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THE WICKED QUEEN OF BEASTROG

Once upon a time there was peace between the two islands of Wollo and Beastrog. Separated only by a narrow strip of sea, people could sail to and fro visiting their island neighbours, and everyone was happy; all except one. Unlike her husband the King, Angina was jealous of Wollo which was much greener and far more pleasant than their realm of Beastrog. Often she had urged the King to invade the other island, but he had always refused. "Apart from the fact that it is not a nice thing to do," he chided, "My kingdom is quite enough for me. Anyway, Wollo is bigger and stronger than us with more people. I could never win."

Then one day the King died and Angina became Queen of Beastrog. Now there seemed nothing to stop her. Wollo was certainly bigger than Beastrog; but it was divided into two realms, each with its own King. "There is the weakness," Angina had told her son, Dorkmund. "I can attack and defeat South Wollo quite easily; then our combined kingdom will be greater than North Wollo; which I can invade later, when it takes my fancy."

That was the wicked Queen of Beastrog's original idea; but she was forced to change her mind on receiving the news that Prince Winstead of North Wollo was to marry Princess Imogen of South Wollo. Angina was furious. "The two realms of Wollo will then be united as one!" she roared. "It cannot be allowed to happen!"

"There's nothing we can do about it," commented her son, the young Prince.

"Forget *WE*, Dorkmund," snarled his mother. "*I* am the Queen, and *I* decide what can and can't be! Those two sneaky Kings of Wollo may think they are clever, but they have played right into my hands. A marriage *will* take place; only not the one they imagine. Imogen *shall* be married, but not to Winstead. You, my son, will be her husband; and in turn, you will also become Prince of South Wollo. When the old King dies - and I hear it won't be long - the kingdom will be ours."

"But why would she want to marry me?" queried Dorkmund. "She doesn't even like me."

"That is of no consequence," said Angina, her eyes narrowing wickedly. "I shall send a small band of soldiers to capture Imogen and bring her here. You will marry the Princess within days; and that will be well before her doddering old father can do anything to stop it."

"What if Imogen refuses to marry me?" asked Dorkmund.

"As you know, I can be very persuasive," grated Angina with a sneer. "She will not dare to refuse, trust me."

The wicked Queen might have thought that her plan was secret; but in her hovel in South Wollo's swampland lived an ancient, withered Sorceress. Mamma Seetah had seen it all unfolding in her telling-crystal. "Old I may be, but my powers are still greater than Angina's," she hissed to herself in a crackly voice, "And I intend to foil her plan. Jollyroll," she commanded the rat sitting beside her, "Away to the King's court and have Princess Imogen brought to me." She

paused to gaze into her telling-crystal once again. “Hurry, now – Angina’s soldiers are already on their way and will be here in less than an hour. I hope there will be enough time...”

Jollyroll scuttled and ran through the swamp, ratty-paddled a little, then ran again until he was standing before the King of South Wollo, breathlessly delivering Mamma Seetah’s message. Imogen was sent for and immediately escorted back through the swamp with Jollyroll leading the way. The Sorceress was impatiently waiting for them and pushed a small flask into the Princess’ hand. “Drink this potion, my dear,” she said. “It will change your appearance so that Angina’s soldiers will not recognise you; but the transformation will not be instant. You must remain hidden until my spell has had a chance to work. Now drink, girl; and go quickly.”

Her escort hurried Imogen out of the swamp, confident that Angina’s troops knew nothing of the magical potion, nor even where the Princess was at that time. Unfortunately, Angina had spies in South Wollo’s court, and one of them had rushed off to tell the invaders of Mamma Seetah’s plan. When Imogen’s party marched out of the swamp, the wicked Queen’s soldiers were there to intercept. “I thought the old crone was supposed to change you,” Angina’s Officer said to Imogen, “But you look the same to me.” He laughed. “It seems Mamma Seetah is losing her touch.”

Imogen certainly appeared no different to when they first took her; but the journey back to Beastrog being quite long, over the duration the Sorceress’s potion started taking effect. The Princess first began to change shape and grow fur; next a fluffy tail. By the time she was presented to Angina the transformation was complete. Prince Dorkmund stared in horror at his intended bride. “The wedding’s off!” he declared to his mother. “I can’t marry a *squirrel!*”

Those around her grew increasingly nervous as a growl built in Queen Angina’s throat. Finally she calmed herself and said in a grinding, vengeful tone: “I shall not be beaten by some withered old crone.” Turning to her son, she said: “Squirrel or not, you *will* marry this Princess, Dorkmund.” She spun and bellowed to the assembly: “Make ready for the wedding.” Then she slowly panned her gaze around those courtiers present and spoke very calmly: “I suspect at least one of you is a spy for South Wollo. Return to your King and inform him that his pathetic attempt to better me has failed. And you can also tell him that if he wishes to meet with his daughter one last time before her wedding to my son, he will find her in a cage in my courtyard.”

There was indeed a spy, but not in Angina’s court. Mamma Seetah was once again peering into her telling-crystal and had seen the wicked Queen’s intentions. “I cannot believe how evil that woman is,” she crackled. “You must go again, Jollyroll; this time to the court of North Wollo. Bring Prince Winstead to me, and waste no time. I must summon all of my powers and more if I am to turn this wedding around and ruin Angina’s devilish plan.”

Prince Winstead eventually arrived along with his father. “What can we do, Mamma Seetah?” King Feargel pleaded in desperation. “Princess Imogen is in a cage and will be heavily guarded. If I send soldiers to rescue her there will be a terrible battle which we may possibly lose.”

“No need for soldiers, Your Majesty,” said the Sorceress. “Just one will go – Prince Winstead.”

“Me?” spluttered the Prince, “On my *own*...? Against so many, what can one man do?”

“Actually,” said Mamma Seetah with a chuckle, “You won’t be a man.”

“Not a *man*?” retorted the King. “If not a man, what will my son be?”

“Wait and see,” said the Sorceress, handing a flask of potion to the Prince. “Drink this, Your Highness.” She watched as Winstead sniffed the neck of the bottle and wrinkled his nose. “Yes, it does smell quite foul,” commented Mamma Seetah, “That’s from the droppings of bat and the slime of toad; but it won’t kill you. Drink, boy, and in a short while you will be ready to rescue your Princess.”

Over the coming hour, those gathered outside Mamma Seetah’s hovel watched the Prince change a little at a time. Although he didn’t know why he was doing it, Dorkmund sank to his

hands and knees, then stretched out on the ground. From there he started to grow, longer and bigger; yet he still looked the same as he was; only for a few moments, though. Scales began to appear all over him; and as they did, his nose stretched until it was a long snout. This felt really strange and he opened it to speak, revealing rows of sharp teeth; and the sound he made was not words but a loud hiss. King Feargel stared in amazement at the creature that was once his son. "You have turned him into a crocodile, Mamma Seetah!" he groaned. "Is that what you intended? If so, why?"

"Who among you would you dare approach such a ferocious creature?" the Sorceress asked, casting a glance around the assembly. There was much shaking of heads as they all backed away from the scaly Prince. "Of course you wouldn't; and neither will Angina's troops." Crouching beside the crocodile, she began whispering; then asked aloud: "Do you understand, my Prince?" The crocodile nodded his head. Rising to her feet, she said: "Only Dorkmund knows my plan; but there is one among you who will tell Angina of the Prince's transformation." Looking past the members of the group, she noticed a servant trying to slink away. "And there he is," she declared. Extending her arm, she pointed a withered finger at the individual. A bolt of lightning shot from the finger, enveloping the spy who froze on the spot. "Do with him as you wish, Your Majesty," she said to the King; then spoke to the crocodile at her feet: "Go now, my Prince; and follow my instructions exactly."

Dorkmund the crocodile slithered into the water and swam through the swamp. Reaching the trees, he lumbered onto the dry land and continued trudging until he was at the back of the beach. Still under cover he waited until night fell before sliding down the sand into the sea. The swim to Beastrog was quite long and Winstead would never have attempted it had he been as he was; but as a crocodile it was easy. On the far side he waited in the shallows with only his eyes showing, just in case there were any soldiers about. When he saw that the coast was clear he began the trek to Angina's stronghold, weaving his way through the trees and bushes to remain hidden.

Soon enough he was approaching the main gate. Two sentries were guarding the entrance. Here would be the test. Dorkmund plodded casually towards them. The guards saw him, stiffened, looked at each other in amazement; then turned and ran into the fortress with Dorkmund following on their heels. At one point the soldiers stopped to look back. The crocodile whipped its tail from side to side, then ran so fast that he was catching up with the fleeing guards who didn't stop until they had joined the others guarding Imogen.

Dorkmund paused for a moment to take in the scene. The squirrel which Mamma Seetah had told him was Imogen was cowering in a wooden cage. Dorkmund's anger grew. Opening his mouth wide, he let out a loud hiss, then ran at the circle of guards surrounding the cage. Never having seen such a ferocious creature up close; never mind coming straight for them, they simply turned tail and scrambled away to safety.

The crocodile ambled up to the cage and peered in. Imogen shrank back in fear. Dorkmund tried to produce a smile, not a very convincing one because of the rows of sharp, pointy teeth; and this made Imogen shiver. Moving right up to the cage, he opened his mouth wide and was about to bite into the wooden frame. "Please don't eat me," Imogen pleaded in a trembling whisper. The crocodile paused, just long enough for her to look into his eyes. Surprisingly, they were neither fearsome nor terrible as might have been expected; these eyes were soft and gentle. In fact, Imogen was sure she had seen them many times before. "Those eyes, I do believe I know them of old. Dorkmund?" she queried in wonder, "Is it really you?"

The crocodile gave her his crooked smile and nodded his head. Waiting until the squirrel was as far from the front of the cage as she could possibly be, he closed his jaws slowly. The wooden bars splintered and fell apart. Backing off, he let Imogen scurry out; then turned sideways and remained still. Imogen was puzzled. "What do you want me to do, Dorkmund, climb onto your back?" The crocodile nodded again, so the squirrel hopped on.

At that moment a roar echoed across the courtyard. Angina was standing in a doorway, fists clenched tightly by her sides, eyes blazing with fury. “Don’t just stand there!” she bellowed at her troops. “Take them; and kill that ugly monster!” She watched impatiently as her soldiers advanced hesitatingly. The crocodile turned to face them and let out a wide-mouthed hiss which brought them to a halt. Dorkmund took a few steps towards them. Most retreated; all except for one who extended his spear and prepared to stab. With a quick scurry, Dorkmund rushed at him, grabbed the spear and snapped it in two with a bite. That was enough for the soldier and the rest of the troopers who all spun on their heels and scattered. “Cowards!” yelled Angina, “Useless, craven cowards! And as for you...” She pointed a quivering finger at the crocodile with the squirrel on his back. “You haven’t heard the last of this, or me!”

Dorkmund gave his impression of a shrug, curled his mouth in a sneer at the wicked Queen; then took off at a run, out of the fortress and this time, not bothering with staying hidden, continued along the track to the beach. Swimming across the sea it was easier than running; but by the time he had hauled himself up onto South Wollo’s beach he was so tired. Imogen hopped off into the soft sand. “I never thought to set foot on this land again,” she said, “And it is all thanks to you, Dorkmund, my brave Prince. Now we can marry, except...” She looked at the scaly crocodile, then down at her furry body. “...We can’t do it looking like this.” After another pause, she said: “I heard tell that a true love kiss can break any spell.” Leaning towards Dorkmund’s snout she added: “I’ll do the kissing, though, if you don’t mind. Just keep your mouth closed, please – it will be safer that way.”

After Imogen had planted a lingering kiss on the crocodile’s lips, she stepped back to watch. Dorkmund remained as a crocodile, as she did a squirrel. She sighed. “I guess we’ll have to leave it to Mamma Seetah to put us back the way we were.” Hopping onto Dorkmund’s back, she said: “Lead on, my Prince. We have a wedding to prepare for... with luck, that is.”

Mamma Seetah had seen in her telling-crystal that they were coming and was outside her hovel to greet them. “How was Beastrog?” she asked with a crackling chuckle, “Beastly as ever?”

“It was horrible and very frightening,” said Imogen, “Until Dorkmund came to rescue me. Once we were back in South Wollo, I gave him a kiss, but nothing happened. I thought a kiss was supposed to break a spell.”

The Sorceress smiled. “Only in fairy tales, my dear. What you need are these.” She held out two bottles. “My potions make, and my potions break – and that’s the real truth of the world, believe me.”

In less than an hour Dorkmund and Imogen had returned to the way they always were. Sitting next to each other on lily pads, they gazed at their reflections in the water. “I didn’t mind being a crocodile for a bit,” commented Dorkmund, “But I’m glad Mamma Seetah changed me back.”

“Me too,” agreed Imogen. “Being a squirrel was very itchy. I much prefer to be a frog again.”

Dorkmund smiled. “A very beautiful frog, my Princess.”

“And you are my handsome frog Prince,” croaked Imogen. “You do realise there is a big chance that we’ll have problems with Angina in future.”

“Very likely,” Dorkmund croaked back, “But on the scales of one to ten, I think me in my crocodile suit will rank higher than any wicked Queen, don’t you?” And he gave his love a big, froggy smile.