

Riddle Me Magpie

A week before she drowned, the queen had been plagued by the smell of the ocean. As she wandered outside together with her two daughters and dear professor Connelly, their arts teacher and royal physician, a sea-salt breeze bothered her nostrils. She blamed an oncoming cold or perhaps foreign spices being used in the kitchens.

Ever since His Majesty the King had passed away several months before, the strings of fate kept weaving adversity into the life of the royal family. The prime minister seized the opportunity to try and convince the rest of the royal council that the queen was not fit to rule by herself. As proof he used the imminent threat of war with several of the neighboring kingdoms – kingdoms whose rulers, much in the same manner, saw their chance in the royal house's mourning. Dogs fought over scraps. Poetry lost all meaning – and then came the rumors.

One evening her youngest came to the queen's quarters with a warning. The head cook's son, who had found out from the manservant, who had heard of it at an inn in the city, told her of a strange mirror. This mirror, they said, had the power to trick one's senses. It weakened the mind, poisoned the soul, and turned dreams into nightmares. They said there was a mirror in the land that could sow the seed of insanity into the most stalwart opponent.

"You are too old to believe in fairytales, dear," the queen retorted. "There is no such thing as magical mirrors."

"But Your Majesty," her daughter said, "They told me this mirror is in your castle."

"Then their claims are even more absurd. If there were any such monstrosity within the castle walls, I would be well aware of its existence."

"You know best," said the princess with a raise of her brow and left the queen to her evening prayers.

But the rumors were not to die out quite so easily. Gossip traveled through the streets and hushed whispers carried the message into the farthest corners of the city. In the still of the night, when bright-eyed rats roamed the periphery and wolves howled at the moon for company, two bare feet

dragged across the road, disturbing the earthbound silence. The being, it quivered and whimpered and howled into the wilderness but received no answer. Its movements cut through the wind that pummeled the roofs of houses. Not a soul could see.

He was found in the morning, that professor Connelly, slumped over a barrel asleep with his eyes wide open. Hard to believe a man of his station would drink himself out of his wits so that he could not produce a coherent sentence anymore. “Magpies indeed riddle runners on rubies! Holy, ephemeral lunette, pondering!” Against his will the good man was taken to another physician, who could however discover no cause for his colleague’s alarming behavior. Doctor Connelly’s symptoms were made public in the next day’s newspaper: paranoia, amnesia, loss of cognitive functioning, hysteria, and finally clinical madness. The city rustled with fear of a new disease, a deadly plague perhaps, and the queen was forced to have the professor locked up in the dungeons.

The princesses were no longer taught about art seeing as the queen had too many responsibilities on her hands to waste valuable time. Nonetheless her duties only multiplied in the following weeks. More and more people kept turning up with no recollection of where they had come from or whose sons or daughters they were, mumbling to themselves about magpies, marionettes, mules, moons, and millennia of magical music. Among the victims were visiting merchants, several knights of the royal guard, servants, and an ambassador whose infection sparked discussions of an assassination attempt, much to the prime minister’s joy. Children of the streets had no doubts as to the origin of this illness, however; it was the accursed mirror whose name the afflicted were so terrified of hearing. They all must have gone down the darkest stairway in the castle and found it. It was said then that the mirror was the devil’s gift to the land, showing whomever gazed into it a vision of themselves as their greatest enemy could see them. The revelation would be so vile that whoever saw themselves this way once would lose their mind for good.

When one of her counsellors was met with the same fate the queen couldn’t take it any longer. A conspiracy may have been brewing within her reach – or worse, her own family might have been in danger. She went through her round of nightly prayers and, safe from the prying eyes of anyone but the two guards she ordered to stay put during her absence from her quarters, descended down the stairway into the dungeons.

At the bottommost step she picked up a torch, following behind where its flame lit the way. The fire flickered and danced in reflections on the cold, mossy walls as the queen advanced through the darkness. A shrill screech reached her ears and her back stiffened. Surely it was nothing, nothing but the wailing of the damned who had been cast down here when no one dared look them in the eye anymore. Besides, the dead could neither speak nor scream. But the voices of these lost souls, they stumbled about in her head and made the water on the stones look like unshed tears. She quickened her pace, her breath in ragged huffs and her vision in strange hues. What was that – just the patter of a mouse’s paws, just a ripple in a puddle!

To her right on the other side of a half-crumbled opening in the wall an abandoned antechamber spread out. It wasn’t particularly large, but its emptiness defied its dimensions giving it an air of all-consuming austerity. In the middle of it stood a tall frame with its back to the queen as she squeezed through the entrance. It was the mirror, ominous and beckoning. It loomed over its throne room for the queen to find, basking in an eerie glow, and she obeyed its call. After all her own worst enemy only saw her as weak and feeble-minded, an image of her that threatened her little. She tightened her grip on the torch and circled the menacing mirror until she stood face to face with her own reflection.

Beyond the glass, the queen’s twin regarded its blueprint with a stern and unforgiving expression. She wore the queen’s coronation robes, carried an apple instead of a torch, and her face was angular as if carved into stone by a carpenter’s apprentice. The queen’s own voice resonated in her mind in barely audible whispers, yet the reflection stood perfectly still. “Useless,” it mumbled. It kept its eyes locked on the queen as the whispers grew louder and louder, invading every corner of the woman’s head, and she paced around looking over one shoulder and then the other frantically in search of the source in vain. “Such a waste, such a shame,” the whispers hummed. “Wrong to sit on the throne and wrong to sit at the dinner table. We’ve become consumed by power and greed, and for what? To deny our daughter, our own flesh and blood, her rightful place!”

The woman in the mirror brought the apple she was holding to her lips. When she took a bite of the fruit a deep crack cut the reflection in half with a heart-stopping echo. It looked straight through the queen and smirked when its skin began to peel off where the crack split its face in half. The apple fell to the ground on the other side and the torch slipped from the

queen's fingers as she watched her flesh drip from her bones. She let out a scream, a soul-rending cry that bounced off the walls and swept through the dungeon – for it was not the prime minister but her younger daughter hiding behind that revolting mask. In the mirror the secondborn princess, corrupted by anger at being stripped of her chance to reign, was shown pouring poison into His Majesty's chalice. She wore a black rose in her hair and a smile on her face.

And then, much like the cracks that spread out and distorted the image, stripes like lightning colored the columns and the stones. Through where she the queen had seen mere droplets of tears as she wandered through the corridor now spilled saltwater and bile. The light died out within seconds. The queen stood frozen with ache in her heart, waiting for the ocean to take her.

After days of searching all that was found was the queen's crown, heavy upon mossy ground. Nothing remained of the god-forsaken mirror but a frame and a few scattered broken shards. The elder princess was crowned queen but passed away soon after under mysterious circumstances. Her sister took her place. For as long as she lived she never once ventured into the dungeons.