**1**

 I can’t believe I’m going to tell you this story. I can’t believe I’m able to tell it. This isn’t an easy tale to tell, and I don’t know how easy it will be to hear. My apologies if it distresses you. But you asked, and I am bound to answer. Settle in. Grab popcorn, if you like; I’ll wait. You’re sure? What about a soda? You could get a- okay, okay, I’m starting.

 Once upon a time – that’s how all the best stories start – there was a tower that had always been there. No one knew of a time when it had not existed, nor could any remember when it had been new. It was forever a dilapidated ruin, and the children would play in and around it against their parents’ commandments, and scare each other with stories of the evil wizard who had lived there long ago and done unimaginable and unspeakable things. The stories of each generation were more fearful than the last, and no one knew if they were true. As they grew up, they cared less about the ruins of the tower and more about who to go to dances with and where they would work and about keeping their own children out. The parents did not fear the tower or the dark magician who had (supposedly) once lived there; they feared the tower giving way to the ravages of time at long last and collapsing while the children were in it. Physics and entropy, not magic, was what had them warning their children away, and it did as little good for them as it had for their own parents. The stories they had once told each other were relegated to childish nonsense, and to those no longer a child, they had no power.

 But the stories of children have power: to frighten, to command respect, to compel belief. Even if this power works only on themselves and on other children, it is power. And after generations upon generations of this magic being worked in the ruins, it was bound to have an effect. No one knew that, of course. No one thought of stories as magic, or that they had any real impact on our life. The rational mind, you see, could not conceive of that as true, and so wrote it off. And the rational mind is a wonder that has brought us things both marvelous and terrible; I would never suggest that you toss aside your logic, your reason, your capacity and drive to figure out why things are the way they are. But there is another side, of course. Just as light casts a shadow, so the rational must always show the irrational. They exist together and just as you should not wholly be irrational, so you must not always bow to logic. As you question existence, you must also look at oblivion.

 I know, I know, but this is important for you to understand. Science did not defeat magic in any way except in the court of public opinion. *Magic still exists in this world*, and any more it is in the hands of our children, who are not taught to wield it properly, who do not know what they are doing even *is* magic or that it is unsafe. And no one knows that imagination is a powerful fuel for magic, and stories the crafter’s tools. And so no one knew or thought to expect what would happen in a tower given that sort of power, channeled towards the sinister, the spooky, the unhealthy and evil. No one knew it had been given such power, or, indeed, that such power existed.

 The first signs that something was truly wrong were subtle, and overlooked. They were reported by children, and the adults did not believe them. They knew the magic of stories to scare children (though they never thought of it as such) and believed that the reports of strange sounds as of stone scraping against stone, of claws tapping against the rocks, of strange voices heard on the wind were all the product of overactive imaginations (as if this were possible). They gave their kids less candy and told them, again and sternly, not to play up there in the tower on the hill. Their kids bought candy at school, and went up to the hill regardless.

 The sounds became more frequent, and varied. Now came the sound of wood against stone, as if someone had been sitting in a chair and pushed it back to stand. But there was no chair and no one to sit in it save the children playing Dark Wizard Freeze Tag (where the person who is ‘it’ is the Dark Wizard, and he is literally using his magic to ‘freeze’ you when he touches you). Now there was sometimes the sound of screams from the distant past. The children started to stay away from the tower in the evenings and nights. Chloe swore forwards and backwards she’d seen a light in the tower one night, like a candle, and that it moved as if someone had picked it up and was carrying it about while they went about their work.

 Children’s tales, nothing more. Spooky gotcha type stuff. Easily written off by adults. And then, one Halloween, a pack of the junior high kids went up there, on a dare. Spend the night in the Dark Wizard’s tower! They all told their parents they were sleeping at Roberto’s or Jodi’s or Elisa’s and took their sleeping bags up the hill. All told, six went up; five came down, running and screaming when the first fingers of dawn pulled back the cover of night.

 He’d been quiet, but they thought he’d been asleep. They thought he was brave. But Rob’s bravery wasn’t why he was quiet. They had heard some noises, like he was turning in his sleep, maybe moaning faintly, but it was dark, so dark, and lights were forbidden by the dare. So it wasn’t until dawn that they saw him split open and empty, like a hollowed out pumpkin, eyes staring up at the sky.

 Now the adults cared. The tower was off-limits, but they didn’t have to repeat it to too many children now. Elisa was hysterical. “He was right next to me! The whole time! I didn’t… I didn’t know…” She had to be put on medication, and she wouldn’t leave her room. What was left of the boy was cremated. The wake was quiet, and people cast furtive glances away to the hill and the tower upon it. No one thought the other kids did it, of course; there was talk of a psycho, maybe a pedophile. The authorities were puzzled though because there was no blood. All of his blood and most of his internal organs had just disappeared, and his sleeping bag was dry and clean (save for some dirt and dust from the stone floor), his clothes had been torn open to get at his juicy innards, but there was no blood on them either. There was no sign of a struggle, and none of the kids had heard anything they couldn’t have chalked up to the normal night movements and sounds of a sleeping friend.

 Elisa was the worst, but the other kids who’d been up there weren’t faring much better. Nightmares were common. All of them were put into group therapy; Elisa was hospitalized. None of them were getting better. And then one day, Jodi didn’t show up for group. They called her home, and the school. They checked her favorite hangouts: the old-timey diner where the waitstaff wore rollerskates, the movie theater, the strip mall with the pizza place and the pet shop and the used bookstore. She was nowhere and no one had seen her. Her mother demanded they check the tower, and the authorities thought she was crazy, but they did it, just in case. If she’d been grabbed, the tower’s ruins were a good place to hide away, to do terrible things, just as they’d all heard and whispered about as children. But she wasn’t there, and there was no sign of her. She was just gone.

 The parents of the other kids who’d been up there – the Tower Kids, for lack of a better phrase - started talk of moving away. The police were clearly incompetent and someone was stalking their children, some sicko. Jodi’s mother maintained her daughter was alive out there somewhere, they needed to keep looking, but no one believed her. Not after what had happened to Roberto. They talked of demolishing the tower, to give the scumbag no place to hide. The town’s historians protested that it had always been there, it was a symbol, it was of historic importance to the town. They convinced no one. The town hired a crew to come tear it down, its walls and its ruins: cart the stone and decrepit wood away, far away from us. They sent a couple of men to scout the site and give an estimate. The only one who came back down was talking about fairies and strange music, and when asked where his partner was, said only that they took him away with them, “the lucky bastard.” He stayed at the motel overnight and went back the next day, ostensibly to look for his partner. When he didn’t come back down that night, the town got worried. Vague mutters were made of “someone should go up there”. But no one did. No one would until morning.

 So it wasn’t until the next day that they found him, frozen. It was full-on winter now, and the snow was falling as light and soft as feathers. At first, there was tremendous guilt; the elders among the town chastised the young and healthy for not going up there to check on the man and letting him freeze to death. But the autopsy said the freezing temperatures hadn’t done as much harm to him as the fall from the top of the tower had. What he’d been doing up there, and why he’d leaned so far out the window, no one could say. He had his hands clutched together, carefully, as a child cups a firefly they’ve just caught. His face was frozen in permanent confusion, or, as one of the interns at the morgue put it, betrayal. There never was word of his partner; he was as gone as Jodi.

 What was next? Let me see… patience now. I have to sort through the memories of the town; I wasn’t here for this. Haha, you didn’t know that, did you? I am not as old as you think I am. It is the tower that has always been here, not me. Now then…ah, here we go.

 Whatever was going on at the tower, people didn’t like it. The wise were called foolish for staying far, far away from the place, and the true fools decided to lay a trap for whatever murderous presence lurked there. They didn’t call it that, of course. It was a serial killer, a sociopath. While a serial killer *would* be a “murderous presence,” that was too hokey a phrase for a person, for someone of flesh and blood and deranged mental aspect. They didn’t know what they were dealing with – no one did, but the wise stayed away, or moved away. The other parents of the Tower Kids all moved, taking their traumatized children with them. I don’t know what happened to them; my range is limited, and they moved far. Derek’s family was going to Alaska. I don’t know if they made it. We will say they did, that they moved to a faraway land and were never heard from again, because that’s good in stories like this. Anyway, yes, you’re right; back to this story.

 The authorities knew that whoever he was – of course they assumed it was male, either because of a misguided belief that females are not capable of deception, torture, and murder or simply because of the stories they themselves had told as children of the Dark Wizard and *his* unspeakable acts – he acted at night (with the exception of the missing workman). This would normally speak to scouring the ruins by day, to find him asleep and unawares, one would think. But no, they were foolish to attempt this nonsense in the first place, and their foolishness continued unabated. They took flashlights and guns and body armor and the Force of the Law up there with them one night, marching up the hill as the sun began to set. Those who survived were the ones who ran when He moved against them. All who stayed were never seen again, though now and then bits of some of them would turn up: an ear here, a bit of spleen there.

 When Roberto was killed, right next to Elisa, with all of his friends unawares, there was no blood. This time, when the morning came, the ground was soft with it and the stones were stained with it. Aside from the bits though, there was never a trace of what had become of the men and women who stayed. No drag marks, no bullet holes, even though the survivors swore they heard shots fired, saw muzzle flash in the dark. One of the police officers would, if you got her drunk enough on the good stuff, tell you she saw her partner hit Him, right in the heart or at least close enough that He should’ve felt it, should’ve gone down, but He didn’t and the last thing she heard before she fled was the sound of her partner’s bones crunching, like a cheap empty water bottle being crumpled before it’s thrown out. Sometimes, people would crush plastic bottles around her just to watch her wince. The amusement at her expense didn’t last long; she shot herself in the head six months later.

 She wasn’t the only survivor who wound up not surviving. Even those who had never crossed paths with Him carried down the hill with them a terrible burden: guilt for having run and lived was common, and none escaped the nameless and shapeless fear of He who lived in the tower that had always been there. For they knew it now: He was male and He was Alive and He could never be killed. More people moved away, either out of a mix of wisdom and fear or out of disgust at the police force that now refused to try again to apprehend this monster, not even in daylight. There was talk of bringing the FBI in, but no one wanted to be responsible for their deaths. Eventually, there came a consensus: just stay away. Stay away. Except for Jodi, who her mother said was still alive somewhere, no one who’d just stayed in the town had met with any misfortune. And that was true, at the time.

 But of course it didn’t stay that way. You must know that. There was a year of peace in the shadow of the tower that had always been there. Children played there no longer, and while no one told stories up in the ruins now, the magic there did not abate. No, now children –and adults alike – told stories down in the town, in their own homes. They brought back the stories of their youth and their parents’ youth. They didn’t seek to scare one another; it was unnecessary to use stories to do that now, because they had news clippings and memories far more frightening. They did it for information, to glean what they could of the Dark Wizard, if that’s who He was. They acknowledged Him for who He was because they had no other name by which to call Him, and they didn’t know they were right. They didn’t know that they were feeding Him power, that they were, by telling these stories around their tables, extending His reach. For He had been confined to the tower that had always been there, because that was where the magic of imagination, fear, and storycrafting had created Him, but now, as the stories spread and as the town came to believe in Him…

 A year. 12 months of peace, of quiet, of no one dying by mysterious means. People died of old age, illness, or suicide, just as had always been. Well, perhaps a bit more of the last; the police force was dwindling rapidly as the survivors crumpled under the weight of their guilt and fear. But it wasn’t mysterious; eventually, there was no longer even surprise.

 And just when it seemed like perhaps they were safe if they never again set foot up on the hill, there arose a terrible storm. It was swift and sudden. The day had not been cloudless, but it was one of those days of sunshine and white innocuous puffs up in the blue sky. And the little cottonball clouds suddenly blew away like dandelion seeds, and a terrible, dark storm cloud, large enough to cover the entire town, appeared. It was the middle of the day, and people peered out their windows at it, but no one dared go outside. Those who were caught out in it fled indoors as the first raindrops fell, as if they were acid. They pounded on shut doors and begged to be let in, and the rain stung and burned but didn’t leave marks. As the rain fell harder, charity dried up, and doors that might’ve been opened once stayed closed. And those trapped outside writhed in an agony that would’ve been mystifying to a visitor from another town, who didn’t know the stories, who hadn’t seen what this town had seen. It looked like rain. They were getting wet, it seemed. But they screamed as if they were being eaten alive. There was no blood.

 Lightning flashed red and the thunder was deafening. The bravest souls turned on their televisions and radios, or checked their computers and smartphones, to get reports of a bright and sunny day in nearby towns. There was no mention of a strange storm out of nowhere. They looked out their windows and shut off their devices. Some prayed. Some didn’t. It made no difference either way. The wind screamed – not howled – hellishly through the town. The people caught outside begin to smoke, and their skin to slowly brown. They were being cooked by the rain, even though temperatures maintained that it was a cold day in March outside, just as it had been before.

 And as the storm died, the town’s new Master stood in the town square. He was then much as He is now: flowing black robes that glittered darkly, ashen skin, dark hair and eyes. Gnarled hands and fingernails that looked like talons. He didn’t say anything. But the town knew their Master when they saw Him. They came out and kneeled and His gaze swept over them. He directed them to bring the unfortunates to the tower that had always been there, for He was hungry, and His meal had been made ready for Him. And they obeyed, carting their brothers and sisters and husbands and wives and sons and daughters up the hill.

 Now that He was Master, He would not let his town go hungry of course. There was a feast, for there had been many trapped either too far from shelter or simply denied it. And everyone was made to eat, to take part in the unspoken covenant: He is the Master we have made with our power, and He is not to be trifled with. Obey Him or Else. And from then until now and probably until the end of all things, your father has ruled the town here, from the tower that was always His and always and forever will be.

**2**

 Will you never tire of stories of the past? You know they hurt me so, child. Yes, yes, I hear and obey; do not tell your father, please. You know I cannot but do as you –and He- wish. If you wish it, you shall have it, if it be in my power to do so.

 In the first days of His reign, He was unchallenged. The town was remade in His image, or rather, in the image of how the townsfolk had always imagined it would have been back when He had been alive (only He hadn’t been, not then, but He was now, and He would have things done properly or not at all). Modern buildings beyond conversion were torn down, materials re-used if possible, and the town began to resemble one more in keeping with the storybooks and fairy tales. It was hard, but the townsfolk had help.

 The workman who had disappeared? The other who had talked of fairies before his literal fall? They had not been crazy. Not all the tales told in the tower that had always been there were of the Dark Wizard, after all, just most of them. There were tales, too, of the fairies in the woods beyond the tower, and now they came to Him and did His bidding based upon a contract He had with their Queen. No, no, I do not know the details of it; there are things He will not tell me. Ask Him yourself, though He may wait until you are older to tell you. You may make your own deal with the fey someday, who knows?

 The fairies helped the townsfolk to remake the town to His standards. He left the town its modern marvels, even the devices that would have allowed them to call for help or to warn people away. Some tried. Their corpses fed Him well those first weeks. After that, no one tried again. They continued to chat idly with far-flung family who called and they made excuses not to go visit; they posted silly gifs to their Tumblrs and babbled about the latest celebrity scandals. They did not talk about themselves. They did not talk about their town, and they certainly never mentioned their Master, the Dark Wizard.

 The Master was pleased when the conversions were complete, and gave the town a gift: a tall onyx statue of Himself, in the center of the town square, so that they could always remember Him and know that He was watching. It was exquisitely crafted, but that was probably because He had made it with the magic with which generations of children had imbued Him. His eyes were the dead, soulless eyes of any statue, but they seemed to turn and shift, and always follow the onlooker with an expression of disdainful knowing, as if the statue knew all of your worst deeds and terrible thoughts and condemned you for them. He required the townsfolk to gather in its shadow once a week and spend an hour contemplating it, no matter what the weather.

 Oh, and He did return the weather to normal. Usually. Sometimes there were the boiling rains and the screaming storms of the damned. Those who had lost loved ones to the Master’s hunger swore they could hear the lost souls of their friends and family crying out in the wind during such times. But mostly it rained when it rained everywhere – normal water-from-the-sky rain – and it snowed when it was snowy and the sun shone elsewise. The Master stayed mostly in His tower and the townsfolk could continue their lives.

 They owed Him tribute though, every so often: one or two people from the town to go up to the tower. At first, it was believed they would all be eaten, and those who longed for death as an escape volunteered. But death was not an escape for a necromancer of His power. Death was only the beginning of torments to come. However, not all of those who went to Him were meant for His table. As volunteers dried up, He began to come down Himself and choose His tributes, and He began choosing children. Their parents wept and cried and pleaded to be taken in their children’s stead, but He refused. He took them…and He trained them. They were apprentices, assistants, and He chose them for their malleability as well as for their inherent talent for magic.

 Oh, do not smile so. They were not trained as you are, child, for He cares for you, perhaps loves you. These children were broken and remade into His image, taught to hate their own parents as weak-willed and stupid. They fought amongst each other so that only the strongest would learn His powers and ways (or what portion of them He would teach them, for He was not stupid enough to invest in them the ability to rival Him). Occasionally, there would be contests; the losers fed the victors, of course, and these children who had once been sweet and loving thought nothing of it.

 Death feeds on death, you see, and darkness on darkness. By increasing their own powers, they increased His as well. He, in turn, gave the fairies free reign, as per the contract. No, I still do not know all the details, only the ones that affected the town. You still must discuss it with your father. Do you want to hear the rest of this story or not?

 The townsfolk were obliged to leave offerings for the fey or be subject to their mischiefs. In a way, they were a more terrible threat than the Master, for you never knew what to expect from a fairy. Sometimes, you were blessed and other times – far more often – you could be cursed. The fey-blessed were the new kings and queens of their social circles, for they were lucky and/or clever, or someone in their family had been and it had extended to them. Strangely, a fey-blessed child was never taken by the Master to be taught His cruel ways. That might also be part of the contract, but I cannot know what He will not tell me.

 Occasionally, the fairies liked to lure someone out into the forests beyond the hill with the tower that had always been there, and they were never seen again. Their voices did not ride the winds of the screaming storms, either. Some people whispered they’d been taken away to the Feylands, there to serve the Fairy Queen. They told fantastic stories to each other about what the Feylands were like, and, I believe, thus made things better for those who had been whisked away. Because that power hadn’t dimmed at all, you see: nothing can diminish the power of imagination, and, if anything, it had become concentrated and more potent in this area. I do not know with any certainty that the Feylands are the way people say they are. I do not know if those who disappeared are there, living amongst the Fair Folk. But I choose to believe it, because it makes me happy to do so, and I cannot say that they aren’t, after all. So why not a sliver of hope? Why not some paper-thin shard of happiness? Since the Dark Wizard was born – or reborn, if you choose – there’s so little of either hope or happiness to be found.

 Why does He allow it? Oh, probably because just a little light often makes the darkness that much darker. Some small hope makes the tang of despair that much sharper. And because the more people tell stories, the more power He can have. So let them tell their tales, He thought, never believing it would harm Him. Of course, He was right in the end, but He may not always be so. No, I should say no more about that. It’s getting late, and little girls should be abed. Tomorrow. Tomorrow night, another story, if you’re good and clear your plate. Someone died for that food you eat, possibly more than one; the least you can do is appreciate it.

**3**

 Did you think I would forget? Yes, I saw your plate, clean of all save the bloody remnants. You were a good girl and you got your dessert already, but you are still owed a story. Shall these be bedtime stories from now on? It will leave you more time during the day for your studies, so let’s. Did you brush your teeth? Okay, into bed.

 Now that you’re cozy – oh, hold on, he’s right here – there you are. Your very own personal monster for snuggling with. Now where were we? I had just finished telling you of the first days under your father’s dark rule, yes? And the town was adapting to the reign of the Dark Wizard of their nightmares and His cohorts, the often wicked fairies.

 Oh, fairies when they’re mad, they’re terribly frightening! I know you don’t think so, but they would never dare to harm you. They’re clever little things, and though they often get themselves into trouble with their Queen, there are some lines that are not crossed. You’ve nothing to fear from them, I’d think.

 But those unsuspecting townsfolk below us have plenty to fear. If the fairies are not appeased with offerings of cream and cake, then all kinds of mischiefs could befall them. One man was turned into an as- ...a donkey. Classic, very traditional, that. One woman was made to dance until her feet bled and then dance still longer until she literally dropped over dead. Do you see a pattern here? They didn’t know it, but they were doing these things to themselves, in a sense. Oh, it was still the fairies' doing directly, but the beliefs of the fairies, the stories of the fairies, every wicked act from every fairy tale influenced what happened to those who dared disappoint the Fair Folk.

 And it wasn’t all bad. As I told you last night, some were blessed, and they were often spared direct meddling from the Master because of it. People became more hospitable to one another, because you never knew who might be a fairy in disguise. People helped each other more, because no one else was going to. The world around this town turned from being capricious or indifferent into actively hostile to the people who dwelled within it. They could do nothing but band together against what little they could.

 For they could not rebel against Him. If someone so much as whispered it or thought of it in any way except with fright, He would know, and that person would be part of the town’s next feast. Hm? Oh no, not all the food is from the slain corpses of those who would disobey Him. Shall I tell you a secret? He quite likes pizza. Didn’t have it back in the fairy tales, you know. And sometimes, He asks me to get Him a sub from that place down on Burlap: He likes the spicy peppers and extra vinegar on it, always.

 His favorite is still the freshly-cooked flesh of someone who would oppose Him though. You can’t beat the recipes you grew up with, I suppose. He prefers them cooked alive; says the fear and the pain enhance the flavor. Sometimes, He eats them with spicy peppers and extra vinegar, too.

 No, no. I’m not answering that question, or, at least, not now. Do you want to hear this story or not? …though I’ve forgotten what story I was telling you. Ah, yes, the good things of your father’s dark and terrible reign.

 There was no crime. IS no crime. He knows all, and while you might think petty things like theft between the townsfolk who are barely better than cattle to Him would be beneath His notice, He intervened mercilessly the first few times, and it’s hardly been needed since. You see, a criminal is someone interested in breaking rules, and He is the source of all our rules now. If you would break one rule, you would break others. He believes in stepping in before things get to that point, to make an example of those who would try to get around the laws He has laid. And an example is what they become: there was a man who beat his wife to death while he was drunk. The Master did not like someone else being able to mete out death, and so the man was flayed alive and left chained by his hands and feet in the town square, beneath the statue of the Master. He was turned so he could see the statue and look up into the Master’s eyes as the crows made a slow meal of him. His screams rebounded through the town, to its farthest edges, and that was the last murder this town has known. Not the man, of course, but his wife.

 Murder is illegal, you see. The Master cannot do anything illegal, because He is the Master. He *is* the Law. Therefore, those who are killed under His doing or His commandment are not murdered. Slaughtered, perhaps. Killed, most definitely. But not murdered. The crows do not care; they eat either way.

 The Master’s new way of doing things certainly proves the adaptability of the human spirit. Now, as you look around the town, people are used to it. There is a certain dark security in knowing that your life can be forfeit at any moment, for any reason. This is true for everyone, everywhere, of course, but those people beyond your father’s reach are able to push it out of their minds. The townsfolk here cannot, for they have only to look up here to remember. When you know that every moment may be your last, you appreciate each one survived.

 And they’ve fallen into their routines of waking, going about their day, praying at the Master’s statue on days that require it, leaving the cake and cream out for the fairies, and going to bed. It’s normal to them now. They send their children off to school to learn reading, writing, arithmetic, history, English, and magic.

 That’s probably the best thing to come of your father’s reign: children learn now how to control their powers, and they will retain them into adulthood. It was necessary, of course, lest they summon someone up to rival Him. He was wise to take steps to secure it. By teaching them, He also teaches them obedience to Himself, indoctrinating them to His will. They will not cross Him, and they will not accidentally conjure a hero to thwart Him.

 So you need never fear: your father is safe upon His throne of shadows, with His crown of blood and cruelty. The people are too afraid of Him to act against Him and, as time has passed, they have become as sheep: docile and blindly obedient. Open their pen and they likely would stand still and stare stupidly at you, uncomprehending.

 But shall I tell you a secret? You must promise never to tell. I have heard stories of a certain tree, out in the fairies’ forest. It looks no different from any other tree, so you must keep your eyes closed as you walk through the forest – only if you keep your eyes closed the whole time will you be able to detect which tree it is. And within this tree, they say, is the key to the Master’s downfall.

 I don’t know. It could be a sword in there. It could be a magical wish-granting tree, like in a book I read when I was growing up. It could be a secret doorway to another realm. It could have magical apples – if it’s an apple tree; it might not be. Who knows? But don’t tell Him I told you about it. It’s just a story after all, and probably not even real, but He wouldn’t like to hear of it.

 Clever girl. You’ve listened well, and learned much. It *is* a story from the time before your father, and that is why they say it might lead to His defeat, because it might have the same magic in it that He does. But no one remembers the story precisely, just that there was a tree and it was important. So I don’t see how it could help. What magic it once had has probably been dulled by forgetfulness and time. Your father’s reign is secure forever, and so you are forever safe as well.

 Sleep well, child. Dream of monsters that bow to your command, and you, the princess of them all. Yes, and Queen someday, too. Queen of All Monsters you shall be, when you are grown. Good night.

**4**

 Yes, I’d heard you got in trouble today. Found your father’s treasure room, did you? And now you will want to know all about how He acquired that mountain of shiny things. Fine. Where’s your stuffed monster? Good. And you brushed your teeth, good, good; climb into bed.

 Well, the vast bulk of it is taxes paid to Him by the town. Money can come into the town, but it cannot leave. It is part of His magic. Tourists tend to have the same fate as money. Their material goods have added to His coffers. Being an old-fashioned sort, He puts no trust in banks and prefers a heavily-guarded treasure room… speaking of which, how *did* you get past the… Oh. Just asked, did you? Haha, they responded to that part of Him that is in you. You grow more and more clever by the day.

 Some of the more fabulous items were conjured into being with Him, in effect. Once He truly came to life and came into His power, everything the old stories claimed of Him began to manifest as well. He had defeated a princess and taken her axe, imbued with the power of Incredible Strength to the one who wielded it in battle; He had stolen the boat of a famous sailor and shrunk it to fit in His hand; He had crafted a ring from the gold of a comet – it’s not actual gold, but it looks like it and it did come from a comet – that allows Him control over demons and monsters.

 My favorite is a hand mirror that acts like a window, anywhere in the world you want it to be. Say “Paris, near the Champs*-*Élysées,” and it will look as if you are in a Parisian flat, looking out the window at the most beautiful street in the world. You can look through any window in the world with that mirror; I do love it so. Where do I look? Oh, I’ve only used it once, and He caught me, and was angry. I had to live in a bottle for a week, as if I were a genie. “Itty-bitty living space” is right. So I haven’t gone back.

 Well, it’s easy for me to get into the treasure room; I can go right through the walls and floor and ceiling, after all. Being incorporeal has its advantages. No, I doubt you will ever be incorporeal, nor would I want you to be. But when you come into your own measure of power, you will not need to be. The town and all in it will bow to you, including the very buildings should you wish them to. No door would dare to remain locked to you. That is what you have to look forward to.

 The treasures in the treasure room will be yours one day, I’m sure, though you would have to talk with your father to be absolutely certain. I do not know that He ever intends to die; you may rule beside Him, but I do not know if you will ever rule alone. Oh, of course you will never *be* alone, dear child! I am bound to you for eternity. And you will always have your stuffed monster, too.

 Your father is quite right: you should not tell someone the true name of someone or something you care about. Knowing the true name gives you power over that thing or that person, or monster. So it’s okay if you don’t tell me your monster’s name. I understand. It’s for his or her best interest. Its? It’s an it. Okay, its best interest. I apologize; I didn’t mean to offend.

 And now it’s time for little sorceresses and their monsters to go to sleep. No, that’s all the story you’re getting today; you were bad, after all. I know you were only curious, but if you’d been anyone save His daughter, you might be incorporeal yourself right now. You must grow up big and strong and powerful, yes? Just like your father. You’ll be Daddy’s Little Girl, and Queen of All Monsters. When you grow up. Good night.

**5**

 Okay, tonight you are getting a real story, and not one about your father. Settle in, get cozy. You’ll like it. Yes, and it will, too. Are you and it comfortable? Okay.

 Once upon a time, there was a village up in the mountains, and it was beautiful there: the sky was always bright and blue, the trees were green all year long, and the mountaintops were snowy white. The village was lovely, and the people a good, hardy stock. But they were not happy.

 For you see, a Giant had taken over the mountains and, once a week, came to the village demanding livestock to eat or else he would squash the village flat with his massive feet. At first, out of fear, they gave the Giant whatever he wanted, but they were running out of sheep and cows and horses, and they couldn’t breed more if the Giant kept eating them all!

 And so one day, a young boy came out to meet the Giant when he came for his weekly snack. “You can’t have any more!” the little boy told the Giant. “Go away!”

 The Giant’s laugh was like thunder. “’Go away’?! I can go away, pipsqueak – and stomp your town flat in the process! Now you go away; I’d like mutton today, I think…”

 “I SAID NO!” the little boy yelled - he had to stand on the roof of his house to even be heard by the Giant. He pulled out his slingshot (which a lot of little boys like to carry about, mostly to torment their sisters with) and one of his collection of pebbles.

 The Giant laughed as the little boy aimed his slingshot at him. “Go ahead!” he said, leaning forward towards the little boy. “Take your best shot! And after you take your shot, I’ll take mine.” He intended to eat the little boy, you see.

 But the Giant was overconfident. The little boy was a good aim, and strong for his age. His slingshot was well-made, and it flung the pebble at high speed – it was as good as a bullet, and it hit the Giant right between the eyes!

 The Giant groaned and fell over backwards, and the village was free! All because of a little boy and his little slingshot and his little pebble, and because of the Giant’s oversized ego, of course. So what have we learned from this story?

 Well, yes, don’t lean forward towards someone trying to kill you. Well done, that’s very important. Anything else? Even the littlest things can be the biggest threats, especially if they’re underestimated. You have to be careful, because the little things can undo you in the end. But do you know what else that means?

 You’re a little person now. And you have it within you to be a threat. Maybe not now, but someday, you could be. To whom? To anyone who got in your way. To anyone who was doing something you didn’t like. All it takes is being smarter than they are, and using what you have at your disposal. And you are the daughter of a powerful, powerful wizard. Yes, and you will be Queen of All Monsters – you’re never forgetting that, are you? So you will be a powerful threat.

 But you mustn’t go around saying so. No, no. People need to be surprised. It works better if it’s a surprise, just as the Giant was surprised that the little boy was able to kill him. So you should keep your power to yourself, for now. You are still learning, after all, and it’s better to wait until you are sure that you will win before you fight.

 Hm. Some fights are worth fighting, even if you’re unsure you’ll win. But if you have time to prepare, then you should take it and get whatever advantage you can so that you know you’ll win. For example, I would not recommend fighting against your father. If He tells you to do something, you should do it, because you would not win that fight. He would not destroy you, but He can punish you, and more severely than just sending you to bed without supper, if He chose.

 How will you know if a fight is worth fighting, even if you don’t know if you’ll win? You will know, inside. Your heart will tell you what is right and what is wrong and what is worth fighting for when you come across it. But for now, you are still a little girl. You have time. Grow up and grow powerful. Then none can stop you.

 Some will say it’s crazy to fight if you don’t know you can win, but sometimes, it’s all you can do. And sometimes, madness is preferable anyway. No, no, you can’t choose to go mad. You can *be* mad, in the sense of being angry with someone, but *going* mad – that is, losing your mind – isn’t something you can decide. I’d’ve gone mad years ago if I could have. Well, it seems like such fun, sometimes.

 No, no, I won’t go mad. If I haven’t by now, I don’t think I ever will. And, strictly speaking, I don’t have a brain anymore, so I’m not sure if I even *can* go mad? And in any case, I belong to you, and to Him, and it doesn’t help you for me to be crazy. So I will stay just the way I am, forever, okay? Just for you.

 Sleep well, and dream of how powerful you will be someday. And tomorrow you can tell me the story of what you dreamed of. Won’t that be nice?

**6**

 Well, good morning! No, I can’t stop right now; your father has bade me… What? Well, if you’re worried about forgetting it, go write it down. You need to practice your letters anyway. Go on. I have work to do for your father, and I will catch up with you later.

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 Okay now, did you write your dream down? Can I read it? Here, I will read it aloud, and you will tell me what I mess up, yes?

 “I dreemed that I was Queen of All Monsters and I live in a palase and **all the Monsters are my frends**. And Daddy wuld com to visit and we will have cake and soda and chokolat ice cream! And you live with me and tell me stories all day and the Monsters too cuz they like to lissen.”

 Well, that was a very sweet dream! And very colorful! Spelling needs work. Now, I know, but your father has high expectations of you. But I liked it. I did.

 Hm? Oh, no, this would not have the magic of a story, because it’s more like a wish. There’s a difference. Wishes can have a sort of power, but it’s different from the magic of stories. How do you make it a story? Ah, you want it to be magic so you can cast it like a spell, I bet. So you can magically make your dreams of cake and soda and chocolate ice cream real. And Monsters, yes. Do the Monsters get to eat cake and ice cream? Only if they’re good – yes, that’s very wise of you.

 So, how do we make this a story? “Once upon a time” is a good place to start – it isn’t strictly necessary, but it’s good for beginners. Don’t say that you dreamed it, just say “Once upon a time, I was the Queen of All Monsters.” No, silly girl, it doesn’t work that quickly. Stories need time and …exposure, I guess, to gain power. Well, in this case, it means that a lot of people need to know the story and repeat it to others. It’s the telling and sharing of stories that gives them their power; if you write a story that no one knows, it’s nothing but entertainment for yourself, a way to kill time.

 But if you tell the stories to others, or let them read it, then they have a chance to become invested in it. They put their emotions into the story, whether that is love or fear or whatever. And that is how a story works its magic. That is how it becomes powerful and becomes a spell.

 I suppose it would help if your spelling were better, yes. So work on your spelling and on writing your stories. What should you write about? Well, anything you like. Write about your adventures as Queen of All Monsters. Write about your daily life. Write about your father, if you like.

 Me? My daily life isn’t that interesting, sweetheart. I can’t tell you what I was doing for your father, either. Not yet, anyway. He won’t allow it. Even if I wanted to tell you, the words would not come out of my mouth. There are many things I am not allowed to tell you, but would if I could. I’m sorry. But someday, someday you will get to help Him, too. I’m sure He’ll have more important things for you to do, though.

 You are so impatient! Well, you can always go ask your father if there are ways you can help Him. He might like that, hm? It couldn’t hurt to ask. Well, it couldn’t hurt *you*, but that is only because you are His precious daughter. No one else has the right to ask anything of Him.

 Oh, you are full of questions today. There is much I cannot tell you, but I can tell you this: that question alone you must not ask Him. Not now. Someday, I can answer it for you, but right now, His magics are too strong. They bind me to silence; He could answer, but He will not want to, and you could make Him angry. Don’t make Him angry, please.

 Yes, if His powers were weaker, I would be free to answer your question. I could answer all your questions then. But this cannot be done. Haha, well, you think that if you like. Perhaps it will even be true, that someday your power will rival His. Perhaps. But not if your spelling keeps up like it is. Mind your teachers, and mind Him. Your time will come.

 You have class tomorrow; is your homework done? Did It help you with it? I can tell; yes, I see the monster prints on it. Well, I’m not your teacher; I don’t know. I think she’ll appreciate the artistry, if nothing else. No, I won’t tell you what you got wrong or right; wait ‘til tomorrow. Patience is a good thing to develop. No one likes impatient children. More than that, you will need to be patient and studious in order to develop your powers. It won’t happen overnight, any more than you will wake up tomorrow and be 21 years old. It will take sixteen years for that to happen. And if you practice your writing and spelling and learn a lot every day, then by the time you’re 21, you might be the most powerful person ever! Yes, even moreso than your father, maybe.

 And you’ll definitely be Queen of All Monsters, yes. Do you know what else will help? Reading. Reading a lot will help you write better, and it will help fuel your imagination. Playing games will help, too. Yes! Some games have stories in them, and the more stories you know, the better. And movies, and even some songs.

 I can help you with all these things, when your homework is done and you aren’t in class. And when you’re not helping your father, if you still want to do that? You’re going to wait until you’re older, hm? Clever girl. Do you want to play a game or shall we read a book together? Well, we can’t do both at the same time! Let’s play a game first, and then we can read. I can read you stories every night, too, at bedtime. Let’s pick out a game, and I’ll let you be first player. C’mon.

**7**

 Once upon a time, there was a prince. And though he was handsome and strong, he was only nice to some of his subjects. He only liked the subjects who were attractive, who were about his height and weight, who had the same skin color as he did and who thought like he did. To these people, he was very nice, polite, and friendly, and they loved him. To everyone else, he was harsh, cruel, or just outright ignored them. He didn’t have to be nice to them, because he was the prince, and one day would be king. His power meant he could mock them, and he did so, because it amused him. And because they were powerless, they could do nothing.

 But one day, a sorceress came to visit. She was on vacation, and had heard nice things about this kingdom. And the prince liked her very much: she was beautiful, the “right” height and weight, and very well-educated, but her skin was a different color. He called her “exotic” and thought it was a compliment, but really what he meant was that she was attractive to him despite her “flaw”.

 She knew what he really meant; she was powerful and she could see into his soul. He wanted to possess her, as if she were an object, a statue to be put up in his throne room. She didn’t like that: she was a person, full and complete, with a mind and a heart and a soul of her own. And he was by turns wicked and unthinking: some people he meant to hurt and some people he hurt without meaning to, which was almost worse. He was like a child flailing about with a sword, surprised when he drew blood of an innocent bystander.

 So the sorceress used her powers to shrink him to 3 feet tall, but she kept his weight the same: the same weight on a shorter frame made him look overweight. She changed his skin so it would be chartreuse with pink polka dots, she changed his appearance so he didn’t look so much like a male model, and she gave him new clothes that were not of silk and velvet but of sackcloth and itchy wool. Then she sent him out into the streets.

 He lived penniless and homeless for 30 days. At first he was angry and he barked at people as he was used to doing, trying to order them about. But no one recognized him as the prince, and they laughed at him, kicked him, and whapped him with rolled-up newspapers. He felt betrayed and alone, and, over time, the loneliness won out as his primary emotion. He had to beg for food and coin, and when a kind-hearted woman brought him into her home to feed him a home-cooked meal, he felt a warmth in his chest he’d never experienced before.

 She was not someone he would’ve given a second glance to before: she was heavier than he had liked when he was a prince and could have anyone. Her skin wasn’t the “right” color – what he had thought of as the “right” color before. And she wasn’t as well-educated as he was, because her parents could not have afforded the tutors he had had. She had gone to the public school and learned how to function in life though; she ran a bakery, and she lived just above it. She was kind and sweet and made him laugh for the first time since he had been transformed. And the closest she came to cruelty was to admit she’d never met someone who had pink polka dots all over, but that she thought he could make it work with the right clothing.

 At the end of the 30 days, the sorceress appeared before him and asked if he’d learned his lesson. She was prepared to turn him back into his old self if he had. He was at the bakery, helping his new friend run the counter, and he said he liked his life here much better than he’d liked it at the palace. He wanted to stay as he was – except maybe the pink polka dots, because they were a bit much.

 And the sorceress laughed and left him as he was, except to remove the pink polka dots because even she admitted it was kind of over-the-top, come to think of it. And the former prince married the baker and they had a family and ran the bakery together and he was never happier in his life. The end.

 So what did we learn from this story? Yes, pink polka dots on chartreuse is kind of hideous. What else? Yes, very good: you shouldn’t be cruel to other people just because they’re different. He had a very different life from a lot of the people he made fun of, and it wasn’t until he was made to live among them and experience their lives that he learned.

 Hm? Yes, people were mean to him because he was different, too. Because that was the standard he had set, you see. He had taught his kingdom that he was the sort of person they should be like, and if they weren’t that way – even through things that they couldn’t control, like the color of their skin or their height and weight – that they were bad and wrong and deserved cruelty. So, you see, he was reaping what he had sown.

 Have you learned that phrase yet? Taken literally, it means that if you plant –or sow- lettuce, you will harvest –or reap- lettuce, and there’s no sense complaining that you wanted corn instead. You didn’t plant corn, you planted lettuce. But people don’t usually mean it that way; they mean that you will face the consequences of your actions. If you know that yelling and screaming through the tower all day will result in your father grounding you, and you yell and scream through the tower all day, what do you think will happen to you? That’s right, He will ground you, and you will deserve it. You have reaped what you sowed – you’ve earned what you’ve gotten. Understand?

 No one is immune from this. Everything in life is action and consequence, but some consequences take a while to catch up with us, is all. Sometimes, we don’t even realize it. But it happens to everyone. Yes, even you. Yes, even your father. No magic can protect you from cause and effect. It cannot protect anyone.

 Well, just look at how your father came to be: He is the effect of generations’ worth of stories told in the same place, on the same subject. The fairies, too. The town is reaping what they sowed, even though they were unaware of the seeds they were planting. Sometimes, that’s just how it works. They caused Him to be, and now He is their Master. Cause and effect. This is just how it works, how it is. And no magic in the world can change it.

 Sometimes people can change it. Just sometimes, depending on what it is. For example, if you yell and scream through the tower all day and your father catches you, He might decide to have mercy on you and not ground you. This is unlikely, as He’s not particularly merciful, but He could do, if He wanted to. He could change the consequences by forgiving you. But as I said, He’s not terribly forgiving, so I wouldn’t put it to the test. It was just an example.

 If we look at the story again, the prince had sown seeds of cruelty amongst his people, and so he reaped what he had sown. But there was this one woman who saw that cruelty was always wrong, no matter what, and she treated him better than he deserved. Compassion and forgiveness are often portrayed as a weakness, because they often mean that you are risking getting hurt. You forgive someone who hurt you and perhaps they will hurt you again; you give a beggar some money and now you are that much poorer.

 But it’s precisely because you risk yourself that makes the path of compassion and forgiveness one of strength, or at least of stamina. It’s easy to shut people away so they can’t hurt you and to treat them the way you feel they deserve, but it’s so much harder to be nice to everyone and to open your heart to those around you. You risk being hurt, but you also might make a friend or fall in love. As you grow older, you’ll learn how to judge who is worth the risk and who isn’t. And sometimes you’ll take the risk and be hurt, but then you will have learned from that experience, and maybe next time your judgment will be better.

 Yes, some people will hurt you always, every chance they get. Some people won’t even know they’re doing it, as the prince did sometimes with his unconscious insults. But if someone hurts you over and over, you shouldn’t have them in your life. No, you don’t have to kill them, just don’t hang out with them anymore.

 Come on, it’s waaaay past bedtime for you and for It. Even monsters need rest. Good night. Have wonderful dreams.

**8**

 No, no, I promise, you won fair and square. I’m just not very good at that game. Shall I tell you a secret? You can’t tell your father. It can’t tell your father either. This secret has to stay between the three of us: you, me, and your monster.

 I am bound more to you than to your father. Your commands supercede His. Well, in this case it means that even though He told me to let you win, you told me to play fair, and so I don’t have to do what your father told me. Your orders are the ones I have no choice but to follow, if they contradict ones He gave me.

 He can still command me, of course. But if He, say, told me I could never eat anything but lima beans ever again and you told me I could only eat jelly beans, I would have to only eat jelly beans. No matter how many times He yelled at me, I could not obey His order if yours contradicts it.

 But here’s the thing: He can dispel me. He can send my spirit away forever, if He wanted to, and I wouldn’t go to Heaven or anything – if there is a Heaven – I would just be gone. So you should be very careful about what you order me to do, especially if it goes against your father’s orders.

 No, I think in this case it’s probably okay. If He asks, I will tell Him that you ordered me to play fair, and I thought it best to acquiesce to your wishes. I don’t think He’ll ask though; He is busy with other things. Well, I don’t know *all* the things He does, but He does have an entire town to oversee. That keeps Him pretty busy, even with the townsfolk as compliant as they have been.

 Hm? Oh, it’s been…well, let’s see… about a decade now, I think? I lost track of time somewhere in there; it could be more. But it’s a decade at least, since your father rose to power. Well, a decade since He started becoming real, and then there was that year where He slowly consolidated His power prior to actually taking over. God, has it really been that long? I should look at a calendar. Ask your teachers; I’m sure they’d know.

 And while we’re on the subject of authority figures, what is this I hear about you not finishing your dinner the last two nights? Hm? You don’t like it? Really? It’ll make you strong. Why what? Why does He eat humans? Well, there are three reasons I can think of:

 First is that there’s not a whole lot else to eat, meat-wise. There are some animals in the forest, and the townsfolk have gotten better at hunting them, but mostly they eat vegetables and grains that they grow in their yards. They’ve had to relearn a way of life long lost to them, because it’s just not practical to have deliverymen coming in here to restock the town’s stores. They might figure out what’s going on and bring in others. Your father is very powerful, but there’s no sense in expending His energy fighting battles that don’t have to be fought.

 Second is that every bite of flesh helps make your father – and you – more real. Remember that He never originally existed here; this tower wasn’t His home until the countless stories of schoolchildren made it so. Taking in real human flesh makes Him more and more human. And you also, yes; you were born of His magic, after all, and by His will. No, I can’t tell you more about how you were born yet. Do not thwart Him on this matter; He will be most upset, and He might do something…drastic. Yes, even to you. I will tell you when you’re older.

 And thirdly is that it’s a gruesome reminder to the townsfolk of what happens when they cross or fail Him. Last night’s dinner was one of the apprentices, I know, who failed in the combat tests; he was said to be very juicy. No, I wouldn’t know; I don’t eat any longer. I don’t need to, and even if I wanted to, I don’t have a stomach to digest it. Yes, this also means I don’t poop.

 Are you done giggling? Yes, well as I was saying, it’s an easy way to show the townsfolk what happens when things do not go as He wants them to. Most humans have an inborn horror of the idea of cannibalism – humans eating other humans. No one wants to die, but to be eaten after death is particularly horrific. So it keeps them in line.

 No, monsters eating humans is perfectly fine. That’s the natural order of things, I suppose. But your monsters will only eat the humans you tell them to, because you will be what now? That’s right! Queen of All Monsters!

 I know. I know it’s gross. I would tell you to refuse to eat it if I could, but your father would be highly upset if you didn’t eat the food He had prepared for you. It’s best to just go along with it, or at least pretend to. When He’s not looking, slip scraps under the table for the hellhounds. There’s nothing you can do for the human that that meat used to be; if you won’t take his or her strength for yourself, at least don’t make it obvious that you’re not eating it. Oh, I’d think grounding would be the least of your worries in that case.

 Oh yes, eating your vegetables is still good. You should definitely do that. They will also help you grow up strong. I heard tonight is spaghetti. That should be okay, right? So you’ll clear your plate tonight, and there will be another bedtime story for you. That’s a good girl.

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 Good girls who clean their plates get bedtime stories! As promised! Settle in; that’s my girl. So, once upon a time, there was a tower that had always been there. No, no, you don’t know this one already, hush. So, as I was saying: a tower that had always been there. And children told stories about a Dark Wizard who used to live in the tower and do terrible, unspeakable things.

 But the children were wrong. The tower that had always been there was once the home of a Lord of little renown but great heart. He fought when his king bade him to, and acquitted himself well in battle, but was never glorified or the subject of heroic ballads. And this suited him just fine, because he was uninterested in glory. When he was not called to battle, he ran his lands: his taxes were fair, his lands were well-kept and patrolled, and he was well-loved of his people.

 He had a Lady whom he loved dearly, and they had three children who grew up to be fine, noble lords and ladies in their own right: noble not just in birth but in character as well. And when the Great Death descended upon the lands, the Lord mourned everyone who fell sick and died, landholder and serf alike.

 The Black Plague swept the lands and ended feudalism. The Lord had to hire people to work his lands and fill his armies, and capitalism became the way of the land. Eventually, nobility fell out of favor; the Lord’s descendants – good and noble through and through – stepped down from their exalted posts rather than be forced out. They continued to live in their family home for a while, but eventually they moved out to the cities and moved on with their no-longer-noble-in-the-rank-sense lives. And their ancestral home crumbled from neglect and the effects of time. The walls that had seen a good family be born and live and die toppled until the tower was the only part still left standing and whole.

 And the people in the town forgot about the lords and ladies who had ruled their birthplace for so many generations, and grew disinterested in history, and made up stories instead. And the stories they made up were terrible and dark, and they used them to scare one another, which is a mean thing to do someone. No one sought out the truth of the good that had dwelled in these walls; they used the rubble for their own wicked purposes, and now they have had their just rewards. The End.

 So I suppose you know how the story ends, but you didn’t know the rest of that, did you? No, it’s all true! You can go and look it up. Just maybe don’t let on to your father. He would prefer that He is the only resident of the tower that had always been here. Well, and you, of course. Yes, and It. And me. The four of us here together, forever.

**9**

 Your teachers say your spelling has improved! Yes, I talked with them; well, the ones that didn’t run away. And your writing is looking good, too. You’re more attentive in class, though you’re still having trouble with math. We’ll work on that, though. Yes, math is important, too; not everything is spellcraft, young lady. One day you will rule this town alongside your father, and you will need to know math to run things properly. How will you know how to mix potions, for example? Home economics will teach you baking, cooking, and alchemy, but you’ll need a good math foundation to figure out how to halve recipes if need be.

 That’s my girl. Your father’s going to have a surprise for you after dinner tonight, but you’re going to have to clear your plate. No, I don’t think it’s human tonight; no one’s angered Him lately, and the apprentices are past the combat rounds for at least another month. Besides, we had human two nights ago. Well, I didn’t, but that was the menu.

 No, no, sweetie, you shouldn’t wish to be like me. I’m dead; you should want to stay alive. Besides, when you’re older, maybe your father will let you pick the menu now and again. It won’t always be food you don’t like. I think you’ll like dinner tonight anyway.

 No, I’m not spoiling the surprise! He’d be quite cross with me. Well, no, but He can dispel my spirit, remember? And then who would play Settlers of Catan with you? Who would play Super Mario Kart and race with you on the Rainbow Road? Yes, and have tea with you and It. Pretend tea is the best tea, it’s true; you can imagine it just how you like it.

 And who would tell you stories and teach you the secret ways of storycrafting even though you are still just a little girl? So I have to do what your father says, so that I can still be here to help you and play with you and It. Would It miss me if I were gone? Awww. That’s nice. I’d miss It, too, but I’d miss you most of all.

 Well of course you’re my favorite! And you always will be. Yes, even more than Marten; he’s kind of a snot, I don’t care how good his grades are. Your father *does* see a lot of potential in him, but He sees a lot more potential in you. You’re His heir, after all, His beautiful and beloved daughter.

 Well…yes, I like to believe it’s possible for anyone to love, even the scary Dark Wizard. And it’s that much more powerful when someone like Him loves, hm? Because He loves so little else, besides Himself and power. And now you. You are that special to Him.

 You know, Father’s Day will be coming up; you should make Him a card. To tell Him you’re glad He’s your father, of course, and that you love Him. He made you, after all, and didn’t have to, so you should show Him some gratitude.

 No, sweetie, I keep telling you: I can’t talk about your mother. I can’t. I *can’t*. Normally yes, but this isn’t just a command of His; I am ensorcelled. I cannot speak of this matter. You would have to break His spell for me to be able to talk about it; just commanding me to tell you won’t work in this case, honey.

 I’m sorry. I’d tell you if I could. I want to tell you, but…well, maybe for now it’s best you don’t know. Yes, it’s another ‘maybe when you’re older’ things. Only it’s really ‘when you’re older and powerful enough to break His spell’. You’ve got a lot of practicing to do between then and now.

 How’s physical education? Really? Getting good at dodgeball, are you? It’s because you’re so little yet; you can move fast, duck quickly, and thus dodge well. Oh, you’re getting good at *throwing* it? Well, that’s also good! One boy got a bruise? Was it Marten? I thought so.

 But now think a moment: what if your father had cast a spell that swapped you and Marten’s bodies? What if you were in his shoes instead of your own, and he had pegged you with the ball hard enough to bruise? You wouldn’t like it, would you? It’d hurt, right? So maybe, when your father and the teachers aren’t looking, you could apologize to Marten for hitting him so hard.

 Yes, I know he’s a snot, but even snots don’t deserve bruises for no reason. Just because you *can* bruise him, doesn’t mean you *should*. Besides, if you apologize, maybe he’ll help you. Your father does think he has potential; if he helped you with your work, you could become better faster. And he will still know that you have the potential to bruise him – sometimes that works even better than just bruising him all the time.

 Well, it’s important that those who serve under you know that you have the power to enforce your will, but sometimes if you’re nice to people, they will do extra things for you, and not just the bare minimum of work required. They will still know that they cannot fail you, because you could bruise them very badly. Yes, or disintegrate them. Yes, or cook them, like your father does. But they will also feel like they want to work for you if you are nice to them, and then they will be better workers.

 Fear is a powerful motivator, but respect is better. No, your father probably would not agree with me. His origin is fear, and that is the source of His power as well as His being. But the children He teaches respect His power. They still fear Him more, of course, and so does the town. He wields fear well; He is, in a sense, a Master Artist and Fear is His medium.

 But when you are old enough and are working with Him to rule the town? Imagine if the townsfolk respected you at least as much as they feared you! They would gladly do things for you, and wouldn’t want to do bad things behind your back. You wouldn’t have to spend as much time watching them all the time, and you would have more time to play with the fairies or conjure monsters for tea. Wouldn’t that be nice?

 It’s important that you develop your own style, you know. You can’t just be a copy of your father in all things. For now though, it’s easier and perhaps better for you to follow along. Do as He says, because these basics that you’re learning are important. Once you have the foundations down, you can experiment a little, and do so safer. Remember that it was because the children did not know, for so long, that what they were doing was magic that all of this has come to pass.

 No, there’s nothing wrong with the way things are now. You’re here, after all, and that’s wonderful. But you don’t want people just doing magic willy-nilly, without knowing what they’re doing; who knows how they might change things? To be in charge of your own destiny, sweetheart, you have to study.

 You also have to sleep. Rest is important for your brain and your body, so you can grow powerful and strong and clever. A clever sorceress is almost impossible to defeat! And you will be so very clever, and strong, and Queen of All Monsters when you grow up, if you work at it. So get some rest. Yes, I will stay here until you go to sleep. And pet your hair, yes. Close your eyes now. Good night.

**10**

 Calm down, calm down! Go slower, so I can understand you. Your father’s going to give you personal lessons?! How wonderful! I assume just in spellcraft? Oh, theory and alchemy as well? Well, you must’ve done something to impress Him, if He’s teaching you all of that already!

 Well, yes, I suppose you never can start to learn too early. So, we shall have another nice story, shall we? Oh, the Resistance? Why do you ask about that? How do you even know about that? Oh He did, did He? Well enough; I suppose this is an instructive story then. It certainly won’t be a nice one. Settle in to bed then.

 Once upon a time – as all the best stories start – your father had been ruling over this town for…about 5 or 6 years. And there were townsfolk who were getting good at being sneaky. They had ways of communicating with one another that your father overlooked, and they used it to plot His downfall. They were quite clever and they had been waiting for Him to grow complacent in His rule.

 You see, He believed He had crushed any thought of rebellion long ago. He was confident that the townsfolk were duly obedient. He was not watching as closely as He used to do. And that allowed some wiggle room. Yes, yes, stop wiggling now; settle down and listen.

 At first, it was little things: soap in the fountain, moustaches drawn on the Master’s statue, silly things, little better than fairy pranks. That’s probably why they got away with it, in the beginning. But then it became so much more: graffiti calling the Master evil, calling people to resist. Things like “Better to die on our feet than to live on our knees.” Hm? Oh, it means it’s better to die fighting and standing up for yourself than to live your life on your knees begging for mercy.

 Well, some people care so much about something that they believe it is worth dying for. For some it’s a person, like their beloved or their children; for some it’s a thing like money or their home; and for some, it’s a concept like freedom. And some people will do anything to stay alive, no matter what; there is nothing that they are willing to put their lives on the line for.

 Me? I suppose I died for a concept, or for a lot of people. It depends on how you look at it. No, that’s a story for another day. As for the Resistance, well, your father rooted them out and killed their leaders. The town thought the head of the Resistance would be some headstrong young man, but she was an old woman. He knew she wouldn’t taste good, so He just had His magic dissolve her in front of the entire village’s eyes. Even if they tried not to look, the image of her rapidly disintegrating body showed behind their closed eyelids. The other main leaders were decapitated and their heads left on spikes in front of the Master’s statue, and everyone was commanded to come to the statue every day for two weeks, for an hour each day, to gaze upon what happens to those who organize against Him. Anyone else who had been in the Resistance was allowed to live, but they are marked and He watches them closely. Thus far, they have not tried to rise against Him again.

 And that is the story of the Resistance. It was short-lived and shut down quickly, before they could even attempt to harm Him. Just the fact that they were attempting to stir the people against Him was crime enough.

 The lesson? Well, what do you think it is? Yes, yes: you must move quickly against those who are a threat to you. Do not give them time to organize themselves, or they will be that much harder to fight. You want a quick, sure victory.

 Why did He let the others live? Because breaking someone’s spirit is more effective than breaking their body. They can still be alive to be useful in other ways this way, and with broken spirit, they will actively discourage others from trying anything. They will get married and have children, and they will teach their children that they must never, ever go against the Master.

 What you teach the children will influence the future. Yes, you reap what you sow. If you teach your children to be afraid and to be respectful, they will grow to be obedient subjects. Even if they have no interest in wielding magic, they will be good and dutiful workers, who want nothing so much as to live a quiet life of anonymity to those in power. That is what your father wants: not to know them, not to have to care about them, to be confident in their obedience to Him.

 Hm? Well, I would say it makes making friends difficult, but otherwise, it is considered a valid governmental approach. It doesn’t last much longer than a single generation, but given that your father is unlikely to die of natural causes, it shouldn’t matter in His case. He will continue to rule with the same ruthless efficiency for the rest of time, and this town will always be His.

 I cannot speak to your father’s desires, but it would not surprise me if He had designs to conquer more than this single town. But He is consolidating His power, raising His army of wizards under His rule, and together, perhaps, they can take the next town, and the one after, and the one after. Again, this is just a supposition, a guess. And you, as His heir, could have a town of your very own to run, perhaps, if that’s what He does.

 Well, that’s a change in subject. What brought this up? Oh. I’m sorry, sweetie, but I don’t know that you’ll ever have a little brother or sister. I’m sorry that you feel lonely. Have you tried making friends in your classes? What about Marten, did you do what I suggested? And what’d he say? Oh. Well, perhaps you can befriend kids closer to your age.

 And you will always have It and you will always have me. Always and always, so long as your father doesn’t dispel me. I suppose you could ask your father for a sibling, but I can’t promise He will like the idea. Go to sleep, sweetheart. It’s better you don’t think about it.

**11**

 What is all the screaming?! Forgive me, Master, I… Yes, I will. Come with me. Come. Take my hand; I can make it solid for you to hold. Come along.

 What did you think you were doing, yelling and screaming at Him like that? Oh, sweetie, no, you didn’t. I’ve told you before you mustn’t ask Him about that. And I told you *not* to ask Him about getting a sibling.

 Hm? He said there was no one worthy of it, huh? Heh. Oh, nothing. I shouldn’t even… No, darling, I told you that I cannot. I would if I could, really I would.

 Let me tell you a story. I remember the first time I saw you: you were a toddler, and so pretty it almost hurt to look at you. It was as if you were not of this world, and I knew right away that I would be bound to you forever. That I would take care of you and teach you and raise you while He went about His dark business.

 And when your father introduced me to you, He said “Spooky, huh?” and you mispronounced ‘spooky’ as ‘pooky’ and so that is how I came to be your Pookie. Did you think Pookie was my real name? Haha, silly girl! No, my true name is something I can’t tell you yet. Your father knows it, and there’s one person in town who would recognize me, if they’re still alive. I don’t dare go see them though; it would break their heart to know what had become of me… but don’t fret, because I like being your Pookie, really I do! I like telling you stories and playing games with you, and having pretend tea with you and It. It’s been a long time since I’ve been at all happy, but you make me happy, you do. Even though I’m dead, yes. Do you think the dead can’t be happy? In some ways, they may be happier than the living, if they’re allowed to rest in peace. They can be free of hunger and torment and pain. They will never again be sick or scrape their knee or have that awful pins-and-needles feeling in their feet or hands ‘cause they slept on it funny or something.

 I’m not resting though. If I were resting, I couldn’t do all these fun things with you. Oh, it’s okay; I don’t need sleep. It’s not that type of resting. Well, sometimes people use ‘resting’ as a euphemism – as a nicer way of saying something – instead of saying ‘dead.’ Only dead people don’t usually wake up, at least without the influence of someone like your father, and you, someday, if you work at it. I’m sure you’ll be a great sorceress, and very powerful.

 You can’t just keep antagonizing your father like that though. He’ll get fed up and then you’ll be in real trouble. Be the nice, sweet, obedient daughter, so that you won’t get in trouble. Yes, I know what I’ve been telling you, and that’s all true: until you find a way to break His spell or significantly weaken His power, I cannot give you the answers to the questions you most want answered. But you’re still just a little girl; remember, I also told you to wait and work on growing your power. It would break my heart if He punished you harshly because of the things I’ve been telling you. So please, let it just be between us, okay? Our secret.

 He would punish me, too, you know. He might yet, for this. No, no, sweetheart, it’s fine. I’ll think of something, and hopefully He won’t… oh, now don’t cry. Here, hold on. There, now I am huggabl-oof! Oh, sweetheart, don’t cry. You were curious about where you come from, and lonely. There’s nothing wrong with those things, really. They’re just things we can’t explain to you right now. Shh. Someday, when you’re older and more powerful. Shh, shhh. Don’t cry.

 Come on, we will go play a game, hm? Do you want to play a game? No? Tea? No. Do you want a story? Okay. Let’s go back to your room, and we’ll have a story. Sweetie, I can’t carry you back there; I can’t stay corporeal that long. You have to walk, so you’ll have to let go. That’s my girl. Okay, come on then; I’ll start the story while we walk, okay?

 Once upon a time, there was an old beggar man. He wore dirty rags and had a scraggly beard and smelled funny. He panhandled – begged for money – on the busiest corner of the village, and so everyone knew him. Most of the people ignored him, some spat on him or called him names, and some kind, wonderful few gave him some money or some food.

 At night, he would sleep in an alley, amongst the decomposing garbage, because as things break down and wear away – decompose – they give off heat. Not a lot, but it was better than nothing. He had made a little hut out of cardboard boxes, to keep the snow and rain off of him. He lived a miserable life, by all accounts.

 But the old beggar man always smiled. He was always kind to everyone, even those who mistreated him. He was never drunk or on drugs, and the only time he was at all mean was when he found some kids trying to tie tin cans to a cat’s tail: he chased them off and protected the cat and thereafter it followed him like his pet. He named it Scraps. And Scraps and the old beggar man were always on the same corner every day, begging for money or food.

 And then, one night, the beggar man was sick and laid down to sleep early. He needed the rest, and he slept deeply. And while he slept, a thief came and took what few possessions the man owned: a book, a flashlight, and a pen. The old man loved to read and re-read that book and write little notes in the margins as if he were talking with the characters. He needed the flashlight to see it in the dark. Scraps tried to scare off the thief and he picked the cat up and dashed it against the wall, killing it.

 In one night, while he was trying to fight off illness, everything he loved was taken from him. And how do you think he felt the next day? Yes, he was very sad. He missed his book, flashlight, and pen, but most of all he missed Scraps. He found a pet cemetery which promised to bury Scraps, even though the old beggar man couldn’t afford to pay for a lot, and he would go twice a week to sit by Scraps’s grave and cry.

 And that was when the Witch showed up. She said, “Do you remember me?” The old beggar man shook his head. She told him, “Long ago, you were the King of this village and of a great many others besides. But you loved money and possessions more than anything else, and so I turned you into this wretch that you are now, with nothing and no one. I will offer you the choice now, O Former King, of two wishes. You may have only one.

 “You can be a King again, and have all the lands, treasure, and power you once possessed again. You will have all the books, flashlights, and pens your heart could desire, and more besides. Or you can stay a beggar man who is kicked and spat upon, who smells funny and shivers away in his boxes night after night but you can have your kitty alive and with you again.”

 “Please, can I have Scraps back?” he asked immediately. “I don’t even remember being a King, and while it would be nice not to shiver every night, I just want my kitty-cat back with me, please.”

 The Witch smiled and, with her magic, resurrected the cat, and he was alive and breathing and just as good as new, and the old beggar man hugged him and petted him and scratched him behind the ears and was the happiest he’d ever been. And he lived out his days with Scraps by his side. When he died, in his cardboard box, after many many years, Scraps was found next to him, a very old kitty by then, and dead as well, having died with its master.

 Yes, it is a little sad, but you see, the King was willing to give up everything to have his companion. Perhaps your father will consent to get you a pet. Something…sturdy. Hardy. And not tasty to eat…though I’m not sure such a creature exists. Maybe he can make your stuffed monster a real monster for you.

 You’d rather keep It the way It is? That’s a good and clever girl, to appreciate what you have. What’s that? Oh, that’s a good point: It doesn’t have to poop the way it is right now. Well, that’s still very good of you to think of. What sort of pet would you rather have, *if* your father said you could have one?

 Hm. I think a rat would be a good pet. If you get pet rats, they don’t have diseases and they’re very clever animals, and they can be quite cute. Don’t get your hopes up yet though; you’ve been bad today, as far as He’s concerned, so maybe wait a few days? Behave and be a good girl, and then tell Him that you’re lonely and you’d like a pet. You can tell Him that I’ll help you take care of it, if that helps? Well, of course I will! We will learn all about whatever sort of pet you decide you want, so that we know how to take good care of him or her, and I will help you until you no longer need help and can look after it on your own, hm?

 No, I think it’s good for a young girl to have someone or something to look after. It teaches responsibility, because if you don’t take good care of your pet, the pet will get sick and die. Yes, I suppose you could practice resurrection then, but that depends on if you even know resurrection at that point.

 Well, why don’t we go and look up what sort of pets there are out there in the world, and see if we can’t pick out one that sounds good? We can spend a few days researching the different types of pets and then, when you’ve got one kind of animal picked out, we can go ask your father. Yes, I’ll go with you. He can be very scary to face alone; believe me, I know.

 I’ll try to smuggle up some dinner for you later, because I’m sure He’ll have told the kitchen staff by now that you were naughty and are not to have supper. It may not be much more than some bread and cheese, but I’ll get you something, I promise. And then we’ll have another story for bed, hm? Now, let’s start with rats…

**12**

 Once upon a time, there was an ugly princess. She was very upset because she had been told that she would grow to be a beautiful young lady, like in the tale of the Ugly Duckling, yet, as she got older, she was still considered ‘ugly’ by the standards of the day. This made her lash out at people because she was sick of being teased, of being whispered about behind her back, and the like. She developed an ugly personality to go with her ‘ugly’ face, because pushing people away was better than letting herself be hurt by them. But secretly, she longed for friends, for romance, for love and happiness – all the things any human longs for.

 However, she was still a princess, and the heir to the throne. And while princesses are often judged solely on their beauty, she was a remarkable woman in all other ways: she excelled at all forms of sword fighting and dueling, she was a tactical genius, she could be – when the situation called for it – very tactful and was good at diplomacy. She was a wonderful dancer, a skilled painter, and wrote engaging and well-thought-out historical analyses. She had an interest in science and advancing technology, in expanding educational opportunities for the poor in her father’s kingdom, and volunteered at the local hospital.

 There it was that she met a soldier. Her father had sent troops to aid an allied kingdom, and this man had been wounded on the battlefield. He had a bad head wound, and the entire top half of his skull was bandaged, including his eyes. She tended to him as she tended to all the soldiers, but he often begged her to stay and talk with him, he was so lonely and he was a little afraid now that he could not see. So she would stay with him, and talk with him about whatever he liked.

 He hadn’t learned much in his school years, but he liked hearing about history, and he often had his own perspectives on things that he brought to bear on events and wars and famous historical people. He often decried injustice and tyranny, thought of fair but not overly harsh punishments for transgressions, and did not reject her opinion out of hand because she wasn’t pretty. She felt herself falling in love with him, but she told herself that she shouldn’t. He would hurt her, the way everyone did. But her heart would not listen to her brain.

 One day, he had two things to tell her: the first was that they were taking his bandages off the day after tomorrow, and the second was that he loved her, and wanted to marry her, if she’d have him. He didn’t know he was proposing to a princess, and, more importantly to her, he didn’t know what she looked like. She brought that last point up with him, and he said it didn’t matter what she looked like: he loved her. She shook her head, knowing that wouldn’t be true, and fled his bedside without further response, leaving the soldier confused and sad.

 She stopped going to the hospital; she spent all her time in her room, rejecting her tutors and her parents when they tried to pull her out for a rousing bout of fencing or a game of chess. She didn’t want to come out for meals; they were able to coax some bread and water into her, but for the better part of a week, all she did was cry and sleep and hug her stuffed pony.

 And then one day, someone knocked on her door. She told them to go away, as she always did. “I won’t,” said the voice on the other side, and it was the soldier from the hospital. She started crying again. “Please, let me in.”

 “I can’t! Go away!”

 “I won’t go away. Are you betrothed to someone else in some political arrangement?”

 “No. Go away.”

 “Do you love someone else?”

 “No. And I said go away.”

 “Do you love me?”

 “…it doesn’t matter. Go away.”

 “It matters to me!”

 “I’m ugly!” she cried at him through her door. “I’m hideous! You won’t love me anymore once you see me.”

 “Prove it,” he challenged. And so she strode to her door and yanked it open.

 “HERE, SEE?!” But he didn’t recoil in shock and horror. He frowned a little though, just a little.

 “You don’t look ugly or hideous to me. But you look like you’ve been crying, and you need to eat something. Come have dinner with me, and see if I can’t cheer you up.”

 She sniffled. “You…don’t think I’m ugly?”

 “Of course I don’t.”

 “You’re just saying that because I’m a princess.”

 “That part was a bit of a surprise,” he admitted. “When I asked around the hospital about you, I was more than a little shocked to find out I’d just casually proposed to the future Queen. But my proposal stands, and it’s unanswered. I was willing to marry you when you were just a nurse; why wouldn’t I want to marry you now?”

 “You wouldn’t marry me if I were an ugly nurse, but because I’m an ugly *princess*, you want to.”

 “Why do you have to say these awful, hurtful things? You know I love you. I don’t care what you look like – I said it, and I meant it. Give up your throne, and my proposal will not change, but you’d be doing your kingdom a great disservice if you actually do that. You’re a smart, clever, and kind young woman; you will make a wonderful queen someday. I’m not sure how I’d do as a consort, but…”

 She sniffled again and murmured, “I think you’d be a very good consort. You’re fair, compassionate, and thoughtful.” He blushed a little, pleased at her compliments. “You really would marry me, even if I were disinherited or if I renounced my claim to the throne?”

 “Try it and see,” he challenged. “I think you’re wonderful just as you are, princess or no.”

 And she finally believed him, and she smiled and hugged him, and he hugged her back and kissed her and they were wed not long after. And she became a wonderful queen, as he had said, and he was a very good consort, as she had said. They had adorable children together, and lived a long and happy life with one another. The end.

 Yes, well, I thought you were due for a purely happy story this time. I don’t want the stories I tell you to always be sad or have people dying in them. It *is* a bit like the story of the prince made ugly, only in reverse; very clever of you. He loved her for her personality and her intelligence, and so what she looked like didn’t matter to him, just as the baker woman loved the disguised prince.

 Beauty is a changing standard anyway; a lot of men and women who were once considered incredibly beautiful are now considered somewhat homely. Standards change. It used to be that a plump woman was beautiful and now we’re told that it’s prettier to be thin. Be who you are and be true to that, and you will find someone to love.

 Friends, too, yes. Have you tried being friends with any of the kids in class? Ah. Yeah, it can be difficult, with who your father is. But if you keep trying, eventually you’ll find someone who’s not as intimidated.