly, the words came from nowhere because no one was in sight or to her side, only the cat who sat by her feet.

Salem’s hair waved like fire, her body spinning in a circular motion as the vines swirled around her every curve, a miracle—some form of black magic miracle—seemed to be unfolding.

Her body stood upright, but still in midair, until the vines delivered her gently to the ground. Energy radiated from her pores, the ambiance switching from yellow to green then to black. Salem’s eyes lit up and her irises disappeared leaving only red, then black, then pitch black and quite demonic.

Unfortunately, she was totally nude after the resurrection because of the searing flames having burnt her clothes to ash—not that Mary minded, nor were the animals scandalized by her natural form, slightly less furry than a rat’s, they figured. It’s just that nobody really knows how to mitigate the awkward conversation after a magical, happy ending that involves total frontal nudity.

## The Evil Princess

Mary and the animals watched excitedly as Salem regained her beautiful, youthful form and opened her mouth, the breath of life swimming once again inside her body.

“Salem?” Mary asked, beaming and smiling.

“Hssssssssss!” Salem answered, her eyes glowing in warning and her long lizardly tongue flashing in and out of her mouth.

Mary jumped back in defense as did the suddenly less courageous flock of animals.

“Woman, don’t sneak up on me like that,” Salem said, shaking her head of dizziness. “Oh yuck, I got the lizard tongue again. Don’t worry, it goes back to normal after a while.”

“You’re alive!” Mary sang jubilantly. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just groggy...” Salem confessed. “Confused...kind of hungry for brains, oddly enough. Say, why am I naked? Did something really weird just happen here?”

“Yes. Don’t you remember?”

“Huh...” Salem stressed about it, as she snapped her fingers and vacuumed a bunch of nearby bush leaves to her figure for a last-minute nature “towel”, sparing the onlookers further embarrassment and forcing them to look only at her face.

“Should I?”

“Well, you remember me, don’t you?” Mary asked in worry.

“Duhhhh...let’s see...” Salem held her head in concern. “Are you my sister or something?”

Mary flinched, more than a little annoyed. “No! No, we’re not *sisters!*” She stomped and waved her hands in exasperation. “Think harder. You really don’t remember? What happened between us?”

“You do look familiar,” Salem said. “Uhh...sorry, hon, you have to be specific. You can’t blame me for getting amnesia after a big magic restoration naked thing.” She shrugged and smiled congenially. “Say, do we go kibitzing on Mondays?”

Mary was angry by now and inhaling deeply. “Well, please try to remember. Remember the way you use to look at me? And how you called me by that funny name? Candy Cane.”

Salem laughed. “That’s kind of a dumb name.”

“Well yeah, but it was your nickname! And my name is Mary. And when you speak it, Salem, it’s like listening to harp play. A symphony. Any of this sound familiar?”

“Really? A harp?” Salem asked in curiosity. “Think kind of highly of yourself, don’t ya?”

She took a step back and gave her the cold side-profile. “Say, are you trying to sell me a timeshare or something?”

*The End of the Magical Kingdom*

“Not literally,” Mary said. “It’s a metaphor...you really don’t remember me?” Mary asked, now irked and folding her arms.

“Sorry honey, I got bubkus.”

“Well...well...well...”

“Well, well, well,” Salem said defensively. “Maybe you’re the one who killed me. Why else would I be nude in the middle of nowhere and waking up from a huge naked magical hangover?”

“Well, fine. I guess I’ll just have to refresh your memory. I guess I’ll just have to wait until you remember me.”

“Why would you do that? Are you some weird princess stalker?”

“Because...I’m in love with you. And I’m not going anywhere.” Mary reached out and touched Salem’s hand. “Even if it takes years, I’ll wait until you remember. Even if I have to convince you all over again. We belong together.”

“Ohh...okay,” Salem said. “Well, now that you mention it. You do look really familiar...you know I seem to recall this weird dream I had.”

“About what?”

“About a princess and...”

“Yes, that was me,” Mary snapped.

“Maybe it wasn’t a dream.”

“You’re the one who opened my eyes. You sang to me.”

“Why don’t you sing what I said. Maybe it’ll refresh my memory.”

*It takes a billion colors  
To show us the world  
If you turn back now what’s it all mean  
The color of blue the color of green  
Haven’t we made such a  
A perfect drawing from the sky*

The last line the two sang together, giving Mary a joyous smile.

“Lady Mary Melancholy,” Salem said with a bratty smirk. “I do remember you. Actually, I remembered you right after the Candy Cane thing.”

Mary slapped Salem’s arm and laughed. “You’re just messing with me! Stop being evil for five minutes!”

“Sorry...I just wanted to hear you sing again,” Salem said with a shy smile, welcoming Mary into a hug.

Salem let go of the hug just enough to meet Mary face to face, their eyes gazing into each other’s newly replenished soul.

“Are you sure? About everything?” Salem asked. “I really could cast an amnesia spell if you ever wanted to...”

## The Evil Princess

“I could never forget you, witch. I’ll never let go again. I promise. You want me to promise? To never let go?”

“Never let go, ever?” Salem said with a smile. “Not even to like, eat and stuff? To use the potty and everything? You can’t promise something like that.”

“I will, I promise. I’ll never let go, ever,” Mary said, hugging her tightly.

“Well, now you’re just being a full-blown parasite.”

Salem giggled as her animals joined in the group hug. The small coven, an amateur one to say the least, looked up into the sky and enjoyed a few more minutes of ethereal magic lighting, as well as a distant glow coming from a blood red moon.

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## Chapter 22

### Melancholy Ever After

*“Children are nothing but heartbreak and disappointment, a reminder of your own mortality and your own mistakes of the past that you can’t live down. Their gradual corruption and total lack of empathy is hardly worth the four joyous years of cleaning up vomit and feces.”*

-Attributed to Queen Darwin IV

Queen Lilith was cordial to Mary, perhaps something even close to maternal, as she spoke to Mary in private quarters. Salem waited outside, among the guards, who eyed her in suspicion. Their distrustful faces only seemed to amuse Salem, who grinned so wickedly back at them in response. She even slurped her temporary lizard tongue at one leering guard, causing him to step back in panic.

“I’m glad you came back,” Lilith said evenly.

## The Evil Princess

“I never wanted you to just vanish. You might as well have given me a fatal heart attack, to run into battle with that odious man.”

“Thank you for caring. And thank dad for sending the guards home.”

“Don’t ever disappear on me again,” Lilith warned her. “I say that now in irony, knowing full well you’re living with an alchemist.”

Mary smiled. “It was Salem’s idea to come back. I was afraid. But she told me nothing’s more important than family. We’re all still here. We should work things out, you know?”

“Indeed. While we’re all still here,” Lilith said as she smiled weakly.

“I’m sorry about the bumpy ride I’ve put you and dad through,” Mary said. “Who would have thought my boring life would have turned out to be so interesting towards the end?”

“Oh, it wasn’t that bumpy. Maybe at first. But I did suspect that your many breakups with Salem would be temporary.”

Lilith raised her brow.

“Really?”

“You seemed *fascinated* by her from the first moment you met. A mother knows sometimes.”

“So...I have your blessing? At least yours?”

Lilith shrugged. Then nodded.

“Well, not your blessing. I get it. I just mean...you do understand?”

Lilith sighed. “No, Mary. *I don’t understand*. I don’t.” Lilith shook off her misgiving. “But I *accept* it.”

Mary nodded. Lilith chuckled softly, staring off into the high ceilings of the palace. “You know, I hoped and prayed that somehow a dashing and handsome prince would come around and win your heart. Someone nice. Someone worthy. Someone better than Aaron and...a bit more *traditional* than Salem. Someone who would give me lots of grandbabies.” She looked down in sadness. “But that prayer never came true.”

“Sorry.”

“We’ll get over it. I accept you. And I’ll always love you. No matter what path you take. No matter who you are or who you become. You will always be my child.”

Lilith hugged her politely but Mary squeezed back hard, giving her all the love she had. This alarmed her mother, who suddenly realized how un-hugging she had been for so long.

“And the two kingdoms? I guess...I ruined that too?” Mary said as she released her grip.

Lilith rolled her eyes. “Well, I wish I had good news for you. But you know Aaron. He’s going to declare war on us. And your father

will give him one. There will be war after war.” Lilith lowered her eyes. “And you know he’s not done with the two of you, either.”

“I know.”

“I suppose wishing for peace was...a bit naïve. But don’t carry that on your shoulders, darling. There will always be a reason to fight. And the rich have nothing but opportunity.”

Lilith flinched, looking into her daughter’s bright eyes. “If only more people were like you and were totally incapable of seeing the all important *point* of it all. You are indeed blessed to be so docile.”

“I’m going to take that compliment, mom.”

Mary folded her arms, cautiously bringing up a sore topic. “I found something out. Something disturbing. About our ancestors and all the fighting. I don’t suppose you want to know?”

Lilith blinked and opened her lips in resignation. “And I ask you, will it add one more year to my life? Will it really change anything?”

“No, I guess it wouldn’t.”

“Then spare me. I have more than enough misery to tend to.”

Mary smiled and dropped her arms, playing nervously with her shoe. “Guess I’m now the Evil Princess, huh? All the kingdoms around Cadabra have lost faith in me.”

“You’ve only lost the title of the Princess for the Two Kingdoms. But legally, you’re still a princess of the Kingdom of Blood.”

“Really? But I thought...with dad...”

“Allow me to burst your bubble,” Lilith replied. “Being a princess means nothing special when you’re poor. The Kingdom of Gold had all the wealth. They were the ones ready to smother you with golden furnishings. Some of our own people have defected and joined Aaron on his crusade against black magic. They’re so tired of war they’re ready to fight for peace. You know how that goes.” Lilith made another snarky face and smiled. “We have nothing left, Mary. All we can give you is a kind word.”

“That’s all I’ll ever ask from you.”

Lilith touched Mary’s face tenderly. “Look at your face.”

“What?”

“Beautiful once again. All wounds heal.”

Lilith, Mary and Salem journeyed towards the doors of the palace, ready to take their leave. Satyre was just returning from a hunt and saw the three of them. He looked away quickly, opting to say nothing. He walked over to his work shelves and pulled his sword-sharpening kit out, made up of a whetstone and metal file.

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“Bye, daddy,” Mary said cautiously, sending him a sheepish look. She almost spoke up again but decided against it.

“Counsel, bring them their traveling bags,” Satyre commanded.

A guard walked over to Salem and Mary and handed them back their bags.

A snotty Salem stared the guard down and pointed her fingers. “There better not be anything missing in here. I counted those cucumbers! Which I’m using for mostly culinary purposes.”

She rummaged her hands through the bag until she felt something new. She looked inside the bag and pulled out an odd looking scepter.

“Eh? What is this?” She held out the scepter for Mary to see.

Mary opened her eyes in ebullience. “Daddy? Isn’t that...”

Satyre didn’t meet her eyes. He stared stoically into the palace wall, blank-faced.

“What is that?” Salem asked.

“It means...it means...” Satyre lost his train of thought and simply exhaled. “It means Alackaday, I’ Faith.”

“Uh huh...” Salem said in confusion. “Thanks.” She looked over at Mary who was beaming with happiness.

“Oh thank you, thank you! We can stay in touch through the magic mirror, if you like. You can look in on us anytime you want! I love you both!”

Lilith smiled wistfully as the guards showed them outside. Satyre’s eyes relaxed, for once, just for a moment and he looked quite peaceful—a wonderful sight for the long-suffering queen.

Salem eyed the scepter in wonder as they walked away from the palace. “So I guess you’re going to explain the significance of this on the way home? Is this a big deal?”

“It’s huge! Another miracle.”

The Garden of Nehustan was vividly decorated that day, with traditional wedding furnishings of a chapel, though one dedicated to evil, naturally and covered in black instead of white. Dusk cast an ominous shadow on the occasion and an encompassing circle of candles provided just enough light so that Mary and Salem could see faint images of each other’s face. An altar cloth covered the table that bore the rings. Incense burned, lending a scent of lavender. A decorative dagger waited above a black alter paten, as the priest held the chalice firmly in hand reciting cleaning chants in preparation of the big event.

They swore upon a deck of Tarot cards and exchanged each other’s

lock of hair, sharing possession of each other's physical bodies, as manifestations of their timeless souls.

Both women dressed in formal black Gothic attire custom-made by Salem and a team of sweatshop rats, who were given plenty of bathroom breaks and happy cow-provided cheese to accommodate their troubles. Mary wore a boning corset with distinctly pentacle-shaped crisscross lace in front, covering or barely covering her accentuated and shaped bosom. Her pleated skirt combined dark blue edges and heavy black vinyl. Her boots were Salem's own witch's scallop boots passed down from three generations of possessed moms. Salem remembered Mary's preference for over-the-top headdresses and so created for her a tall black bird's nest of an accessory—literally a bird's nest with baby hawks squawking for regurgitated food. As a gag, she wore the bird's nest for a few long moments just to give the audience of animal spectators a laugh.

Mary also dyed her hair green for the occasion and not just for Salem's amusement, but also so that no trace of yellow or "gold" could be found anywhere near the Garden of Nehustan. It was a happy occasion and so nostalgically, Mary named her wedding dress "The Resurrection", indeed of life and of soul.

Salem opted for a sultry surrealism and brought together a tail front black jacket with bow detail and a red and orange tutu skirt full of lovely 666 combinations. She also wore black and white thigh highs and the traditional mourning cloak butterfly headpiece with a black flower crown and lace eye mask, with splashes of her own native green. Salem called her bridal dress "Salem's Wedding Dress", she being a practical and rebellious young thing who never quite saw the point of all that fashion nonsense.

The animals surrounded the two modern princesses of no particular wealth or influence, but princesses of great merit and friends to Mother Earth. Such a prodigious day, why every one of Salem's forest friends cleaned themselves twice that morning so that they could look their best for this very special ceremony.

Mary and Salem held hands and slowly began to levitate off the ground, giving the small group of VIP attendees a spectacular view of the vows.

A particularly odious looking warlock performed the ceremony and had a creepy and unnerving sneer of a smile that Salem just loved. Mary went along with it, because finding a warlock with a license to handfast and sacrifice dead things to the dark lord was very difficult on short notice.

*"Do you have the rings?"* the evil-looking warlock demanded, if not

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for the beautiful occasion, one might imagine him torturing innocent souls somewhere in a dungeon.

Mary put a diamond ring on Salem's finger, its notes sparkling red and blue. When it was Salem's turn, she brought out her green jewel snake ring on Mary's finger, sparkling lights and flawless stone, but naturally with an ornery-looking onyx snake head holding the gem safe. The warlock also tied the couple's hands together with a combination blue and black ribbon in the shape of a circle, representing a cycle of life without end.

"Do you, Salem, take this Evil Princess to be your awfully wedded wife, to terrorize good people and to be united in sinister, insidious and dire plans of world domination? Do you promise to be very bad and to be true to each other in bad times, even more bad times and in the worst of bad times?"

"You know I do!" Salem answered.

"And do you Mary take this witch, this demon, this evil spirit and heinous creature with no soul to be your supervillainess dark bride of Hell? Until a glorious death comes and transports you to an eternal place of suffering and torment?"

"I do!" Mary said with a big smile.

"With this circle, you are reminded that all things begin and end and begin again, just as the Gods decree. Life goes on and moments pass. Remember when you are engulfed in anger or grief, look to your hand, look to your rings, remember that the Wheel turns forever onward and it is love that turns the wheel. Then in front of all of us spirits, ghouls and ghosts, you have declared your consent before Mother Earth. May the Good Lord have pity on your soul, you evil, wonderful pair of witches, as you burn so gloriously in Hell. And what devils have joined together let no angel or man ever divide. Now repeat your vows after me..."

Mary and Salem chose to sing their vows to each other, in what many might consider to be sappy, fluffy swirls of pure non-gelatinous marshmallows of love. Mary chose the weeping strings of "Who I Must Be", while Salem stuck to her "When You Speak I Listen" dirge, with occasional references to why she chose Mary over a disgusting snake. Mary was amused that Salem figured out how to rhyme the phrase "Snakes are disgusting" (with "They're slimy, perverted and encrusting") but the namedropping did scandalize many animals who thought Salem still had the hots for a snake—and plausibly so, since she was a creepy witch and they all tended to do horrible and unwholesome things to their lonely bodies with various animate and inanimate appendages. Alas, Mary and Salem laughed in good stride while Snakey

just slithered into a confident coil of silent snake-charm, looking like the coolest-blooded guy in the room.

Salem's vows ended on a sobering and non-lyrical note, she being the proverbial worrywart witch. "Mary, I don't know if you completely understand what you gave up for me yet. But I swear, I'm going to make it work. I'm going to make you happy. You won't regret banking on me. If I get snappy or too evil, just say 'Back off psycho witch!' and I'll heed. You're the shining star of my life. You're not just the big fish in my pond. You're my pond. You're my swamp. My forest. My cave. My garden. You're in the air I breathe. You are the center of my universe."

Mary giggled softly and eyed her lover in a moment of genuine confusion.

Mary's happy ending was, true to her name and self-chosen destiny, one of melancholy and a bittersweet smile. Everyone in that dark and sinister forest was a little misty-eyed by the end of those sacchariferous vows, even Mary, who couldn't help but look for her parents in the corners of her eyes, to see if one or both of them could make a last-minute, heart-warming appearance. It would certainly be the happy ending she deserved, but not the one she would receive, in her mother's own words.

She also knew that if she had stayed, an astonishing royal wedding would have been her future, along with an all-embracing family and the blessing of four kingdoms that came with tradition. But whatever she was now, was not the same substance as all of them. In changing her destiny, she changed so much of herself, to the extent that those outside of the forest couldn't fathom what she had become or even how to behave around this evil princess.

Salem and Mary smiled wistfully at each other, for the first time feeling the reality of what they had lost and gained. Their love was the only thing that could keep them warm in a cold world of greed wars, moral confusion and personal vendettas. The more Mary thought it over, while watching Salem's happy but nervous face in the backdrop of a serene forest under the all-knowing stars, she realized how simple life could be.

"This is the real world, Salem. Here, with you. Not out there. Always remember that. These are the best times. This is the only place I want to be."

She reached inside the integrated pocket hidden in the waistband of her dress and pulled out the Resurrection Voodoo Doll, a bit charred and crumbling after its one-time-only use, but still kept close to her heart as a memento of all things suffered, learned and loved.

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“Like I promised.”

Mary beamed as she finished her vows, but not before Salem sprinkled a bit of magic dust on her animal attendees giving them a chance to sing their little faces off. The animals usually didn't sing for health reasons but made an exception for this momentous occasion. The fact that it was all off-key and warbling made no difference. This was a ceremony of friends, outcasts and evil misfits that sought solace in each other, refuge among refuse and the sentiment was fetching in that “end of the story”, glorious reprise complete with majestic C chords.

### REPRISE

**At last everyone knows the future  
Now you know destiny is not your fate  
Dear Mary Melancholy  
We'll always remember your name**

“*And for once love is in the aaaaaair!*” the cat crooned, quite proud of his soprano low C note. He was the only one of Salem's furry or scaly friends that understood the “ear for music.” Unfortunately, he hit the last note a tad late and totally out of unison.

“Oh bother,” the feline brooded. “I didn't realize we deleted the other two stanzas. Now everyone's going to think I can't sing just like the rest of them.”

“I know you have special talent,” Mary said with a glowing wink.

“You may now kiss that evil siren,” the warlock said quite wickedly.

One might have thought that brassy Salem would take the lead in giving the first married kiss, but it was Princess Mary that grabbed Salem first, so possessively, so absolute of what she wanted, that it charmed the witch who responded by lifting her left leg up to make a right angle at her knee, a symbol of acquiescence to the stronger-minded lover—the one who fought off kings, princes, armies, undead minions and performed miracles all in the name of love. Mary kissed Salem's lips ardently, sucking in Salem's soul, uninhibitedly, wantonly, lustfully, giving the black-haired cutie all of her darkest machinations, opening Pandora's Heart and for once believing in something truly magical.

*“The more you think about it, there’s hardly a reason to believe anything. There is barely any reason I can think of to be moral, to be happy, or to be faithful to anyone. To a cause, a friend, a mate, a parent, a society, a God. Nothing. Whatever we are, whatever we have, is an illusion.*

*Growing up in a kingdom of so many lonely and injured Red souls, I always knew that this demon called melancholy would find me. And I always knew that most people outside of our culture would never understand what it was like to feel this dread, this anxiety, this emptiness inside. To fight so hard, to bleed internally, only to break through a wall and find more despair. Like a flood, it pours all around us.*

*Like so many of them, I could feel my mind becoming dangerous. I didn’t want it to stop. I wanted to rewrite my perfect story with the tacked on happily-ever-after ending. I wanted to destroy my good reputation. I know most people will never understand why. I guess it’s a “Red” thing.*

*So this is my post-wedding resolution and the only thing I really know for sure. I will never fight again—I won’t fight against other people and I won’t fight my own instincts. Knowing that so much death was happening in my name during the Resurrection Spell, at my order, is a sin I will never forgive of myself. It showed me that this can’t possibly be the way. Maybe vengeance is human. But maybe that’s what the world needs: someone strong enough to take the hurt and not want to pay back vengeance at all cost. Someone strong enough to forget, strong enough to forgive. I know now who I must be...a woman who loves life, not blood.*

*A very sad little man once told me that laughter can bring back a broken heart. He would probably hate to know that I did take his advice as a pearl of truth, even after all that happened. Sometimes forcing yourself to laugh, even at the worst possible time, is better than the alternative. It’s better than hating the past. It’s better than hating other people. It’s better than hating what you can’t change.*

*Which is why from now on, they’ll only hear laughter from the Evil Princess. Because any way you look at it, you have to admit that our lives—so full of rage, pain and misery—are still pretty funny to watch looking in from the outside. And finding silly moments of unexplainable happiness, in between long hours of despair, is so crazy an idea it just might work.*

-Attributed to a Disgraced Mary Melancholy

## The Evil Princess

## Epilogue

Mary and Salem bickered back and forth like a newly married couple as they shared a bed in Salem's cave. Salem opted for her sexy leaf gown, while Mary preferred a formal oceanic nightgown, crafted by an old friend who still believed in her—and yes, an insane warrior poet, who had such a wonderful eye for contrasting color. He lost the other one in battle, tragically. Her non-honeymoon dress boasted such merry blue blended colors of cyan, celeste, turquoise and deep blue sky. Made from comfy satin of a polyester and elastan blend, the babydoll style negligee had black lace frills and straps, a tribute to her “darkest” secret, now out in the open much to the scandal of all Cadabra. It was the first dress she owned that was not named anything and not so coincidentally, her favorite.

“All I’m saying is that my dad was very clear about that voodoo doll spell working, only as a last resort,” Salem said. “Classic voodoo resurrection. The incantation resurrected the horde of dead princesses. My dad said something big would happen. It was black magic.”

“I know what I saw,” Mary argued. “It was God. I prayed, Salem. God made it happen.”

“No, it was my magic. And besides, that spell was for your ancestors, not mine. I know zombies, I’ve talked to them before. And believe me, they are not in the business of granting favors. They’re

kinda' standoffish, frankly."

"You were definitely dead, Salem. I asked my ancestors to resurrect you and somehow God made it happen."

Salem sighed. "I wasn't dead yet so I just healed myself. It had nothing to do with God or the spell. The Witch's Apocrypha clearly states that you don't become family after yodeling in the canyon. I know, that's a weird passage, doesn't flow well with the rest of the book. But it's in there. And anyway, if that were the case...I mean, I'd have a lot more girls...that...that..."

Mary stared.

"...Hey, who's on trial here? Look, I'm just saying, family is family. That spell may have resurrected your ancestors and maybe even some of your recently departed cousins. But I ain't your cousin, sweet-butt."

"Then how else do you explain it?"

"I healed myself. I was mounting an awesome comeback, I just needed to stall for more time, that's all. A witch is much harder to kill than just a woman accused of being a witch, by the way."

"No way! You were dead. I saw the zombies standing over you and doing something."

"They were probably just whacking it. They're kind of pervs, you know."

"No, no, no!" Mary said, hands on hips. "That's not what it was."

"Fine, believe what you want," Salem said with a wave of her hand.

"I will!" Mary replied. "You weren't there. And I remember, a voice spoke to me when the sky went black."

"It was probably Catty or something."

"No, it wasn't. A voice spoke to me. And it reminded me to cast the spell. I have no idea what it was. God, an angel, a spirit, I don't know. But there was someone else there."

"Okay, fine. There's just no arguing you Red people."

"That's true, there isn't! And remember, when I came to rescue you, I covered three hours worth of walking in just over half an hour. You can't tell me that wasn't God. I think God teleported me or something..."

"No, sweetie. You said the first time you walked through the field you went in four different directions. That adds on a few hours to what is actually a half an hour jog. There's a perfectly reasonable explanation. God didn't teleport you."

"Once again, you weren't there. You didn't experience it."

"Oy vey! You just want to baptize me right here and now. If you want to get me naked, honey, just say so. I don't need a baptism or any of that other waterboarding torture. I'm Orthodox Witch, ya know."

“What happened was a miracle! Admit it!” Mary said with a big bratty smile.

The cat cleared his throat loudly to be heard...but accidentally coughed up a hairball.

“Excuse me! I do despise when that happens. Sorry to interrupt your first-rate argument, loves. “But I wanted to inform you that you received a letter today. From The Crimson Palace.”

“Oh?” Mary asked excitedly.

“Officially stamped and sealed. Very formal.”

“Uh oh...” She looked at Salem who shrugged.

Mary grabbed the letter and tore it open quickly, reading it aloud.

“A request of from the King and Queen of the Crimson Palace and the Kingdom of Blood to Princess Mary Melancholy. You are formally drafted to help your people in their time of need...in what we shall call a...diplomatic mission.”

“A what?”

“Your childhood friends, Wendy and Blossom and their respective kingdoms, the Diamond Empire and the Commonwealth of the Pink Sky, are requesting your presence as a mediator in a territorial dispute over certain Cadabra lands.”

“I don’t remember you saying you were friends with them.”

“I haven’t seen or heard from them...in ten years.”

“I’ve heard they can be quite a handful,” Salem said with an unctuous grin. “A princess’s duties are never done.”

Mary stared back in uneasiness and sighed. “Guess it’s time to open Cadabra’s Box.”

# The Evil Princess

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Late Mitchell Warren is an author, humorist, producer and prophet. He is the creator of "The End of the Magical Kingdom" multimedia series, debuting in 2015, and the publisher of Subversify.com, a news and commentary magazine. His books are best described as "tragic parodies" in that they combine comedy, drama, social satire and horror.

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