



Do What You Must

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Retold Fairy Tales

“Do what you must to survive and, when you’re in power, their judgment won’t matter.”

Words from my mother.

Little did she know I would take those words so seriously. I would hold onto these words of wisdom long after she died, long after her body had finished rotting.

History is told by the victor and therefore I was never able to speak. Today, however, that will change.

As a child, my mother was the sole breadwinner, my father being absent from the scene. We scrapped by thanks to my mother’s good looks and the lonely workingman’s healthy wallet. When we began to really struggle, my mother expected me to do my part to pay the bills.

“She’s so fair,” one would say.

“I’ll pay twice,” another would interject.

I was the talk of the town. “The countryside gem”, they would say in hushed voices so their wives couldn’t hear. But I didn’t want to be like my mother, I wanted to be the opposite of her. She was diseased, I would take care of myself. She was used by men, but from now on, I would use men to my advantage. She was broken down by thirty years of age, I would be glowing at forty.

I knew I had to get out and, unfortunately, I knew how I would get the money.

Night after long night I would give my mother half of what I was paid, and store the other half behind our mirror, the only hiding place in our worn-down shack. My mother insisted on having a vanity because of the, “importance that beauty is to our line of work”. Her words exactly.

I hated that mirror. Every day I would come home and fight the urge to shatter my reflection, the reminder of what I’d allowed myself to be.

One night, after a particularly violent customer, I could control the feeling no longer and began to throw, to cry, to destroy. When my mother finally came home she held me tight and picked up a shard.

“Look at this,” she said.

“No.”

“Look at your beauty,” she insisted.

“My beauty is all they see.”

“Your beauty makes you powerful. Men will do anything for a beautiful woman. Never forget that.”

She was a terrible mother, but she helped me see the power in beauty. A power that I knew I had to utilize.

When I had enough money to flee at least three cities from home, I ran. I ran as far away from that old countryside as I could. I ran and ran until I could not run any longer. Far enough so no one would know me as the daughter of a harlot. When I finally stopped running is when many of you begin your story of Snow White. It was on the street when I first saw the king. He was walking from the chapel, just released from the funeral of the Queen. His daughter, so lovely

“and reminded me quite of myself, by his side.

He refused to make eye contact with the crowd, but I could tell that he had been crying for some time.

Do what you must in order to survive.

He was no doubt lonely and Snow White looking for a mother.

It is a terrible thing to manipulate a grieving family, but I needed their fortune and I knew I could convince them that they needed me too. The title of “Queen” was not a terrible trade either.

A quick, inattentive run-in with the king. A very quirky introduction and apology. I could practically hear the wedding bells by the end of the day.

The king did move quickly, making preparations for our marriage before anyone had time to question where the beautiful maiden that was replacing the queen had come from. And alas, you can see how haste veils a vital part of my story.

The townspeople despised me. They accused me of being a royal parasite, interested only in the throne. While they were correct, who were they to speak? Given the right circumstances, they too would have done what they had to in order to survive.

Every night, the king would lie down next to me and tell me that I was the fairest in all the land. I lay my head down with thoughts of my mother mother and how, if she could see me, she would be proud that her daughter used her beauty to gain status, to gain power.

The king died unexpectedly and who would take the blame? None other than the beautiful queen who took

advantage of a lonely king and his now orphaned child. I was actually quite sad at the king's death. I was starting to grow fond of him, starting to forgive his kind for years of trauma given to me and my mother. It was truly unfortunate that Snow White began to believe the lies told about me, that she actually thought I would murder her father. Nevertheless, she was an oversight that I needn't concern myself with. Now that the King was gone, I had full control of the land, of the kingdom.

The funeral of the King proved insufferable. Perhaps, if I had more time with the King, we would have fallen in love and this funeral would have been something worth attending. Snow White kept looking at me, every time they said the king's name her eyes darted in my direction. Everyone was staring at me, betrayed, in awe that I could do such a terrible deed. They were frustrated; they could not do anything about the fact that I was now, by law, their queen.

I could not take it any longer and feigned illness to get away from the demeaning crowd. They were full of judgment and I could not bear any more eyes on me.

I ran, just as I had a few years ago, to the deepest corridor of the deepest dungeon in the castle just to get away and what I found was truly fascinating.

A mirror.

I stood in front of it, staring at my reflection. This was my power, my beauty, and I could never let another take my power from me.

"Oh mirror," I said, more to myself than anything else, "you have always been honest with me."

"As I hope mirrors would be," a voice answered back, "After all, a dishonest mirror is not a mirror one should be doing deals with."

"Who-?"

"Who said that? Well the mirror of course. It would be rude not to respond to such a fair maiden."

I was silent, not sure how to respond to an enchanted mirror. I had heard tales of magic in the kingdoms but not since I was a child had I thought any of it true.

"Was there something you wanted to know?"

"What?"

"Mirrors must always be honest. Ask me anything and I shall tell you the truth."

"Okay, magic mirror on the wall?" I questioned both the mirror and my sanity, "Who is fairest of them all?"

"That is easy. Too easy in fact."

"Then who? Tell me who is fairer than I."

And the mirror did tell me. He told me that there were three maidens far fairer than I in the kingdom.

“If you want to be fairest, you need only to remove their beauty,” the mirror said.

“How?” I asked.

“Travel farther down this hall. There is a room filled with potions used by the old queen. You must be careful as its magic is powerful. So powerful, in fact, that it consumed the queen of old. In this room there is a spell to remove another’s beauty. Read it carefully and practice the potion until it is perfected. There is nothing worse than a spell crafted incorrectly or a potion consumed prematurely.”

Potion making was simpler than I initially anticipated. Just follow the instructions closely and the magic does the rest. After a few tries, I perfected the “beauty removal” potion and, as my mother would have wanted, I did what I had to, to survive.

An invitation to the castle was all that was required to get the three beautiful maidens to me.

A bit of tainted wine and the three fair maidens would wake up the next morning with moles, wrinkles, and whatever else was needed to make myself fairest. Cruel, yes, and their husbands were angry. But I never cared for the opinions of man.

Every morning I went down to the mirror’s chamber to ensure that I was the fairest in the land and, every morning, the mirror told me just what I wanted to hear. That I was fairest and, thereby, the most powerful person in the kingdom.

That is until Snow White began to grow. With age came beauty and, due to her lack of hate from the townspeople, she quickly became the most loved member living in the castle.

I went to the mirror, ensuring myself I was not growing old and, to my horror, found a wrinkle in both the corners of my eyes and around my mouth. I could not allow myself to age, I could not allow myself to fall victim to the cruel hands of time. I consulted my mirror and he told me what to do.

In the room full of potions and spell books was a recipe most foul. One that was necessary for my beauty to remain forever. As with all magic, some sort of sacrifice was necessary, and this particular potion required the fairest royal heart in all the land. With the fairest heart, I could capture my beauty and ensure that my position of power would not be taken from me.

I needed the fairest heart and I wasn’t going to take out my own heart, so I was forced to wait. To wait for Snow White to become what I feared most, more beautiful than I.

Day after day I waited anxiously for the dreaded news to come, collecting the other ingredients with haste. With every new wrinkle, every gray hair that I plucked, I watched as I became what I feared most, powerless. When the mirror finally told me that Snow White was fairer than I, I was finally able to begin.

To kill a princess is a difficult thing, but to kill a princess loved by all is beyond possible, but I had to do it. I

would have to call upon some type of black magic to ever be able to overcome this obstacle. My reservations about my next steps were silenced by my mother's voice, echoing in my ear, telling me to do what I must to survive.

I tried a cursed corset, but she was released before she fell into a deep coma. I tried a cursed comb, but it was removed before the poison could seep through and cause her to fall asleep. She would accept no other gift as she was wary of anything I could give to her, and rightly so.

Finally, at wits end, I attempted a huntsman to bring her unconscious to my throne, but even he could not do what needed to be done. I had to take matters into my own hands or Snow White would take everything that I had worked so hard for. I could not allow that to happen.

She escaped into the woods? Well then, I would have to go find her. But how? She has already proven to me that she does not trust me.

"Magic mirror on the wall, speak to me now."

"What is it you seek my queen?"

"How can I get Snow White to trust me?"

"Not as you are, of course. However, she will trust anyone other than you."

"But no one will do the bidding that I desire. She has won over the hearts of everyone in the kingdom."

"Then be another in the Kingdom."

"A spell? To change my ... appearance?"

"If it is beauty and power you seek, you have to do-"

"I have to do what I must to survive," I said. The first time I said those words out loud. The words that have guided my life.

"Yes."

"Then I shall sacrifice my queenly beauty in exchange for absolute and permanent power."

This potion, requiring more than I anticipated, had a taste unlike anything I've sensed before. A mixture of fear and dread filled my mind as I finished the concoction. I watched in horror as my hands withered, as the hair on my head turned white. Perhaps I was wrong, maybe I should have just accepted my fate and allowed Snow White to take the throne.

No.

I couldn't let that happen.

I had come too far to let her steal it all away now.

I needed something to get her to become so docile that I could take her heart without resistance. Something

that would not kill her as a beating heart was required for the potion. Poison, but not real poison. The type of poison that would cause her to fall into a deep slumber, much darker than the poison on the corset or the comb, a different kind of poison.

There, in my spell book, was just such a potion. A potion with no antidote other than ... well, there was no need to worry of that. The girl was so young, to think that she had found true love already was ridiculous and improbable. While she was growing up, I had made sure that she didn't even look at another soul for the majority of her life and love cannot be earned over the course of the few days that she was missing.

Nevertheless, no loophole could be overlooked. The poison would be seven times stronger than originally intended, as to ensure the finality in this potion.

Now, how to get this poison across to Snow White? Ah, yes. An apple. An apple to tempt Snow White, like the stories of Adam and Eve who were tempted into sin. Yes, an apple will do just fine.

With my disguise ready and the apple coated in poison, I was ready to take my place as both fairest in the land and eternal queen of the kingdom.

She was too trusting, you see. She thought that an old maid with a basket of apples could never have ill intent. Poor soul. In my experience, I've learned that mistrust is much easier to cope with than trust. After all, no one can betray you if you never trust anyone.

Her cursed, limp body was much more difficult to carry than I thought, partly due to my elderly disguise. No matter. In a few hours I would return to my more youth-filled self and be able to carry her back to the castle. There I could cut out her heart and, with the other ingredients already gathered, I could finally do what my mother never thought I could, be anything other than the daughter of a harlot.

As I sat waiting, my strength slowly coming back to me, I heard a noise from a far off distance, almost like a group of people talking to each other.

No. There was no way anyone else could be here, unless she befriended the little men while she ran away. Yes, yes, the little men. They would be no bother. They were merely mine workers who supplied the necessary trading goods for the kingdom. Once they saw me, their queen, they would have no choice but to help me. Yes, they would carry her body and if anyone saw us, I would have them burned for killing the princess.

The little men came in just as the disguise wore off completely.

"The queen!" one said.

"Your majesty! What are you doing here?"

I explained to them how I followed Snow White into the woods where she met a strange man from another Kingdom. Poor Snow White was so trusting of this man that she didn't see him poison her drink and, when I

finally got to her, the man was long gone and she was already dead. She was to be brought back to the castle immediately for funeral preparations to be made.

The walk back was long and silent, with the occasional sniffing and sob. I hadn't the heart—or perhaps I didn't really care—to tell them that their sweet princess was not truly dead, not yet anyway, and that I had been the one to do it.

When we got back to the castle, I had the little men place Snow White in her room. After they left, I would be able to move her, or rather her heart, to my chamber.

They sat and told painstakingly long stories of how she used to go to their house and entertain them with her songs. Apparently Snow White was sneaking out of her chambers long before she ran away. That's how she knew where to go. Somewhere I would never expect, somewhere I could never find her, but a place where she felt at home.

It took everything in me not to roll my eyes when they spoke of how she would cook and clean for them. How could a princess stoop so low? How could she serve these men as if she were their slave? The thought of ever serving a man, much less seven men, disgusted me.

I tried to hide my impatience, but the little men caught on because the one that seemed to be their leader suggested that they leave me to work on the funeral arrangements.

Yes, finally. I sighed with relief as, one by one, they began to file out.

That's when their leader asked if they could say one last goodbye to Snow White and, reluctantly, I agreed. I stood next to the body, one hand on her body, to ensure a quick goodbye from the little men as to not waste my time any longer.

One by one they went to Snow White and cried over her body, each giving a small peck on the cheek.

As they did so, little by little, her face gained more color, the warmth in her body slowly coming back. By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late. These men loved Snow White and, with each kiss, broke a small part of the spell.

No. I couldn't let this happen. I wouldn't let this happen again.

"Guards!" I yelled in a fit of rage before the little men could notice her awakening, "Escort our guests out of here immediately."

I would have Snow White's heart even if I had to rip it out of her screaming body.

But how to get her down there?

She stirred and I quickly put a cloak over her to hide her from the palace guards. No one would approve of my plan, especially not a kingdom that despises me already.

I guided her, half-conscious, down to the potion room where I readied my knife.

I had set up the ingredients earlier so that, when I returned with Snow White's heart, I could easily craft the brew and quickly drink its contents.

Leading Snow White to a seat in the corner, taking care to avoid the cauldron in the middle of the room, I read the instructions and began to add the ingredients, repeating each out loud so that no mistakes were made.

"A salamander tail, for the revival of the skin," I said as I plopped it in the heating cauldron. "Childlike laughter, for a voice forever youthful." I am ashamed at how I was able to retrieve that specific ingredient but still, it was necessary. "Blood of a lover, fresh from a kill," as I poured the blood of a recently deceased guard into the pot. Mixing the brew, I read the last ingredient, "And finally, heart of the fairest, to keep time forever still." I picked up the knife, looking at where I left Snow White, only she wasn't there.

"Snow White?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

"I won't let you take my heart," she responded from a different corner of the room. She could never hide well, not even when she was a child.

"Trust me, dear. This isn't personal. Have I ever told you the story of my mother? She was-

"A working woman, I know."

"But do you know what she did for a living?"

"No and, quite frankly, I don't care."

"She sold herself for money. She taught me that you must do whatever it takes to survive in the world and this is what I'm doing now. You see, darling," I said, inching closer to where she was hiding, "I am not doing this to spite you. I'm doing this in self-preservation. I'm doing this because it's what I have to do to survive."

"I'm glad you told me that," she said standing from her hiding place, obviously hiding something behind her back, her heart only feet from my knife, "because this isn't personal either," she said as she threw an ornate box at my head, causing me to throw my hands up in self-defense.

She lunged at me, grabbing my wrist and I struggled, dropping the knife in the process. I was obviously more powerful than her and quickly pushed her off me.

"You foolish girl. Do you know what that box could have done to my face? You could have scarred me for life? My beauty, forever gone in an instant." I checked the mirror on the chamber wall, making sure there was no damage done to me. Then, turning back to the girl, said, "Now, stay still. I will have your heart, you will concede to me, your queen."

"You may have been able to overpower my father, but you will never take me. I am not yours to take."

I was still considering her words when she ran at me again, only this time with my knife in her hand.

The blade pierced deep into my side and pain shot through me.

This would most definitely leave a scar on my otherwise perfect body. Perhaps it was the thought of an imperfection that caused me to struggle less when Snow White pushed me into the boiling cauldron. Perhaps it was the fact that I was tired of fighting, that I was tired of always trying to be the most powerful, the fairest. As the mixture burned my flesh and covered my eyes, I thought I could see a hint of regret in the princess's eyes, as if she was finally coming to the realization that I never loved her, that I was never her mother. She stood over me and all I could hear was her saying, "Don't worry stepmother, this wasn't personal. I did what you said, what I must in order to survive."

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