

## THE CABIN BOY AND THE ENCHANTED ISLAND

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Since the king and queen had no children, the king who, apart from being a king, was also a sorcerer who boasted of being a very wise man, advised his wife to go and see a witch.

"I need a child," said the queen to the witch upon arrival. The walls in her dump had some hideous snakes as hangings.

"I warn you that the child will bring you misfortune."

"No. no. He will always be my joy. I cannot go back home without a child."

Then, the witch asked the queen for her gold crown, her sapphire necklace, her pearl bracelets, her ruby brooches, the diamonds from the buckles on her shoes and the lilies she had pinned on her. The witch threw them all into her cauldron and told the queen:

"You will have a child with golden hair like your crown, blue eyes like your sapphires.

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red lips like your rubies and milky skin like your pearls.

His soul will be as white as lilies and his intelligence will be as clear as a diamond."

"And what should I give you in return?"

The witch wanted nothing but, feeling compelled by the queen's pleas, she eventually said that she was looking forward to giving up her craft and that she would do so when she earned somebody's affection.

Then, the queen embraced the witch and gave her fifty kisses while she said:

"Well then, I do love you and my child will love you too".

"Those kisses will be a spell which you can use to call on me. Go back to your palace".

When the queen arrived at the palace, she saw that the baby she had wished for was resting in a little cradle.

However, she noticed the pink ribbons and immediately knew that it was not a son but a daughter.

The king was furious because he wanted an heir and he got very angry with the queen:

"I asked for a boy".

"Well, you should have said a son. You have spent your whole life studying magic and being a king and now you have no prince to inherit your knowledge and estates!"

From then onwards, the king and queen quarreled frequently. He devoted himself to his huge books and she to her daughter, who grew to become extremely beautiful, till the age of eighteen. One day, the king, who would not forgive the queen, threatened her right in front of her daughter, who intervened and told him off.

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"Don't get involved in this argument, my dear daughter." said the queen and she turned to address the king: "She might be a girl but we can find a good husband for her. If you like, it could be someone who knows about magic.

"He will have to know a lot of magic to marry her.

While the king was saying these words, he was already thinking of the plan he was going to carry out shortly afterwards. After consulting some scrolls and undertaking prestidigitations, he got his plan ready. It consisted of taking the unfortunate princess to the Lonely Tower, which is on an island two hundred miles away from anywhere. She was provided with a dowry and a substantial income. Then, the king hired a competent dragon and respectable griffin to watch over her and keep guard over the surroundings of the island.

"The man capable of reaching you must be very clever indeed. There are nine whirlpools around the island. If he is not sucked into them, he will have to fight against the dragon and the griffin.

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You can use all your time ahead embroidering your wedding dress. Goodbye, girl." The queen, who had remained in the palace, called the witch for help.

"In exchange for the fifty kisses you gave me, I will help you. I will take you to the Island of the Nine Whirlpools. There you will be able to see your daughter, but you will turn to stone immediately afterwards.

The queen accepted her conditions and everything happened as the witch had foretold. Then, she added:

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"I can do two more things for you. Firstly, all the elapsed time will be reduced to one single day for the princess.

Secondly, I will also turn into stone, which means I will not be a witch anymore, but only a happy old lady."

The three of them kissed each other and both the queen and the witch became statues, which stood on either side of the doorway, the queen holding her sceptre and the witch holding a tablet with mysterious runes on it.

Days began to pass, which were only part of one for the princess; and thus, years and years went by.

The evil king died and everything changed in the world except for that island. Many princes tried to reach her but when they saw the nine whirlpools, all of them turned back in fear.

Many more years had elapsed when a cabin boy, who was as handsome and good looking as a prince, was sailing by on a ship and heard someone tell the story. He looked at the sea and saw its dark surface studded with white horses of foam, galloping on the sea waves. Far, far away, he made out a little light. His master, who was his uncle, warned him to ignore the light: it was the Island of the Nine Whirlpools and those who approached it only found death. The story must have been fictional: there was no princess but the whirlpools actually existed and they should be taken seriously.

The boy was turning an idea over in his mind and one morning, he was so close to the island that he saw the silhouette of the Lonely Tower against the pinkish sky and he heard the nine whirlpools murmur unceasingly.

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He was so bewildered by this view that he spent seven days brooding over it. And

when one spends seven days thinking about something, one has no other choice than to try to understand it. Therefore, he noted that:

Every five minutes out of the 1,440 in a day, the whirlpools came to a standstill at low tide. This happened every day, but each day

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five minutes earlier than the previous one. He checked this fact with the help of his chronometer, which he had carefully taken with him. Thus, on the eighth day, he was ready and at five minutes to twelve, all the whirlpools stopped, the tide lowered, and he docked his boat on the seashore. At one minute past twelve, the whirlpools started to turn again, and everything continued as usual.

Then, he saw the princess on the beach:

"I came to save you, said the cabin boy, whose name was Nicasio.

She expressed her gratitude to the young man and they started talking about the difficulties which still had to be overcome: the dragon, the griffin, and how they would leave.

"When do these animals sleep?"

"The dragon sleeps every twenty-four hours, then turns to stone. The griffin sleeps at tea time, but the dragon only sleeps five minutes a day, and each day three minutes earlier than the previous one. I get on very well with both of them. I work on the embroidery of my wedding dress.

Now I only need to embroider one white daisy on the right sleeve and a lily over the heart. The griffin tidies up the house: its wings sweep the floor and remove the dust perfectly; and the dragon has such a fire inside him that he cooks my lunch in an instant."

They parted so that the animals would not see Nicasio.

Then, the boy started calculating how many days they would need for the dragon's sleep to coincide with the low tide and the pause of the whirlpools.

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If you know mathematics, you will realize how difficult the calculation was. Since Nicasio was not very good at maths, he never got it right. The princess would bring him food to a cave that he used for shelter, and when she found him worrying over his calculations, she told him:

"The witch holds in her hand a tablet with a lot of mysterious runes on it. Perhaps this is what we are looking for." The princess copied them down and they read:

"In nine days. Tide 11:24-Dragon 11:27. Postscript: The griffin is artificial."

That was the solution: in nine days, the tide would be low at 11.24 and the dragon would fall asleep at 11.27. So they had two valuable minutes.

After nine days, when the tide began to go down, Nicasio walked towards the princess and kissed her in the dragon's presence.

The dragon became enraged and pounced at Nicasio, who avoided the charge, running towards the seashore. The sea waves receded gradually from the shore and Nicasio, with his left arm tied to a rope whose end was being held by the princess high up above the rocks, went further into the sea.

Seconds went by. The dragon was chasing the boy and its hot claws turned the water into steam that moistened the sand.

Suddenly, it felt that it was going to fall asleep so it tried to go back in order to avoid turning into stone so near to the whirlpools, but it could not and it fell asleep. The princess pulled on the rope she was holding in her hand and helped the boy to climb back up the beach. When the dragon woke up, he felt that he was being sucked into the whirlpool, and that was how its life ended.

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"Now we are left with the griffin".

A griffin is half lion, half eagle. According to the tablet, it was artificial because the wizard king had made it in a rush so the union was incomplete. They waited till it fell asleep. Then, they approached it and shouted:

"Be careful, there is a lion behind you!"

The griffin turned its eagle head and it really did see the body of a lion. Still half-asleep, it gave a peck and its back paws buried into the eagle's neck. So, each half of the griffin butchered the other half. Once the animals were beaten, the queen and the witch came back to life again and you can imagine how delightful this sight was for the princess. However, the whirlpools were still there.

"The whirlpools were made from nine drops of blood that the king dropped around the island," the witch explained.

Therefore, they had to wait until the tide was low.

Then, as Nicasio was going around the island, he picked up nine rubies, which were also drops of blood. When the tide rose, the sea remained quiet and calm like a mirror. The rubies were thrown on the ground and the field where they fell was perfectly broken up and ploughed, as if it had been done with the best and most modern machines.

Once the island was accessible, many guests came for Nicasio and the princess' wedding. They were very happy and the island became a popular summer holiday destination. When the tide is low,

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a stone dragon can still be seen on the sand. Children, showing no respect, climb on to it.

If you want to know what the princess lived on when the dragon used to cook for her, I will tell you that she lived off her income, like many of you would like to do.