

The Queen's Book

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Once upon a time in a lovely, quite respectable-sized village there lived a master teller of stories. In all of the kingdom, no one knew more about story telling than he did. He lived with his wife and three children in a modest-sized house with a large oak tree out front. (There were three children, because in fairy tales, there are often three of things. Three just works.)

Now, the respectable-sized village lay to the east in a kingdom ruled by a kind and gentle, but not terribly observant old king who had a wicked queen for a wife. The wicked queen was said to have created a monstrous magic Book which had a ceaseless appetite for stories. The word bruited about the kingdom was that the queen's monstrous Book would grow hungry, and the dark library would be filled with anguished groans and snarls from the Book, which would snap at anyone who drew near it.

In fact most weeks, if the queen's Book were not fed a well-written story that tasted like a finely aged wine, the people said it would try to eat whoever was nearby. Sometimes for months at a time, the library was closed to all until a brave storyteller could be found to be brought in to satiate the Book's hunger.

And so, people said, the queen advertised for determined storytellers to come, to risk being eaten by the Book. If the storytellers provided stories that were suitable to the Book's taste in vintage tales, the people said that the Book devoured these approved stories and grew a story fatter in the eating. The people also said that the queen then gave the successful storyteller a sack of gold pieces for his troubles.

This story had spread across the entire kingdom and was told to everyone, from little children upon their gam's knee, to the very gam's themselves.

Now the master teller of tales had always fed his young family upon food bought with copper and silver pieces from songs and tales told in pubs and inns all across the land. He had told tales to baronesses and princesses, kings and emperors.

But there came a time when the storyteller grew deathly ill. In the absence of the money earned from tales told by the storyteller, the family eventually had no money to buy food, let alone medicine. And without medicine, the master storyteller would soon die.

"What are we to do?" the master storyteller's wife cried.

"Fear not. I will go and tell the queen's monstrous Book an exciting tale filled with blood and vengeance and action!" the master storyteller's eldest son declared, filled with youthful authorial confidence. "I have just the one! You won't believe it!"

"Alas! I will *not* let my eldest son risk losing his life to the queen's Book!" the master storyteller was barely able to gasp out, from the bed where he lay dying. "Would that I died myself, rather than lose my son in this way."

"Father, rest easy," the eldest son replied. "For I will tell an exciting, action-packed tale, and with the sack of gold bequeathed unto me, I will return speedily upon a fine, black horse I

will have purchased, wearing a fine cloak and wielding a steel longsword to protect me from robbers as I return. And we will purchase medicine for what currently ails you, and all will be well again.”

And the eldest son bade farewell to his family, and left them to go on his journey down country to the castle to present his story.

As the eldest son left his familiar home, he needed to pass through the forest of fairy tale tropes, which was a strange and wonderful place he had never been to before, despite living in a respectable-sized village directly beside it. The forest of fairy tale tropes had a winding path going through it, lined on both sides by mushrooms as big as his head, with red caps covered in white spots. For all he knew, there might have been pixies, nymphs, elves and little people in it as well.

He was passing a pond in a particularly isolated stretch of the forest, when he spied a frog, sitting on a rock sunning itself. The frog was unusually large, and was dark green, with metallic gold spots on it, almost like gold coins.

“And where are you going upon this fine day?” asked the frog quite casually, for in fairy tales, almost anything may talk, if it has the inclination. The frog spoke casually, but it genuinely seemed to want to know the answer to its amphibian query.

“I am passing through the forest of fairy tale tropes to get to the king’s castle,” the eldest son told the gold-spotted green frog. “I am the eldest son of the master storyteller, who lies sick and dying in our village. I am going to risk my life and present the queen’s monstrous Book with an exciting, thrilling story and thereby win a sack of gold to buy medicine for my sick father.”

“Hm,” mused the frog. “An exciting story, you say?”

“Yes!” the eldest son told the frog. “An exciting, *thrilling* story. Filled with lots and lots of action.”

“Action. And you are quite *determined* to travel to the castle and tell your tale?” the frog asked.

“I am,” the eldest son replied.

“I see,” said the frog, resignedly. “I’ll tell you what. If you tell me your story, I will repay you by telling you if the queen’s monstrous Book is likely to accept it, or whether it will simply eat you whole. A fairy tale isn’t just any story. There are rules. So many rules,” the frog said.

The eldest son was annoyed. “I don’t have time for that!” he told the frog. “My father is dying and I’ve got an exciting, action-packed story to tell the queen’s Book to earn a sack of gold. Haven’t you been listening?” And the eldest son left the frog and went on his way.

Striding into the castle’s front gate, tall and confident, the master storyteller’s eldest son announced that he was there to offer up a fairy tale of finest vintage for the queen’s ravenous Book to digest.

As the eldest son was being solemnly escorted by three servants down the hallway to the dread library, the daughter of the king by a previous marriage stopped them. “Who are you and what do you do here?” the queen’s step-daughter asked the master storyteller’s eldest son.

“I am the eldest son of the master storyteller, who lies sick and dying in our village,” the son told her, repeating precisely what he’d told the frog, in the manner of fairy tale dialogue. “I am going to present the queen’s Book with an exciting story and thereby win a sack of gold to buy medicine for my father.”

Now the princess was as radiant as a princess in any fairy tale is bound to be, wearing a gown of brilliant white adorned with a green sash which matched her eyes, which were a vivid green, to distinguish her from the other characters. When she heard this plan, the princess leaned in close enough for the eldest son to see the golden flecks that were in her oft-remarked-upon green eyes and she said “Please reconsider. Oh, how I wish my step-mother the queen would stop doing this! Her evil Book has eaten three storytellers just this week. It seems the Book did not like any of their stories. Not at all. Please turn from your path and go back to your father’s bedside in safety. I can’t bear to hear the screams.”

“No need to fear,” the eldest son told the king’s daughter, filled with all of the confidence that eldest sons in fairy tales often possess. “For I am the eldest son of the master storyteller in our respectable-sized village, and more than any other man but he, I know *exactly* how to tell a fairy tale of quality stock!”

“Pray, please relent!” the princess pleaded with him. “This Book is the necromantic spawn of my wicked step-mother the queen, whose wickedness my father the kind and gentle but not terribly observant king is characteristically blind to. So long as we continue to feed stories and people to the Book, the more it will continue to grow, and the more ravenous it will become. Why, just this month it has grown by three hundred pages!” In her concern, the princess grabbed at the eldest son’s sleeve, her beautiful face drawn with worry.

“Fear not!” said the eldest son, politely extricating his sleeve from the princess’ royal grip and his eyes from her intent gaze. “My story will win over the Queen’s book entire.” He headed down the dark steps to the library, followed by the three servants, two of whom carried torches.

“I am truly unable to bear the sounds of yet another person being devoured by the queen, my step-mother’s, unutterable Book!” the princess called to him. “Therefore I will go into the forest where I cannot hear it!” And into the forest she betook herself.

Shaking off a slight chill, the eldest son of the master storyteller finished his dank descent and entered the forbidding library. He was greeted by the queen of all the kingdom. She was tall and regal, with beautiful pale skin and long, dark hair. Her eyes were extremely large, a very dark blue, and were utterly unreadable. She wore a gown of much the same hue as her midnight blue eyes, and a golden circlet glowed upon her brow. A silver pendant with a large blood-red ruby hung from her neck. The fingers of her right hand never strayed very far from the ruby in her pendant.

The eldest son was not standing close enough to see the tiny crow’s feet that had begun to form around the queen’s large, inscrutable eyes.

She looked at the small group inquiringly.

“I am the eldest son of the master storyteller, who lies sick and dying in our village,” the young man told her. “I am here to present your majesty’s famous magical Book with an exciting,

action-packed story and therewith I hope to earn your majesty's favour in the form of a small sack of gold with which to buy medicine for my father."

This was pleasing in the large, dark blue eyes of the queen, and she smiled slightly and nodded just as slightly, signalling for the confident young man to follow her to the Special Collections Reserve area. This was where the Book was kept chained tight to a sturdy oak shelf so tall it was anchored to the vaulted stone ceiling of the royal library.

The two servants held their torches high and continued deeper into the cyclopean room. As they approached, the gabbling, moaning screech of the hungry tome echoed through the stygian, unpeopled library, and the clashing of chains on a wooden bookshelf could be heard. Movement could be made out at the edge of the circle cast by the torchlight. They went closer still to the thing in the darkness.

The queen made a fond, cooing sound to her hideous offspring: "My sweet, my beloved, I have brought you another visitor..."

The Book thrashed around, rattling the chains which held it in place, and its bone-white teeth could be seen when it opened and shut itself with loud, eager snapping sounds.

The eldest son took up his place in front of the Book and cleared his throat to relate the exciting tale he'd prepared. The Book squirmed ravenously from its place high on the enormous shelf.

Then the queen took out from the bodice of her gown three large iron keys, walked calmly to the Special Collections Reserve shelf and began unlocking the three weighty locks that held the chains in place. The first chain dropped to the stone library floor with a clank. Then the second. When the third chain fell to the floor, the Book leaped from the shelf and landed flat on the floor in front of them with a reverberant thud like a thunderclap. There it waited, panting heavily.

The eldest son could see neither eyes nor ears, but he could tell nonetheless that the huge leather-bound Book, easily the size of a small desk, was both watching and listening. The queen cradled her ruby pendant and waited as well.

"In a world filled with betrayal and danger, **one man** stands against..." the eldest son intoned, stopping only when the Book *lunged* at him. Taking a large step back, he amended: "That is to say, once upon a *time*, in a world filled with betrayal and danger, there lived one man with the courage to stand against..."

The Book quieted and listened to the story. The story was about a remarkably determined young man who could fight and ride and climb better than anyone else, making his way unerringly into certain danger, arriving finally in precisely the time and place so as to save the entire world from certain extinction. The story's hero was an ambiguous fellow, neither wholly virtuous, nor wholly untrustworthy.

The eldest son was particularly proud of how the story led the listener to genuinely believe that the morally complex protagonist had failed in his quest, right before the end, and had in fact been tragically killed. (Really though, the anti-hero had miraculously survived and forthwith dramatically returned to complete his mission.) There was also a particularly buxom woman

waiting patiently for the hero to save the whole world. This winsome person would wed him out of gratitude for the world-saving and all, as well as for his knack in delivering timely, roguish rejoinders. Only she could see the heart beneath his gruff, crusty exterior, the warmth in his flat, gravelly voice. There was also an amusing, short companion to the hero, who was to marry the beautiful woman's fat friend at the end of the story.

The only problem was that, *right* before the part where the hero was to return, and *just* as the hero had been pretend killed, the storyteller's eldest son was himself *actually* killed, right there in the library. The sounds of his horrified screams were cut off with the crunching sounds of his ribs and spine splintering when the monstrous Book gnawed right through them, prior to devouring the hapless elder son of the master storyteller whole in a spray of action-packed, heroic gore. It was clear the son's skin was to be digested and became pages, just as his blood would become printed ink.

(The princess was still in the forest, where she'd gone to avoid hearing all of this.)

"Oh well..." said the queen, and gestured imperiously toward the servant who'd been holding the mop instead of a torch.

If the eldest son had been alive to see, he might have noticed that the queen now had a bright glint in her dark blue eyes, and that the tiny crow's feet around them, as well as the slightly roughened skin upon her throat and hands, had been replaced by cold, perfect, porcelain flesh.

Word of the eldest son's demise reached the respectable-sized village where the master storyteller lay dying. Things looked even bleaker in the second act of the story than they had in the first.

"I will go and tell the queen's horrible Book a tale so wonderful it will not be able to *help* but weep dusty, papery tears by the end!" the master storyteller's earnest daughter told the family, filled with faith in the depth, emotional truth and heart-breaking beauty of her own poignant story.

"Alas! I have lost my eldest son already! I will *not* let my only daughter risk losing her life to the queen's Book as well!" the master storyteller exclaimed in a faint whisper, from the bed where he lay dying even more quickly than he had been in the first act.

"What else can we do?" his daughter asked rhetorically. "Try and *believe* in me, for once. I have talent. I have my own stories to tell, my own inner emotional landscape that needs a voice. And where an overwritten tale of action and violence failed, a subtler story of deep vulnerability, human relationships, redemption and forgiveness will surely prevail. My story is a very special one, and something that the kingdom really needs to hear, especially right now. It's past time that a story like this one got told. I will present this story to the queen's Book, and with the sack of gold it garners, I will return speedily in a carriage I will hire, armed with a bow and a quiver of arrows to protect me from robbers as I travel. And we will purchase medicine and all will be well again."

And the master storyteller's daughter kissed her family, and left them to go on her journey down country to the castle to present the heartwarming story.

As the daughter passed through the forest of fairy tale tropes, she spied the selfsame frog her brash elder brother had encountered earlier that week. It was sitting on the selfsame rock, sunning itself. Flies buzzed about it, but it did not eat them. "And where are you going on this fine day?" asked the frog of the master storyteller's daughter.

"I am passing through the forest to get to the king's castle," the storyteller's daughter told the gold-spotted green frog. "I am the only daughter of the master storyteller, who lies sick and dying in our village. I am going to present the queen's terrifying Book with a story of surpassing beauty and vulnerability and emotional truth and thereby win a sack of gold to buy medicine for my poor father, who I love more than any daughter ever has before, nor will again."

"Hm," mused the frog. "A story of surpassing beauty and truth, you say?"

"Quite so," the daughter told it. "A tale of hardship and redemption. Really empowering. Filled with emotional touchstone moments that could make the very stones of the castle walls themselves weep mildewy tears."

"And you are quite determined to travel to the castle and tell your tale?" the frog asked.

"I am," the storyteller's daughter replied. "It's time I found my voice. It's *my* turn to shine. It's time I truly *believed* in myself."

"I see," said the frog, resignedly. "I'll tell you what. If you tell me your story, I will tell you if the queen's ravenous Book is likely to accept it, or whether it will simply devour you horribly as it did your brother. Fairy tales aren't like regular stories, you know. There are rules. So many rules..."

The master storyteller's daughter was regretful but determined. "Thank you *so* much, but no. I really appreciate the offer. I'm sorry, but I just don't have time for that!" she told the frog, gazing sympathetically into its green eyes with her own sad brown ones, with her head tipped slightly to one side. "My father is dying and I've got a timeless, important story to tell the queen's Book. I have waited too long already." And the daughter went on her way, leaving the frog to sit on its stone in the sun, not eating the flies.

Walking contritely through the castle's front gate, the master storyteller's daughter politely informed the guards that she was there to offer up a brand new classic tale for the queen's ravenous Book, and then inquired the way to the deadly library.

As the storyteller's daughter was being escorted by three servants down to the ominous library, the queen's step-daughter stopped them. "Who are you and what do you do here?" she asked the storyteller's daughter.

"I am the only daughter of the master storyteller, who lies sick and dying in our village," the daughter told the princess, precisely repeating what she'd told the frog in the manner of fairy tale dialogue. "I am going to submit for the queen's magical Book's pleasure a beautiful, heartbreaking story about loss and forgiveness and thereby acquire a small quantity of gold to buy medicine for my dear father who I love more dearly than I can say."

The storyteller's daughter couldn't help but notice that the princess was as radiant as any princess in a fairy tale is apt to be. She, with her rich inner life, her complicated, swirling mosaic of conflicting and changing inner emotions, was a bit jealous of the princess' cheekbones and clear skin. But she admired the quality of the princess' brilliant white gown and her taste in choosing it. She liked and disliked the princess. She admired and judged her. So she complimented the princess on the tasteful accessorizing of the green sash, which she said set off the princess' forest emerald eyes perfectly. And she both meant it, and also didn't. (Or so she told herself, and half believed it at first, then rejected it utterly, before briefly reconsidering it.)

Ignoring all of this, one thing on her mind, the princess leaned in close enough for the storyteller's daughter to see the golden flecks that were in her verdant eyes and said "*Please* reconsider... Oh! I *so* wish my step-mother the queen would stop all of this! Her evil Book has eaten four storytellers just this week. Please turn from your path and go on your way in safety."

"It sounds like you're concerned for my safety," the storyteller's daughter listened reflectively. "I understand what you're saying, and I can't imagine what it must be like for you to deal with this on a weekly basis," she empathized profusely in the princess' general direction. Filled with the certainty that her story was important, and that this royal reading would skyrocket it to fame across the entire kingdom, the young woman said, "I have spent my whole life listening to the tales crafted by my beloved father, the master storyteller in our quite respectable-sized village, and I think the time is perfect for *me* to come out from under his shadow and prove that *I* can craft and share a touching fairy tale for the delight of everyone! Just wait until you hear the part about the grey-eyed girl who somehow isn't quite like other girls! (You *just* might see a little of yourself in her...)"

"Prithee, *please* turn back!" the princess begged the girl. "This Book is the evil spawn of my wicked step-mother the queen, to whose wickedness my father the old and kindly king is characteristically blind. You know how men can be. But so long as we continue to feed stories and storytellers to the Book, the larger it will grow, and the more ravenous. Why, just this year it has grown by three hundred and fifty greasy pages!" In her concern, the princess placed a hand on the storyteller's daughter's shoulder.

"I hear what you're saying, and I appreciate it," said the daughter, taking the princess' hand from her shoulder and giving it a warm squeeze and gazing at her earnestly, trying to make her feel heard. "It sounds like you're concerned about the Book. And I can really see where you're coming from. Really, I can. I do sympathize. But I really believe in my story, and in myself as a teller of stories, and I really must do this for my father and for, in fact, the very story itself. Thanks *so* much for sharing your concerns with me. I appreciate your position. And that *is* a really lovely dress." The storyteller's daughter gave the princess a grateful glance from her caring, brown eyes, dropped her hand and headed down the stone steps to the subterranean library, followed by the three servants.

"I simply *cannot* endure the sounds of yet another person being devoured by the queen, my step-mother's, dread Book!" the princess said to herself. "I do *not* feel listened to, heard of

understood. I will go again into the forest where I cannot hear what will almost certainly transpire!”

Head held high with belief in herself, and in the inspiring poignancy of her story, the master storyteller’s daughter entered the library, ready to find her voice as an artist and as a woman. There she met the queen, tall and regal, with her beautiful pale skin and long, dark hair looking more youthful and lustrous than ever. She wore a lower cut dress this day, but it was of the same dark blue colour to match her large, unreadable eyes. She again wore her circlet and her blood-red ruby pendant. The queen looked at the small group inquiringly. “Well?” she said.

“I am the only daughter of the master storyteller, who lies close to death in our respectable-sized village,” the young woman told the queen. “I am here to share a story. A very special story. A story I believe your majesty’s famous Book will find moving, heart-breaking and inspiring. A story whose time is truly upon us. I hope it will be of sufficient emotional beauty as to move the queen’s heart to help me in buying important medicines for my beloved father. Surely this is what it’s all about: two women, united in sisterhood, raising awareness, finding our voices, empowering ourselves and working together for the good of others?”

The queen again smiled slightly and nodded just as slightly, signalling the girl to follow her to the Special Collections Reserve area where the Book was.

Two of the servants carried the pair of torches. As they approached, the gabbling, moaning screech of the hungry tome once again echoed through the forbidding, sepulchral library.

“My darling, my dear one, I have brought you another visitor...” the queen called.

The Book spasmed violently with savage delight, rattling its chains and baring its teeth, its papery maw opening and shutting with loud snapping sounds that coruscated across the crenellated ceiling.

The storyteller’s daughter stood very straight, chin up, hands clasped behind her, ready to deliver her very special story.

Then the queen took out her keys, walked calmly to the Special Collections Reserve shelf and unlocked the weighty locks that secured the Book to its prison on the shelf. The first chain dropped to the library floor with a hefty clank. Then the second.

When the third chain fell to the floor, the Book launched itself through the air from the bookshelf where it had been bound and landed flat on the floor in front of them with a thunderous *smack*. It quivered in anticipation, amid the cloud of dust its fall had raised. The queen stood silent, stroking her ruby pendant.

The daughter could somehow tell that the iron-capped leather-bound Book, the size of a dinner table, could both see and hear her. She gathered herself, looked down, and started her story. “Jasmine Smoke was not the prettiest girl in her village, but she...” the daughter began, stopping for a moment with a tiny gasp when the Book *lunged* at her. She leaped back, and in a shaky voice amended: “That is to say, *once* upon a time, there lived a very special young woman named Jasmine Smoke who at long last was about to come into her own. You see, she was not like other girls.”

The Book quieted and listened to the story. The story was about a perky, witty, wise young woman who, despite not being the prettiest girl in her village, had nonetheless attracted the attention of two uniformly sultry young men. She was, you see, indeed not like other girls. She possessed some indefinable quality of *specialness* that not everyone valued as much as they should have. For one thing, her eyes were a smoky grey.

One of the interested young men was dark-haired and smolderingly exciting, while the other was fair-haired, superhumanly kind and far sweeter than his rival. Each was as devoted to her as the other, and equally willing to wait right until the end of the story for her to choose between the two of them. Neither spoke to other girls.

The storyteller's daughter was particularly proud of how the story led the listener to believe that the heroine had finally made a choice and had picked the fair-haired sweet one, mostly due to the charming misbehaviour of the exciting dark-haired one giving her pause for thought. The story craftily misled the listener in this way, only to then reveal that the sweet fair-haired man actually loved the heroine *so* much that he only wanted her to be happy. Regretfully resolving to be "just friends" with her forever, he then selflessly sacrificed his own life for the dashing dark-haired man, enabling the couple to live together gratefully ever after. There was also the quipping fat friend of the heroine, who by the end of the story had already started to draw the romantic attentions of the dashing dark-haired man's amusingly nebbish, skinny companion.

The only problem was that, right before the part where the fair-haired love interest was to fictionally sacrifice himself for the heroine's happiness, the storyteller's daughter was herself very non-fictionally killed. The sounds of her screams were soon cut off by the splintering sound of her neck and skull crunching when the monstrous Book bit through them and devoured her whole in a torrent of poignant, evocative bloodspray.

(The princess was still in the forest to avoid hearing any of this.)

"Oh dear, oh dear..." said the queen with a slight smile, and gestured again to the servant with the mop. She now had a fresh glint in her bright, unreadable eyes, and her flesh was even more perfect than before. There was a flush in her cheeks and she breathed heavily as she fingered her pendant.

Word that the daughter had met her end just as horribly as the eldest son had soon reached the village where the master storyteller lay on his deathbed. Things looked even bleaker in the third act of the story than they had in the second.

"I suppose it now falls to me, the younger of the two sons, to tell a true fairy tale, a story acceptable even to the delicate papery palate of the queen's murderous bookspawn," the younger and shorter of the two sons said, very quietly and seriously. He had always been a very quiet and serious person, even as a boy, and he had always listened to everything going on around him.

"Alas! I have lost my eldest son your brother, and my daughter your sister already! I will *not* lose the last of my children to the queen's Book as well!" the master storyteller croaked,

from the bed in which he now seemed absolutely certain to die. He looked even worse now than he had in the second act.

“I am not eager to do this thing, Father, but it is clear I must,” his only remaining child said, with quiet resignation. “I have heard many, many fairy tales. I will do my best. First I will plan the tale out carefully according to the conventions of fairy tales, then I will craft it, and go present it to the queen’s Book. Hopefully I will thereby obtain a sack of gold and return to you in time to purchase medicine, and you will then be well again.”

And the remaining child of the master storyteller and his wife (who, entirely marginalized, doesn’t enter into this tale) packed his things and left the house that day, leaving the master storyteller weeping, expecting to live out his few remaining days childless.

As the shorter, younger, more attentive son passed through the forest of fairy tale tropes his siblings had traversed before him the week before, he spied the gold-spotted green frog on the rock from which it was accustomed to accosting unsuspecting travelers. “And where are *you* going on this fine day?” asked the frog of the master storyteller’s only child.

“I am passing through this forest to get to the king’s castle,” the storyteller’s son told the frog. “I am the only remaining child of the master storyteller, who lies sick and near death thither in our respectable-sized village. I must craft a tale in the old fairy tale style and present it to the queen’s terrifying Book. The hope is that I will thereby earn a sack of gold to buy medicine for my father, who is a good man and worthy of all this and much more besides.”

“Hm,” mused the frog. “A tale in the old fairy tale style, you say?”

“Right,” the storyteller’s only son told the frog. “You know: Once upon a time a hapless child becomes a successful adult by leaving the known to go down into the unknown, conquering chaotic, nefarious forces hiding in the dark, then returning back up to the known with new competence and character to the benefit of all, finding love and living happily ever after for his efforts.”

“And there is no way *whatsoever* that I can talk you out of journeying down to the castle and telling the evil queen’s ravenous Book your best attempt at a fairy tale?” the frog asked hopefully.

“Nope,” the storyteller’s only son replied eloquently.

Some flies buzzed peacefully near some enormous white toadstools with red caps and pale spots on them, but the frog paid them no attention. “I see,” said the frog, resigned by this point. “Does your story have extremely clearly drawn lines between good and evil? Parasitic, perhaps cannibalistic evil characters spawning evil magic, and stalwart, simple, pure of heart characters standing up to all that, out of love for family and community, rather than merely for selfish reasons?”

“Of course,” the storyteller’s last son said. “It is a *fairy tale*, after all.”

“Good. Male characters showing up as young heroes-in-the-making or sage old doddards, and female characters being maidens, matrons or crones? If someone loves you, they’ll feed, shelter and clothe you, and if they don’t, they’ll poison, kill and maybe even eat you?” the frog

continued quietly, a shaft of sunlight piercing the leaf cover, dappling the rock where the amphibian sat. It glinted quite dazzlingly off its golden, coin-sized spots.

“Exactly,” the storyteller’s son answered, clearly anxious to be getting on to the castle.

“Old crones trying to cheat nature by stealing youth from the young? Up and light are good, down and dark are bad? Everything coming in threes?”

“Yes, yes and yes” the storyteller’s son affirmed patiently, nodding his head with each “yes.”

“But don’t all of those old stories feature a princess who is nothing more than a damsel in distress who needs to be rescued by a handsome prince at the end? Teaching young girls that they’re helpless and need a man?” The frog seemed to be testing him.

“Nope. Most of them are about someone finding their fortune, or true love in some sense of the word. So in many of the stories, when a couple comes together, the point is true love, not that one of them needs to be rescued.”

The frog said nothing.

“Many fairytales have sad endings, and no one gets rescued at all, but rather gets eaten by the wolf or whatever. The one with the cat wearing the boots, it’s the cat who rescues the boy. The one with the two kids in the candy house, the little girl slays the witch and rescues her brother. In the one with the mermaid, it’s the mermaid who rescues the prince. (Dies at the end and doesn’t get true love in that one.) In the one with the girl in the ashes, it’s her fairy godmother who actually rescues her and equips her to go find true love her own way. The gravest danger she’s in is staying single and needing to do her own housework. In the one with the long-haired girl in the tower, the boy doesn’t so much rescue her as knock her up, enrage the witch leaving the girl homeless, so he can then wander in the wilderness helplessly blind, waiting for her to rescue him and cure his blindness with her tears. With the sleeping princess, it’s more about true love reviving her, than about a “rescue” of any kind. (Especially in the version in which the baby being born is what awakens her.) In the one with the imp that can turn straw into gold, no one rescues the girl either. She’s a queen and she hires spies and one of her hired spies overhears the creature saying his own name so she can guess it correctly, saving herself and the child that trickery and true love got her. In the one with the aristocratic beast, it’s more about true love rescuing him from his bestial state. So, no. That’s the sort of complaint people make when they don’t know what happens in the stories and don’t care either.”

“I see. But you know better?” The frog looked at him in a way that was almost human.

“I do.”

“In your story evil is brought to an end by its own machinations, rather than being coldly executed by the hero, whose hands thus remain clean?” the frog asked, eager to verify this one last thing.

“What *else* would I do?” the storyteller’s son smiled rhetorically at the frog. “I’ve heard more than a few fairy tales in my time. You’re talking to the master storyteller’s third child, here.”

“Well, if you’re determined to go...” the frog trailed off.

“I am quite resolved. If I survive the thing with the queen’s Book, I’ll come back and tell you a fairy tale if you like...” the storyteller’s only child offered.

“I’d like that,” the frog replied.

Arriving at the castle’s front gate, the master storyteller’s remaining son let the guards know what he was up to, and headed for the stairs down to the Book’s labyrinthine library lair. Three servants joined him to escort him down into it. Two of them carried torches.

As the storyteller’s son reached the top of the steps, the princess, in her white dress with its green sash, stood watching him solemnly. “Last chance to turn back...” she told him with bottomless wells of sorrow in her gold-flecked green eyes.

The storyteller’s son said nothing and headed down the stairs, followed by the three servants.

“Don’t forget to include *true love* in any fairy tale you tell to the queen’s Book,” the princess called after him. “How else will your maidens turn to matrons, and your sons to fathers?”

Disappearing into the darkness, he didn’t give an answer. Of *course* he wouldn’t forget something as simple as that. It was a fairy tale, wasn’t it?

And again, the princess left the castle to avoid the gruesome sounds of Dewey Decimal death she feared to hear emanating from the library.

Looking oddly calm under the circumstances, the master storyteller’s only son entered the library. The queen, dignified and tall, stood waiting. She looked lovely and majestic and even more youthful than before, but the storyteller’s son was interested only in the Book he intended to satiate with a vintage fairy tale. The queen gestured to the back of the library, watching the young man hungrily with her enormous, dark blue, empty eyes.

As the light from the torches of the two servants whose only job was to carry torches fell across the shelf where the Book was chained, it awoke. A hooting, ululating howl rebounded from the vaulted stone ceilings of the place. The chains clashed against the wooden shelving.

“Dearest, I have brought you another visitor...” the queen told the Book.

The Book twitched and squirmed, eager to be loosed from its chains again. The chains were scarcely long enough to encircle its great girth now. It snapped its maw open and closed in the flickering torchlight. It had a hunger that clearly wasn’t being sated by the parade of failed storytellers its mother was bringing to feed it, though it grew fatter with each one.

The son of the master storyteller planted his feet shoulder-width apart, and waited to tell his story. While he did this, his story arranged itself in his head like an intricately laid out, turreted, moated, bannered castle, and waited to be told.

The queen again unlocked the three heavy padlocks that held the chains to the looming shelf. The first dusty chain dropped to the stone floor with a weighty clank. Then the second. When the third chain hit the floor, the Book let itself tip forward from the towering shelf and thudded heavily to the floor. It was corpulent and ponderous with the devoured storytellers who’d told unsatisfactory stories, and so had become chapters in the Book themselves. The Book

waited, dust settling around where it had landed, squatting like an oversized grand piano before him.

“Once upon a time,” the storyteller’s son began. The Book sat utterly unmoving as the master storyteller’s son unfolded his fairy tale. It had no fairies in it, but then most fairy tales don’t. Children left the familiar, mundane known, trekking deep into the unknown, through unfamiliar climes where odd messengers interrupted their journey unexpectedly with clockwork regularity. Characters went down into ominous, Jungian darkness and faced down evil anti-mother step-figures paired with weak, absent fathers. People and things were transformed into other things, and then back into their original forms. Characters fell in love with people of surpassing beauty who always loved them back. Extremely obvious secrets set up from the beginning of the story were revealed right on cue at its end. Characters went from the unfamiliar darkness and depths back up to the light, and from there back home to the familiar country from whence they came, newly able to protect home and community.

And when the whole thing was told, the storyteller’s son finished: “And they all lived happily ever after.”

The Book sat on the floor, drooling quietly. It did not move.

The queen looked at the Book. The servants looked at the queen, then back to the Book.

“Well?” the master storyteller’s last child asked her.

“Well *what?*” the queen responded, clearly rattled. Fine lines were clearly visible around her large, dark blue eyes then, and the skin of her neck had started to look a bit... *tendony*.

“Did the Book like my fairy tale?” he asked. “It seemed to.”

“No. It did not. It was a very poor story,” the queen said. “A *very* poor story. We’ve all heard *that* old story a thousand times.”

“Well then, it was my honour to travel to this place and tell it to you for the one thousand and first time,” the young man said, starting to leave in gracious disappointment.

“Devour him!” the queen hissed at the Book, quietly at first, then louder: “Devour him!” she said.

When she started to say “Devour h-” for a third time, fingering the ruby pendant she wore, readying it to absorb the chaos and terror of a sudden violent death, the Book opened wide and *keened* sorrowfully. Inconsolably. The Book had deeply loved the fairy tale and didn’t want the master storyteller’s son to leave it alone in the library now, and it certainly did not want to kill him horribly. Not a single storyteller before this one had ever told it a fairy tale that had followed the rules of fairy tales so masterfully.

Wide-eyed panic starting to show through her rage, the queen turned to the Book, holding up her ruby pendant to compel it to do her bidding. The Book cowered at first, shrinking away from her fierce eyes, then it lunged forward and snapped the ruby, and with it three fingers, from her left hand.

Instantly, like an orchid shrivelling in a campfire, the queen shrank into herself and became a bent crone with three remaining teeth and a long wisp of frazzled white hair trailing wildly

from her bald, spotted head. The velvety fabric of her dark blue gown grew rotten and moth-eaten as well.

Hand spouting gouts of dark, syrupy blood, the crone lunged for the pendant, still held within the pages of the Book, and her thick-spined offspring simply snapped her up and ate her whole. With the sounds of shattering dry bones cracking and pattering off the distant ceiling of the library, the crone's shattered body disintegrated into dust and ash as it was devoured, billowing out in a fan-like pattern in front of the despairing Book.

Still keening to itself, the Book lurched off into the hidden depths of the library that was its home, taking refuge in the darkness, finally free to wander the unspeakable stacks at will.

The servant who had been holding the mop went off in search of a broom and dustpan.

In the confusion that followed, the master storyteller's son knew which side his bread was buttered on, and headed off, empty-handed, to watch his father die. Passing first through the castle gates, then up through the sunny forest of fairy tale tropes, he thought back dismally upon his odd journey.

Coming to a bend in the path through the forest, he came upon the same frog, sitting upon the same rock, sunning its golden spots in the same sun as it had been when he'd left it. He was not surprised to see it.

The dying storyteller's son sat for a moment on a stone beside the frog's smaller one. It was much larger, but had slightly less sun. "Well, *that* could have gone better..." the storyteller's only child told the frog.

"Could have gone a lot worse, too!" the frog replied, looking at him closely. "You're still here, aren't you? So, what happened with the fairy tale?"

As the young man unfolded the story of delivering his fairy tale, the frog listened silently, with growing excitement.

Finally it interrupted. "The queen is dead? Eaten by her hulking hardcover offspring?" it asked.

"Yup," the storyteller replied in his eloquent way. He was, after all, a storyteller's son.

"I see," said the frog. "And your father may still be alive?"

The young man nodded just as articulately.

"Then we must be quick," said the frog. "Pick me up and run with me to the castle entrance. Be very careful not to drop me..."

And so the master storyteller's son did as the frog bade him, picking up the green creature with its markings glinting like molten gold in the sun, and running as fast as he could to the castle, confused but curious.

Just as he was about to run through the castle gates, the frog told him "Wait. Stop. Put me down."

The young man did as he was told.

The frog hopped three short hops. The first hop brought it just short of the gates. The second hop brought it to the threshold. The third brought it just inside the castle gates. And once

inside the gates, the frog transformed dramatically back into its true form. For of course it had been the princess all along.

“My step-mother the queen ensorcelled me so I would not be able to leave the castle grounds to get away from her without transforming into a frog,” the princess who’d been the frog told him, conveniently providing expository dialogue. “Only here, in the place where I was most miserable could I remain myself. If my guess is right, the spell was broken with her wicked neck, and having now transformed for good into my true shape, I can leave the castle grounds and we can ride the king’s horses to your father’s house without worrying about my turning back into a frog. Quick! Let us fetch the court physician and go. We must hurry!”

And so it was. The princess and the master storyteller’s son, accompanied by the court physician and three guards armed with crossbows and great-axes, sped off on the king’s fastest chargers to see to the master storyteller.

By the time they arrived, the master storyteller was not aware of their dramatic entrance. He did not so much as stir when they called his name. The master storyteller lay in the bed motionless.

After the court physician had treated the master storyteller’s illness with herbs and foul-smelling concoctions for three weeks, however, the man was soon well enough to get up and walk to the window and look out at his back field. There, his son was asking a princess to marry him, both of them lit with fiercely orange-pink flame by the sun setting over the forest of fairy tale tropes.

She said yes at first, then no, then yes again, and eventually they married: princess and newly appointed court storyteller. And when he told his stories to the crowd in the castle courtyard, the royal consort knew that he often had an appreciative audience listening from the storm grate that led to the library deep underground. The kingdom was finally at peace, free from the dark tyranny of the evil queen.

And they all lived happily ever after.