

*"Daddy, can you tell me a bedtime story please?"*

*"Of course, Muffin. What would my little girl like to hear tonight?"*

*"Poisoned Apple! Do Poisoned Apple!"*

*"Sure thing. Do you remember how it starts?"*

*"I do Daddy! I do! Once upon a time..."*

...In a land far, far away, there lived a great King and Queen who ruled their kingdom kindly and justly. They were loved by their people, and loved their people in return.

Their Princess was born with pale, white skin. The little girl was barely breathing. The King, stricken with panic, called for the royal Wizard. He had to know if his tiny, snow-white child was going to survive the night. He needed to know how she was going to die.

The Wizard came as fast as he could, carrying a small wooden box. When he arrived at the royal bedchambers, he found the King cradling his new child. The child had fallen asleep, and her breathing was softer than ever. Silently, the Wizard set the box on the bed and opened the lid. Inside was a collection of brass and glass and all sorts of shiny trinkets. From the box he pulled out a long, silver needle. As gently as he could, he poked the child's foot, drawing a tiny drop of blood. She fussed, but did not wake.

The Wizard took the bloody needle back to his box. He pulled out a small roll of parchment, and dabbed the needle against it. As he whispered the magic words, the blood he had smeared began to dance and wriggle around the paper. With a bright and brilliant flash, the blood spelled out two simple words.

The King suddenly became very nervous when he saw the look on his Wizard's face. Clearly, something was wrong.

"What is it? What fate awaits my daughter have in store?" The King asked.

The Wizard said nothing. He simply turned the paper for the King to see. It read POISONED APPLE. The King laughed so hard that the walls shook. This was wonderful! She was going to live! And, best of all, she would never have to die before her time. He was the King. If he said that there would never be apples in the castle again, then that was that. His daughter would never have to live in fear of death.

The Wizard was not so sure. He reminded the King that this spell was never wrong. The parchment would always predict how someone die, and it could never be avoided. After all, the Queen's parchment had read CHILDBIRTH. And it had come to pass that on the day the kingdom received its new Princess, it had said farewell to its Queen. The King scoffed at this. Nothing was beyond his power, not even death itself.

The Princess's parchment was right; she did not die that night. The little child lived to grow into a beautiful girl. The King named her Snow White, as her skin never quite shed the pale color it was the night she was born. Snow White was never allowed out of the castle, to ensure she would not happen upon an apple by accident.

Before long, the King remarried. But Snow White's Stepmother was not the woman the Old Queen once was. Where the Old Queen always smiled, the New Queen would scowl at everyone who wasn't the King. Where the Old Queen was quite open about what her parchment had read and still bravely had her daughter, the New Queen had never been tested, for fear that assassins might use the information against her. And where Snow White's Mother had approached her death with a smile on her face, the New Queen was a bitter coward.

As time passed, the beautiful girl grew into a beautiful woman. Snow White was in every way like her mother, and was now old enough that she wanted to see the world. The castle walls were just too small for her now. But the King would have none of it; she was to stay in the castle. After all, he was the King, and that was that.

But her Stepmother was more than eager to get Snow White out of the castle and out of her life. Every time Snow White would ask what an apple was, so that she could understand what lay in store for her, the New Queen would cringe. Every time Snow White pleaded to be shown an apple, so she could know what death looked like, the New Queen would have to leave the room. How could someone so young be so headstrong about confronting certain doom, when she could not even bare to know what it might be? Before long, the New Queen had devised a plan to end Snow White's questioning and rid her from the castle.

One night, while the King slept, the New Queen took Snow White out of the castle gate and into the kingdom. The New Queen lied to her stepdaughter, telling her that the King had finally given in to her wishes. Snow White was too overjoyed to wonder why they were leaving in the middle of the night, or even to ask where they were going.

To her, each new thing was the most amazing thing she had ever seen since the last new thing. The castle had jesters and royal jugglers, but it didn't have anything to compare to wild flowers or babbling brooks. The trees and grass and the wild animals were all new to her. And while she was amazed at every single thing she passed, her Stepmother led her farther and farther away from the castle.

Shortly after dawn, Snow White and her Stepmother entered a strange clearing, where the branches of the trees were decorated with hanging red orbs.

"These, my dear daughter, " the New Queen said, "are apples."

Snow White was dumbfounded. After spending all of her life searching for an apple, she had found an entire grove filled with them. She bounded from low-hanging branch to low-hanging branch, touching and smelling every apple she could. Each time, she would wonder if she should take a bite out of the apple she was staring at, and each time she could not help but wonder if that apple would turn out to be poisoned.

"Stepmother," Snow White asked, "Do you think it would be a wise idea to try one?"

There was no answer. Why Snow White turned around to see why the New Queen was not speaking, she found that she was alone in the grove. The New Queen was gone, leaving her abandoned.

At first, Snow White was frozen with panic. She was alone in a place where she had never been before, surrounded by objects that could very well kill her. But she was a brave princess, and it only took her a moment to return to her senses. She had never been here before, but it was not a scary place. She was alone, but she was not helpless. And she had no way of knowing for sure if any of these apples were poisoned.

Without another moment's hesitation, she reached out, plucked one from the tree, and took a giant bite from it.

It was delicious.

As it happened, a small band of dwarves lived near that grove. While they were returning home from a hard day's work in the fields, they heard a beautiful voice that was new to

them, laughing loud and brightly. When they finally found the source of the laughter, they found Snow White rolling about in the grove, a large stack of picked apples sitting next to her. She was more than happy to share, and the dwarves took her back to their house for dinner.

*"What were their names, Daddy?"*

*"Their names?"*

*"Yeah! The dwarves. What were their names?"*

*"Um. Well...there was Stabbed, and Arrow, and Black Plague, too. And there was Old Age, also Falling and Landing--- those two were brothers. Oh! And the last one was named Peanut."*

*"Why do they all have such weird names?"*

*"See, the dwarves were a very silly people, and named all of their children after what their card, I mean, parchment, said."*

*"That is silly."*

*"I know. But no more interrupting. You're supposed to be going to bed. And I've got a story to finish."*

When Snow White reached the dwarves' house, she suddenly realized that her father must be very worried about her sudden disappearance, as any father would worry about his missing daughter, even if he was the King. She asked the dwarves if they would be willing to deliver a message to him so that he would know that she was alright.

Peanut agreed, and started off for the castle. He found it very quickly. But when he knocked on the castle gate, it was the New Queen who answered.

"I have a message for the King, saying that his daughter is safe," said Peanut.

"I will make sure it gets to him," said the New Queen.

"But please, Your Highness, it is important I deliver the message myself," Peanut said.

"The King is out of the castle now, dwarf. Leave it with me and I will make sure he receives it."

"Dear Queen, great Queen, please let me give this to the King. It is news of his missing daughter."

"The King is not here, and even if he was, I would never let a lowly dwarf like you see him. Now give me that message or it will never see anyone at all."

Peanut felt deep in his gut that the New Queen was not to be trusted, but she would not let him inside. His only choice was to give the letter to her. Feeling that he had failed, he started slowly back to the dwarves' house.

The New Queen had barely closed the door when she began to seethe. This would not do. She had left her stepdaughter in a grove of apples to show her how meaningless it was to embrace her fate. It seemed that if she wanted her stepdaughter to understand how serious death was, she would have to show her herself.

The New Queen went directly to the royal Wizard, demanding that he make her a poisoned apple. But the Wizard was not a foolish man, and he knew that the New Queen only wanted the apple to kill Snow White. He refused. The New Queen begged and pleaded with him, saying that the apple was only meant to teach her daughter how dangerous the world could be. The Wizard refused; he would not have the princesses' death on his hands. The New

Queen was so furious at him that she had him thrown into the dungeon. She would not let a little thing like a foolish Wizard keep her from her dreadful task.

After scouring the Wizard's tower, the New Queen finally happened upon an old scroll. It was exactly the spell she had been looking for. Before the day was done, she had completed the spell; she had made her poisoned apple.

Telling the King that she was going to try to find his missing daughter, she left the castle again and quickly found the grove where she had been before. This time, however, she was in disguise. Using another spell she had found in the Wizard's tower, she had made herself look like an old beggar woman. It pained her to turn herself in to such an old woman, so clearly near the end of her life. But if it meant she would finally be rid of Snow White, she would be able to deal with showing that weakness, if only for a short while. It did not take her long to hear Snow White leading the dwarves in songs and various merriments. She followed the sound to the dwarves' house.

"Excuse me!" she called out. "Can you spare any kindness for a poor, old beggar?"

Snow White's kind heart was immediately moved by this pitiful woman. She brought her in and fed her dinner and did everything she could to make her comfortable. The New Queen relished being waited on hand and foot. When the sun had begun to set, she called Snow White over to her.

"Please," she said, "have this apple. It is the least I can offer you for your kindness."

"Why, thank you." Snow White replied. She had come to very much enjoy the taste of apples., and this one was far more red and far more plump than any she had seen in the grove. Snow White took the apple from the New Queen, took one large bite, and promptly fell over dead. The New Queen let out a cackle as her appearance changed from the old beggar woman back to herself. Peanut immediately recognized the New Queen as the woman he had seen at the castle.

"Let that be a lesson as to what happens to anyone who invites their death in to their life!" the New Queen said. And then she left, all of the dwarves still shocked at what had happened to their new friend. They had assumed her name was just like theirs, and she would die in the winter, possibly in a fresh snow. Never something like this. They could not bear to bury someone so beautiful, so they left Snow White out in their living room for all to see, her skin as pale as her name.

All they could do was wail and weep. Day in and day out, for three days, the dwarves cried. But on the third day, a young farmer named Michael came to their house. He had heard their wailing all the way from his farm, and had to find out what could possibly make someone so sad. The dwarves told him of Snow White, and of her brave heart and her tragic death. Instantly, Michael fell deeply in love with this woman courageous enough to meet death head-on. They showed him her body, and he was amazed at her beauty, still perfect even in death. He knew he had to do something to avenge this poor girl.

Peanut explained that it was the New Queen who had done such an awful thing. And that revenge on her would be next to impossible, as no one knew what her parchment said. Clearly, Michael reasoned, they would have to find out. And so, he and the dwarves decided

they needed to free the royal Wizard, so that he could work his magic and tell them how to slay the evil New Queen.

In the dead of night, Michael took the brothers Falling and Landing to the castle wall. All dwarves were exceptional diggers, but Falling and Landing even more so. With names like theirs, they knew they could take all kinds of risks in the tunnels and more than likely be safe. In no time at all, the two dwarves had burrowed under the dungeon and into the Wizard's cell. Michael quickly explained what had happened. The Wizard was not too surprised--the death parchments are never wrong and the New Queen was truly twisted in what she had been trying to achieve. Both of those things together could only have ended this way.

Michael begged the Wizard to perform the death-predicting spell on the New Queen. The Wizard was hesitant. He would be more than happy to help, but he would need his magic kit and a sample of the New Queen's blood before he could do anything. Michael had expected this, and called for the dwarf who was still waiting outside.

Black Plague was the bravest of the dwarves, fearing only rats and people with the sniffles. Hearing what he had to do, he started climbing the castle wall towards the bedchamber of the New Queen. He started slow, finding the right footholds in the old stone wall. But once he passed the height where a fall would only break his bones and was then high enough the drop could only kill him, he climbed as quickly as a spider, not fearing a thing.

When he reached the New Queen's chamber, he could not believe his luck. She had been practicing the Wizard's magic, and his magic kit was sitting right beside her bed as she slept. Silently, he grabbed the long, silver needle, just as the Wizard had instructed, and pricked the New Queen on the palm of her hand. She fussed, but did not wake. Grabbing the kit and taking care not to wipe the blood off the needle, Black Plague scurried out the window and back down the wall.

On his way down, he decided to show off to his friends waiting down below. Not fearing the fall, he climbed one handed, and upside down, and using just his feet while he waved at them with his hands. It went well for a while, until he got close enough to the ground that the fall would not kill him. While trying to do a handstand on a particularly loose stone, he tumbled to the ground, dropping the kit and the needle.

Michael was able to catch the needle and the kit, but he did not even try to catch Black Plague. After all, it wasn't like he was named Falling. With a thump and a loud crack, Black Plague's leg broke as he landed. He screamed terribly loud and terribly pained. The Wizard tut-tutted him. The death predictions are not to be mocked. Respected and honored, yes, but if you mock them you may simply find new and exciting ways to hurt yourself, even if they won't kill you. After making Black Plague promise to never do something so stupid again, the Wizard muttered a few magic words, and his leg was healed.

Michael became very excited. "If you can heal his leg," Michael said, "surely you can revive Snow White!"

The Wizard sadly shook his head. He was a powerful Wizard, but there were even some things beyond his might. Before he could say any more, cries of alarm could be heard from inside the castle wall. Black Plague's scream had woken the New Queen, and when she had woken to find the magic kit missing and her hand bleeding, she had called for the royal guard, telling them that assassins were about. For fear of getting captured, the dwarves, the

Wizard and Michael ran the entire way back to the dwarves' house.

Once there, the Wizard was able to perform the death prediction spell. He dragged the needle across the parchment, said the magic words, and watched as the red smear danced in to a single word: KING. The dwarves were ecstatic. Finally, the secret to the New Queen's death had been discovered. But Michael could not bring himself to celebrate. Snow White was still dead. He was still desperately in love with the woman she had been and was no more.

In a fit of sorrow and passion, he ran to where Snow White lay and kissed her. Before the kiss had ended, the color had returned to her pale, white skin and her heart began to beat once more. Michael was amazed. He asked the Wizard if this was his doing, but the Wizard shook his head. He was a powerful man, but even his powers were nothing compared to love. Real, true, deep and sincere love was the strongest force there was.

When the sun rose, everyone set out for the castle. The newly-revived Snow White hid her face in a hood, hoping to disguise herself. When they came to the castle gate, Peanut knocked again, and the New Queen answered again. This time, however, he barged straight through the door and found the King himself, his friends following close behind.

When they reached the throne room, the Wizard told the entire story to the King. How Snow White had snuck out with her Stepmother, how her Stepmother had abandoned her in the apple grove, how the dwarves had found her, how the New Queen had stopped the letter from reaching him, and finally how the New Queen had poisoned Snow White.

The King was absolutely crushed to hear the news of his daughter's death, and he was furious to have been betrayed by the woman he called a wife. He demanded the New Queen be beheaded at once. The New Queen pleaded for her life, begging for the Wizard for to perform the death prediction spell on her. It would show that she was not to be beheaded, she argued, and that she was clearly innocent. The King refused; she had lived without the spell, and she would die without knowing what it said. Without any further talk, the New Queen was taken to the executioner and beheaded on his royal order. Because he was the King, and if he said she was to die, that was that.

After the New Queen had been taken away, Michael asked the King if he could speak to him. He told the King about what the dwarves had told him about his daughter. And about how beautiful she had looked. And how he had fallen deeply, truly in love with her. And how love was the strongest force there was.

It was at this point that Snow White removed her hood, and the King saw that his daughter still lived. He was overjoyed. He called for a feast and for celebration. At that feast, Snow White talked to the man who had given her new life. She and Michael talked all through the night and after the sun had come up. She, too, fell madly in love with him. Later that day, they were married. And they all lived happily ever after, until they met with their preordained deaths, which they met bravely and with a smile on their face.

*"Like the story, Muffin?"*

*"Yeah. I love Poisoned Apple. But, Daddy. There's something I don't understand. Does it mean that Snow White could never eat apples again if she didn't want to die?"*

*"What?"*

*"Her card, I mean, her parchment still said POISONED APPLE, right? So that was still how she was going to die for real? 'Cause it seems like it'd be real bad to never be able to eat apples."*

*"It would be. So. Um. You see, Snow White had already died once The apple killed her. So that prediction had already come true. So she decided to have herself tested again. And the second time she got, um, MOTORBOATING ACCIDENT."*

*"Really?! That's just like me, Daddy!"*

*"I know. Now get some sleep, okay, Muffin?"*

*"Okay, Daddy. Night night."*

*"Good night, my little princess."*