



Natalie Yacobson

Swan Lake

Dragon Empire

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«Издательские решения»

Yacobson N.

Swan Lake. Dragon Empire / N. Yacobson — «Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-00-532083-4

Queen Diana kept a secret that fell victim to her two daughters. One Odette is the daughter of a mortal king, the other Odile is the daughter of a sorcerer. Both princesses were cursed, forcing them to turn into swans. Brothers in love with princesses want to remove the spell. For love they have to fight with dangerous magical creatures and charms.

ISBN 978-5-00-532083-4

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ISBN 978-5-0053-2083-4

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

The secret of my love

Pandemonium reigned in the palace, people were overtaken by evil spells. The courtiers turned into statues, blinded, turned to stone, someone's skin was covered with plants, someone's ice. Nobody understood what was happening to them.

Diana lunged forward, making her way through the noise and crowd. She alone remained untouched by magic.

The spirit of evil crept into the palace, and now everything here was in his power. Everything merged in murky darkness, only the insane cries of people doomed to become victims of evil were heard.

It all happened because of her. She fell in love with two at once. One of them was light, and the other was darkness, but which of them did she love more: the one who was the beautiful prince of her dreams, or the other, gloomy angel. They were all chained together by the secret of witchcraft, and now not only their souls perished, but also the lives of everyone who were at the royal court.

«Diana,» a dull voice whispered to her, and, as if waking up from some terrible dream, she looked around, but everywhere the same nightmare reigned.

People fled in different directions, trying to survive, but they could not be saved from their death, as well as from the new ruthless ruler of the world.

Diana knew one thing, she had to get out of here at any cost to help the one she loved.

The scarlet velvet curtains flew open in front of her, and she found herself in the dark passage to the throne room. Diana stepped uncertainly forward, to where everything previously belonged to her, but now became the possession of death.

Everything in the hall seemed to stand still, not a sound, not a step in the deathly silence.

The golden crown shone on the red velvet of the throne, as if drawn there by the hand of fate itself. Now it meant only one fate for those who wore it – death.

Diana noticed how a black shadow flashed near the throne, and her eyes were filled with horror, she tried to follow with her eyes the rapid movement of an obscure figure and suddenly met her gaze with a small elevation, he had not been here before.

She looked closely, and, indeed, there was something that looked like a golden goblet, but what could it mean. Another moment, and Diana cried out in fright, a trickle of blood flowed along the edges of the goblet, and it mingled with the scarlet rivulets flowing from the lips of the young king.

The royal crown did not become his life, it became his curse, and now he lay on the marble floor, his hair scattered over the cold slabs. How young and beautiful he was, but the embrace of death thickened over him, as over the flame of a loving heart, and his last word was:

«Diana.»

She bent over the chilling corpse.

«No, don't die,» she whispered, «don't leave me.»

A bolt of lightning cut through the darkness around them, before Diana stood the dark figure of a tall and sinister man.

«You killed him,» burst out from Diana.

«He had to die,» came the cold answer, «remember, Diana, you were supposed to become my love, we were betrothed to each other by my and your birth where the forces of light met the power of darkness, a distant star said that in my life there will be only one love, and I really fell in love.»

She knew that the genius of evil, the lord of the night, the ruler of the dark forces, or the devil himself stood before her, but he became so because of her, only she was to blame for everything, but no love could save his heart from falling to the forces evil.

Darkness could not kill his beauty, but nothing truly beautiful remained in his soul, a pale face, black long clothes, like the dress of a sorcerer – a warlock, but not the prince of her dreams, and only

his eyes, yes, it was eyes, expressed so much witchcraft and alluring beauty, how many were not in the whole world. What kind of person stood in front of her? What terrible secret was his heart hiding? Only she knew about it. She alone loved him, although she hated the bloodthirsty spirit of his dark power. She alone was the love of an evil genius, but no one knew about it, it was the secret of her love.

The queen stood next to the shadow of former love, but this shadow, this genius of darkness was now stronger than ever.

A malevolent smile shone on his face, but it was the bitter smile of lost love.

He knew everything, all the secrets of the world and shadows, the earth and the seabed, love and sorrow, but the beauty's pride ruined him, he was powerless in front of her imperious and sad look. A ruthless killer, an insidious devil, an omnipotent lord of evil, he stood before her, but she was not afraid of him, the only one of all.

But not only the memory of evil was hidden in him, there was also a moment of light, the only clear moment in his life, he ruled over the world of shadows, but memories ruled over them, and this was their grim victory.

Now he was a winner, but this did not please him, because he himself was defeated by an earthly beauty.

Their eyes met for just a moment, but this moment seemed to them an eternity, his dark gaze and the clear eyes of the queen, like a dark union of an angel and a demon. The darkness no longer separated them, nor did the difference between them. Diana resigned herself to the fact that there were two loves in her life: dark and light, insidious and noble, witchcraft and beautiful, and who knew which of them was stronger than the other.

Diana stood motionless. Nothing mattered anymore: not the corpse lying in front of her, not the torment of the people, not the danger awaiting in the distance. Demon and beauty, oddly enough, were brought together by a feeling above life and death. What a pity that his heart belonged to the darkness. And her soul was torn between a dark angel and another, stronger and lighter love.

A witch's wind rushed into the hall and, blowing into her beautiful face, open to his feelings, pulled her blonde hair from her shoulders, but now their hands joined, and no longer the voice of the devil, but the voice of an unhappy lover whispered:

«Diana.»

«Diana,» this sound, like the sound of some kind of witchcraft, echoed in her thoughts, and she cursed her name, which became a symbol of love and death for two unfortunate souls, and then a completely different and sad voice of the one who died just a few minutes ago, uttered her name.

Diana's eyes opened instantly, and now there was not even a shadow of witchcraft in them, her will was stronger than the deceptions of darkness, and if this night was ready to become the moment of her death, she had to boldly accept her.

«Rothbert is the king of a dark country, the king of violent power,» she said, trying to drown out the pain with loud words as well as the tears that came to her eyes, «what people could choose you as their ruler, what lonely soul could love the dark heart of the king of evil...»

«Do you remember, Diana,» he said, «you forgot everything, but I remember the only bright moment in my life, and I will never forget it.»

«You have become the ruler of darkness, the whole world trembles before your name, there is nothing to hide, you are the cause of the horror that settled here, but why, because of what did you become like that?»

She waited for an answer, but he only sadly raised his gaze and looked straight into her eyes, enveloped in a sad and unsolved mystery.

«Because of you,» he said.

«No,» she turned away, and a tear rolled down her snow-white face.

«From now on, I will own this country,» were heard his fatal words, «but my power will not be here. Everything around me, whether I like it or not, must become dark and terrible. Malice and

death will reign here, and I must become their king. I should not listen to human cries, feel their suffering, regret their fate. My fate has prepared such a fate for me, it is as cruel to me as to everyone else, but the more pain in my heart, the stronger the shackles of passion and death, so share this with me, be my queen!»

Diana turned to look into the dark pool of his eyes. Where did man come from in the sinister world of the prince of darkness? The proposal was more like a dream.

«I can't,» Diana whispered, and at the same moment the gold wedding ring slipped out of her hand.

«Then whatever happens,» he said, and as soon as it fell to the floor and hit the marble slabs, like a broken love, a thunderclap thundered in the distance, and it seemed, in her very heart. The sky above the palace turned dim, turning into a blue hell and bursting with a terrible thunderstorm, bright lightning split the green tall tree even in the darkness, and its fragments caught fire with a burning fire, this ring of lost love wooed the end of the world with the dark horror of hellish, otherworldly life.

Boulders of rocks burst out of the ground, everything groaned and roared, as in a nightmare, everything sobbed and cried for its former beauty and met its new ruthless master with streams of tears.

Waves of silvery radiance ran along the walls and darkened the beauty of the palace, and now – this was the world of stone monsters and bats. The bright face of the palace became the darkness of an eternal, merciless curse. Marble slabs and ornaments became in an instant the gloomy stones of a huge castle – the lair of the king of darkness. His last hope did not come true. Now he was suffering, although the shadow of the cruel ruler had already crept into his heart. He was the master of evil, and nothing could stop him on his difficult and dangerous path in the conquest of the world, but he needed only one of all this nightmare of eternal life, the one and only and therefore even more dear, beloved heart.

The wind rushed into the hall and ruffled her long hair, and the master of evil slowly, as if in a nightmare, extended his hand, white as snow, to her, but he did not order, he begged, and in front of her eyes, as if in reality, an ugly and spiteful face rose red-haired witch whispering:

«You can never be evil.»

«No,» she burst out, «never.»

She looked at the corpse, now everything in it was cold and dead, even the heart that she loved so much.

The eyelids of his beautiful eyes closed forever, and his hair fell to the floor. It was his love for her that ruined him.

Without even casting a glance at the dark figure in front of her, she rushed to him, but the marble face did not feel her last, farewell kiss. At that moment, the lord of darkness looked at her like a snow-white flower that grew in the kingdom of evil, he was in love with a white swan, and she became his curse.

«How could you,» she uttered through crying, but there was no answer in the dead silence, he had nothing to say, in her eyes he was a murderer and a villain, but he was guilty of only one thing, his love.

«You are a killer,» Diana whispered, «you took so many lives in just one night, and in just one moment you destroyed all my dreams.

«You will stay with me,» his eyes flashed with cold dazzling hope, «change your outfit for a black dress of the queen of evil, for a golden crown with a blood-red ruby, human wealth is nothing compared to the fabulous treasures of the world of darkness, you will be beautiful even as a black swan.»

She glanced at the royal crown. Its gold now shone as brightly as all the treasures of the earth could not shine, but now something dark appeared in it, the seeds of dark crimson, like blood, pomegranate shone where the pure tears of diamonds had flowed before, during the life of their love,

and in the middle of the crown burned like the flame of hell itself, a fiery red ruby. Nearby lay a lush dress, everything in it was beautiful: jewelry, lace and sleeves that looked like swan feathers, except for one color, black as pitch. Everything foreshadowed her fabulous riches, this night called her to become the queen of darkness, but at the last moment she remembered the distant sunlight, the light of day, there was so much beauty in it, and the darkness was an eternal witchcraft secret. What could overpower good or evil? The rays of a clear dawn still stood before her eyes, and her eyes were blue, like the azure sky during the day, the day did not hide its beauty, and the night kept in her soul that which tormented her all her life.

Diana looked at the royal throne, now even its splendor seemed gloomy and dark, and fear crept into the soul of anyone who saw this room, but, no, she could not become evil, could not forget the light in her life, she was no longer a queen, she was an ordinary girl in love.

«How I wish I could die with him,» she whispered, and another bitter tear rolled from her eyes down her snow-white cheek.

«You must stay with me,» exclaimed the prince of darkness.

«Diana,» he shouted warningly, but she rushed to the dais, grabbed the golden goblet prepared by the red-haired witch, and when her white hands touched the sparkling gold, something inhuman appeared in them, in the union of gold and thin fingers of the beloved of the dark and damned demon.

«Goodbye,» she whispered and quickly raised the goblet to her lips, blood boiled in it, gold flashed like fire around her white hands.

«No,» he shouted, and it was the cry of a mad lover, not the prince of darkness, but he knew what this witchcraft ritual was fraught with.

She took the first sip, and that was enough, her head was spinning, the blood in her veins was boiling and seething, blazing with fire, she dropped the precious goblet from her hands, and the blood from it spread over the marble floor.

He rushed to Diana, but it was not he who hugged her, but death itself.

«No,» he whispered, and a crystal tear ran down the face of the lord of shadows, even he was only able to cry once in his life. He pressed her golden-haired head to him, and the last call of dying love made him pronounce, like an eternal damnation, only one name:

«Diana.»

But she fell to the floor, a crown of golden hair adorned her pale face, she was as dead as his love.

«Goodbye, Diana,» he said, and a cold mask of pain distorted his face, no one will ever read this secret in his eyes, he won't hear her name, he won't see the feelings of his heart, no one should ever know that love lived in his heart. evil genius.

Cursed by darkness

Cliffs stretched far beyond the sea, like the wings of a white swan, but they were not part of wildlife, they breathed and whispered in the night, no one dared to climb them, no one dared to come closer to their spreading shadow, they became part of the cursed land and deserted the beauty of the dead splendor of darkness.

They said that at night witches and sorcerers gather there, and the devil himself visits them, that they rage and scream until morning and kill anyone who enters their dark domain. No one knew another, more beautiful legend that the devil himself of these rocks and the dark sea was once a man, like everyone else, but this was the secret of his love.

The night was deaf and dark, even the dim light of the moon in the distant gloomy skies could not dispel the darkness. Here he was too weak and helpless to illuminate the possessions of evil forces, and not far from the rocks, there was a beautiful palace, but its beauty was too weak to attract people in comparison with the devilish legends about the eternal heaps of rocks and swan lakes beyond the borders of the kingdom.

Everyone knew that the legends tell the truth, and they have no reason to lie. Everything was true: witches, demons, beautiful captives of evil, the very girls turned into swans by the black demon of darkness, all heard the sad songs that were heard at night. There, far beyond the rocks, the hostages of darkness at night took on their real appearance and sang and danced all night, but no one dared to approach them, to the beauties who were so careless that they went to the rocks, and then the devil's revenge found them. No one knew why he was taking revenge on this world and all those girls in whom at least a drop of deceptive and enchanting beauty was preserved.

A piercing wind blew and carried the dry leaves from place to place like a round dance of night shadows. Odette shrank from the cold, she didn't know how she got here. What ghost brought her into this enchanted world? The only thing she remembered was the tale of her maids of her beautiful mother and the spirit of evil that killed her. Everyone tried to hide this story from the little princess, but still one day she heard it, and she remained an eternal imprint of horror in her heart.

The rocks filled everything around them with a blue-bluish color, he was beautiful and cold, like the endless kiss of the wind, only the wind flew into these gloomy possessions, until Odette herself stepped here.

She was wearing a light, light dress, but even it was luxurious, like a princess's outfit, her long wavy hair fell in a light cover over her shoulders, her face was beautiful, she herself was a worthy daughter of Diana. Although no one dared to pronounce this name since the moment of death of the graceful queen.

Odette did not want to seek adventure at all, but some evil fate drew her here along with him, some voice called her, breaking through the veil of her dreams.

Suddenly, a shadow flickered around the bend in the maze of rocks, and Odette froze in place, as if a ghost was showing her the way. She did not think long and decided to go to the call.

As soon as she moved forward, a black bird flew right over her head, it was a gloomy eagle, but what he did here, it was the first bird that flew to the witch's rocks and how unusual it was, how bold was the look of shining eyes, as if they were full of human hatred and mysterious pain.

Odette turned her head, wanting to follow the bird's flight. Suddenly, in the distance, there was a sound like a quiet, ominous laugh. There was something dark and triumphant about it. Fear seized Odette, but she slowly moved forward. Her journey was long and dangerous. Some kind of indistinct burning flame blew into her face and burned her eyes so that she involuntarily closed her eyes, and when she opened them, she saw what was behind the bend of the rock.

The rocks were a real labyrinth, it was impossible to predict what was hidden behind the next turn, and there could be any danger, although even the robbers did not look here, because they were

also people who were afraid of ghosts, only witches gathered here at night, and Odette believed in this legend, like everyone who lived in the country.

She plucked up the courage to bend over to see what was happening there, beyond the rock, and saw a burning bonfire, a huge cauldron with some kind of scalding brew, and three figures standing around it.

They were dark, almost indistinguishable, but Odette could see their dirty black robes and long hair falling almost to the ground, and the gnarled nails on their bony hands, barely covered with dark skin like ash from a fire.

Odette pressed herself against the rock and looked closely, their faces lit up by the glare of fire, and the terrible deformities of the three witches were barely discernible in them. It was difficult to describe their ugliness, but besides that, each of them had their own terrible flaw, and Odette shuddered when faced with it. Her eyes darted from one witch to another, each of them turned out to be even more unpleasant than the last.

The first had one eye missing on her swarthy face, but not in the same way as in people, as if it shouldn't have been on her face at all by nature. Dirty skin had grown there, as if from birth, the second eye was mobile and vicious, like some ominous light of a cursed swamp, it sparkled and shimmered with its red, almost bloody fire and burned brighter than the flame of a fire.

Her long hand reached out to her friend, the next witch. The one was much worse than the first. Both eyes were missing on her face, but they were not gouged out – such was the eerie nature of the creation of the night. She seemed to see everything without eyes. She did not need them to have her evil power over the world and to frighten all people. Her face expressed too much. Large nostrils felt everything around them and slowly inhaled the rotten smoke of the fire, scarlet lips were thicker than those of a common man, and yellow, huge and rather rare teeth peeped out from under them.

Odette looked at the third witch, her face was as disgusting as her two sisters, there was no mouth on her face, it was overgrown with smooth and gray skin, there was no nose either, only two small specks shone in the place where he should be located. But she spoke, like everyone else, and her voice was raspy and disgusting, it sounded like the sound of a flowing water or the sound of a falling tree, although it was not clear how she could speak without lips, probably it was another mystery of witchcraft...

The hair of the witches was prohibitively long, they were stuck with mud and dirt, and they themselves were of a resinous color and curled at the ends like snakes, but the fire did not touch them, although they fluttered next to the flame, as if it were an unspoken agreement of witchcraft and lords of bitter fires. Suddenly Odette thought that she knew what the mistress of all this nightmare looked like and that her hair was red like fire.

Odette watched the three witches for a long time and did not even notice how they began to talk among themselves. Their voices rang out in the valley between the rocks. It seemed that the fire itself flames in time with them and merges with their even more burning flame.

«Today is that night,» one of them hissed, «a sacred night, and we must meet her with a new victim, I hope you have lured someone to the rock today.»

«Yes, our new victim will come soon, we have completely bewitched her,» the second remarked mockingly.

«I hope she's attractive?» croaked the impassible witch, although it was not clear where her voice was coming from; from the depths of her grim figure or hell itself.

«Of course,» the second answered her, «it is such a pleasure to kill beautiful and young.»

She smiled longingly in anticipation of diabolical delight, which made her face even more terrible and disgusting. Odette clung to the rock in horror to see if they were talking about her. They lured her to a rock and now wanted to kill her. She wanted to run away from here as soon as possible, but her legs did not obey her, they were completely numb, as if in a dream, and she could neither walk nor run, she seemed to be rooted to a rock.

«You remember what happened on the same night many years ago,» meanwhile the witch said.

«Yes,» her friend responded, and a fiery eye flashed with a wild light, «exactly so many years ago the beautiful queen died, she should have gotten to us, but this scoundrel took her soul from us.»

«It's right that the mistress killed her. Diana was just an angel of strife, so many lovers suffered because of her, she ruined her beloved king and she herself had to die.»

«She was too young, but it is the souls of the young that give immortality.»

«Her daughter is to be queen tonight, but we'll intervene, don't we?»

They all laughed deafeningly, their laughter filled the entire space between the rocks..

«And Rothbert's daughter,» meanwhile, they said, «she must also be with us.

«He himself will consecrate her, besides, it is better not to have anything to do with him, because he can destroy us all, and then we will cease to exist.»

«No,» said the other, «this will never happen, at least as long as our mistress is alive, we are under her dark protection.»

«Odile is a real beauty, but her soul is dark, and woe to those who fall in love with the curls of her dazzling black hair.»

«Yes, such a person died, because she is the daughter of the king of darkness, but when will she join us.»

«I would like to kill her,» the one-eyed witch remarked with hatred and fury, «a girl of such beauty has nothing to do in this world, let her live with angels, not with people.»

«But she is... a dark angel, and she is Diana's daughter, although she has forgotten her mother, she has the beauty of a dead queen and the evil heart of her father, her hair curls like snakes of death, that will be fun when the young prince gets to us from- for the love of her.»

The witch went up to the fire and threw something that looked like white powder at it, which made the fire burst into a black flame, and the same black smoke went from it, along with the stench of death, which made Odette sick.

«Let it be so,» said the witch, and together they all repeated this short but deadly phrase of the devil's spell, and black fire reflected on their faces, and they all seemed even more nightmarish in its reflections.

«And Odette,» one of them said, and the little princess shuddered, «she has a pure heart. How can we get her?»

«Do not be afraid,» one of the witches assured her, «our mistress has come up with an original way of terrible revenge, Odette will regret that she was born at all, this will be her curse.»

Odette felt that she was losing her feelings, but nevertheless with an effort she managed to pull herself together, she did not have to utter a word, otherwise she was waiting for death, and not only death, but also the eternal damnation of her soul.

The witches laughed with a vicious, disgusting laugh, which immediately spread over all the rocks.

«It's time,» one of them whispered, and her face twisted in a devilish grin, «I know she will be here soon.»

And then in the hands of one witch Odette saw a small child, he was crying and screaming, and at that moment, when the light of the fire fell on him, a dagger flashed in the hand of another witch. It slowly but steadily approached the heart of the child, it was a terrible bewitching sight, and Odette could not resist.

«No,» she shouted, jumping out from behind the rock, and immediately the fire burst into a bright column of her flame, burning everything around her, but without touching the three devilish figures.

The witches froze in amazement, but then their faces were distorted by ominous grins, and on the claws of one of them bright human blood was already shining. The fire swelled with extraordinary force, and now, as if those silhouettes of witches were not here at all, they disappeared somewhere

and the child along with them, but Odette was ready to swear that a minute ago she saw them and almost witnessed a nightmarish ritual...

Now everything around was calm, but Odette clearly saw that she was standing on a rock, and in front of her in a rocky hollow a bright fire was burning, its flame warmed with its hot gusts, it was so pleasant in the cold of the witch's night, but at the same time, how- then mysterious and mysterious.

There was a huge cauldron next to the fire, from which from time to time small streams of smoke burst out and disappeared into the crimson darkness of the fire. What was in it, some kind of witch's brew, and in fact, before her eyes, the witchcraft almost killed a living child. Odette could not believe what had happened to her, but it was true, a minute ago she saw all this and could not take her eyes off the witchcraft rite.

Odette slowly approached the fire, now a pleasant warmth and a kind of comfort unknown here emanated from him, his flame blazed slowly and hotly, his scarlet tongues caressed the hot air around the fire and suddenly, in this darkness, some unknown, but ominous voice called:

«Odette, Odette, Odette!»

Odette turned, but there was nothing but the rapid beating of her own heart.

Suddenly the fire burst into a blue flame, and no more heat emanated from it, it turned cold like ice or snow, and pale blue like night clouds. Odette could not understand what had happened, just a moment ago everything here was calm and quiet, and now some ominous spirit crept here and did not give any more peace to this, perhaps, accursed place.

Something said to her «Come to the cauldron», some voice pushed her, but fear was stronger, it could only be overcome by excessive curiosity, and it always appeared in the soul at the most dangerous and inappropriate moment.

Odette walked slowly over and carefully peered over the edge of the cauldron. A strange green brew mixed with something dark crimson resembling blood was boiling and seething in him.

Odette wanted to recoil in horror, but suddenly there, in the green mess, a head with long messy hair appeared, and the hand of the ugly witch grabbed Odette by the clothes. She tried to escape with a scream, but nothing worked, the green hand held her tightly to the dress and did not want to let go for a moment, it seemed that the end of the young princess was coming, but something terrible awaited her, in front of the cauldron next to her appeared disfigured with scars and burns face of a red-haired witch.

«The time has come, beauty,» she hissed, and her angry laugh flooded everything around, not allowing a single drop of silence to take possession of this place, and here, in horror, the princess woke up, the dream was too much like reality.

The full moon was shining over the beautiful royal palace, its walls and Gothic windows were flooded with sparkling, silvery light, as in a charming fairy tale, but it was the fairy tale of the night itself, and it did not let go of anyone from her magical embrace.

The palace was both huge and rich, it was not more beautiful to find it in the whole world, but many years ago the one to which it now belonged was subjected to a curse.

A huge lake overflowed in front of the palace, its dark cold waters glittered in imitation of the moon, and it was reflected with pleasure in them, not allowing the night darkness to fully embrace itself, there was only one thing missing: swans that had fallen asleep at night, but the darkness had its plans.

The deep night covered everything around, but they did not sleep in the palace. In the huge windows of the throne room, a bright light burned and dispelled the darkness around its possessions. The moon was reflected in the waters of the lake, making them beautiful and mysterious.

The fairy tale of the night began here, by the transparent lake, and continued in the royal palace, and it was magically beautiful, like the witchcraft of nature itself.

The palace was magnificent. Previously, Diana was its mistress, but now another beautiful princess overshadowed her fabulous beauty and shone with her charm in the castle at night by the swan lakes that spilled far, far, beyond this embraced dark night of the country.

Today all gentlemen and noble ladies have gathered in the throne room. Fulfilling the last will of her parents, the young princess had to get married and take the crown of the mistress of this country. All the noble nobles who had gathered here regretted this in advance, the little princess was so beautiful that it was simply impossible not to fall in love with her.

She stood at the throne, in a lush ball gown, its folds rustling in the gloomy silence. Odette was a ray of light even in this night and sparkled with her unique beauty. It would be difficult to find a girl more beautiful than she, and Richard knew this, knew that his love had become his curse.

There were so many girls in the world, both accessible and sympathetic, and he, as if in a terrible dream, doomed himself to eternal torment, fell in love with a young princess and could not forget his love. All will be lost tonight. She will marry another, and he will never have hope. He was afraid and could not confess his love to her.

Now anxiety and fear were fighting in him, if he did not have the courage, he would remain unhappy for his whole life. Yes, besides, Odette herself did not want to get married, she did not know her fiancé and was still quite a child, but he loved her as much as he could only love the one who was called the best knight in the world.

He fought duels, won wars, fought like the noblest of all, and now he was overtaken by a mad infatuation with the one that was supposed to go to the royal throne, not him. Richard looked at Odette's sweet face, how he loved her, even so cold and unapproachable to human feelings, but only she was his love, beautiful as a white swan and cold as dispassion itself.

No one should have known what was in the heart of the invincible knight, that he was suffering from a criminal love for the one who was to become his queen in the future. He looked at her delicate features and swore to himself that he would never yield her to any prince, not to one of the most powerful king in the world, no, he would fight for his love.

Richard squeezed Odette's hand, and she gave him a sad look. Since her parents died, he has been her only and most faithful friend in the world. She was attached to him much more than to some prince, whom she had never even seen in her life.

A knight in luxurious robes entered the hall with a quick gait, Odette recognized him, this was the most noble and wealthy lord from the retinue of her unknown groom. He bowed politely, But Richard looked at him full of hatred and smiled slyly, he was not going to give up his happiness to the first person he met, even if it was the prince of the richest country.

“It's time to start, «» he said dryly, “where is His Highness now, or has he forgotten about his own wedding, but I swear I will do everything to prevent it from happening, «» he boldly declared right in the face of his enemy, who, however, was afraid to answer him, because all the kingdoms knew the valor and courage of Richard.

«Oh, I'm sure he...» the lord drawled, but he himself did not know what to say, «I'm sure that His Highness is now delayed due to the fact that he sat for too long surrounded by his books.»

This lie succeeded, and the lord sighed with relief, but to be honest, he himself did not know where Prince Etienne was spending his time. He has already sent his people, a whole convoy, to search for his unlucky and windy master.

In the tavern, noise and commotion reigned, one could hardly find a noisier place, and although this did not befit his royal person and upset his mother, Etienne was sitting at one of the tables, next to the wine, of course, the lord could call any place a library. but now Etienne himself did not know where he was. Some kind of drunken brawl, in which both sides were crippled and bruised, several bottles of wine and the coquetry of those who were called the most accessible girls, and Etienne even forgot that he was a prince, how could he remember about his own wedding.

«Etienne,» ran up to him his faithful friend Fritz, who often covered him before the wrath of the queen and even the late father, «Etienne, I beg you, let's go from here.»

The prince only grabbed his head with his hand. The wine he had drunk made itself felt, and he became completely drunk, and, moreover, he was again drawn into a fight. It was full of those whom he considered his enemies.. The prince proved his bravery in a rather unusual way, fighting with drunks, playing and drinking. Unfortunately for the parents, their handsome son only did what he dragged around the taverns, drank, swore and played. But it was worth noting that this required more courage than even entering the battlefield.

«Hey, you,» Etienne shouted to one of the drunken, tall and powerful pub-goers. As Fritz did not try to restrain him, he threw himself into a fight and almost killed his rival. The latter's friends arrived in time. Etienne received several cuts and countless blows before being thrown out of the tavern with a friend. Everyone was comforted in their own way, and Fritz prayed to God that no one would find out where they were that night. He dragged the prince past other drunks, with whom Etienne immediately tried to start a fight. He still managed to pull his friend out of danger, but even the fresh air could not sober the intoxicated head of his young comrade, about whom, however, one could say that he was the bravest prince of all who came before him.

He did not even remember about any princess and the wedding. The girls didn't bother him. Their beauty did not evoke hot feelings in him, which, however, woke up in him during fights and drunken skirmishes. His mother, the queen, tried many times to re-educate her very handsome and even more unlucky son, but all this ended in complete failure, and Etienne returned to dice and fights with strangers.

But today everything should have been different, it had not yet struck midnight when the knights from the king's personal guard broke into the roadside tavern, was it worth describing the commotion they caused among drunks and ladies of easy virtue, although they were looking for only one person in this place but he was the hardest to find.

The head of the guard, inwardly, mercilessly cursed the fate that had brought him to such a place, but he was a determined person and was going to carry out everything to the end, although it turned out to be even more difficult than he had expected.

Their task was to get the young prince out of the pub and bring him to his own wedding, while not allowing him to get drunk or fall asleep, the queen has long tried by all means to do this, but, in the end, more experienced people had to be brought in here. who, however, were themselves a little afraid. After all, who did not know how well their crown prince could fight for his life.

If his father remained alive, who could always bring him to his senses, but, alas, he died, and there was no one to watch over his unlucky son. No firm hand could any longer hold back the frantic impulses of his young heart. It would seem that such a handsome man as he could not behave in this way. The prince was beautiful, all the girls admitted it, but he didn't care about them. He did not even want to know about some kind of princess Odette, who was chosen for him as his bride, he did not care about her. He did not yet know that she, too, remained indifferent to this choice made by others for her.

Soon the tavern was in complete disorder, but the knights could not find out from anyone where Prince Etienne was, finally, they found him in one of the rooms in a hangover, he was fast asleep, and a girl was sitting next to him. As always, the prince was handsome, but in a state in which the queen was better off not seeing him.

While the knights were figuring out what to do, their leader was barely able to wake the prince. «Congratulations, your highness,» he said as politely as possible.

But Etienne could hardly understand his words, he slightly raised himself, quickly glancing around everything around him and vaguely realizing where he was.

«With what?» he could barely say.

«With the fact that the date of the royal wedding has already been appointed. A worthy bride has been found for you.»

Well, he no longer had salvation, he was waiting for a marriage to an unloved girl and eternal torment, he could never find that beautiful princess he dreamed of. She did not exist in this world, and he will forever remain alone, and now, God knows what fate is preparing for him, probably someone even more ugly than those he has already seen. It was early for him to marry, he understood this, and Fritz, who had also already been taken, as politely as possible under escort, looked at him with regret. He sympathized with his best friend, with whom he spent so many anxious nights in different taverns. Etienne could barely recover from grief, but there was nothing to do, and he involuntarily got out of bed, it was time to go to his unchanging and bitter fate.

And in the chambers of the palace everyone waited for midnight, the very time when Odette would become their queen. Why the coronation was scheduled for midnight, no one knew, it remained a mystery even to Richard. He looked at Odette with despondency, and his gaze became more and more sad every minute, the time was approaching when he would lose her forever, but he decided on madness.

«Why,» Odette quietly whispered to her friend so that others would not hear, «why should I ruin my life, Richard.»

And at that moment he made up his mind.

«Odette,» he said quietly, «listen to me, Odette, you want to stay with me.»

«With you,» she looked at him full of sorrow. Of course, she wanted to stay with her friend. Better he than some prince she had never seen.

«Then run with me,» burst out from him, «we will run away together, and no one can find us, everyone knows that there is a curse on the throne of this country, and it will not let you go, and if you leave with me, then I will save you from it.»

«Yes,» Odette whispered into Richard's pleading face, «yes, I will run away with you.»

Odette squeezed Richard's hand in a friendly shake, or maybe it was a shake of love that suddenly flared up with a bright fire in the darkness of the witchcraft and cold night over the beautiful, but damned royal palace.

The time had come, only a few minutes remained before the fatal midnight, at midnight the young princess was supposed to become the queen of a huge country, although her heart did not want this, she felt a threat to her life in the future, and it was a strange disturbing feeling.

«You won't forget your words, Odette,» Richard asked her anxiously and excitedly.

«No,» she whispered softly to him and involuntarily looked away.

The crown was already shining on her head, and she was about to sit on the throne, but suddenly a scarlet arrow pierced directly into the royal arms in front of her. The knights grabbed their swords, but they were powerless against witchcraft, blood dripping from the poisonous tip of the deadly weapon. Diana would have recognized this arrow if she were alive, she saw her in a golden goblet with poisoned blood, but Odette has not yet faced the power of black magic.

A strong gust of wind burst into the hall, it swept away and blew away everything in its path and tore in different directions the clothes and hair of those present. The throne room was filled with a dull howl of the wind and whispering voices, but no one could catch a single word in their dull, monotonous whispering. They called some kind of curse on the palace. They whispered and screamed, but it was not clear where they were coming from or what they were looking for in the royal chambers. They were strange cutting sounds, piercing right through the ears. Those who stood in the hall seemed to find themselves in a dark hell blazing with blue fire and ash.

But then the smoke cleared, and everyone saw the grim figure of the woman, she was dressed in a long blue cloak with a hood that almost completely covered her face from prying eyes. She stood calmly, as if waiting for the moment when horror paralyzed everyone who saw her, completely, but

then long hands with black claws lowered the black hood, and Odette saw the ugly face of the red-haired witch.

«The hour of reckoning has come, princess,» the witch hissed angrily, «I have come for you.»

Odette looked anxiously at Richard, but everything was useless, all the knights were paralyzed with horror, although they were brave in battles, but the gaze of the red-haired witch brought them all to death.

Meanwhile, the red-haired witch slowly moved towards the throne and towards the frightened princess.

«Your mother has betrayed both us and her love,» his burned lips pursed, «now the hour of your death has struck, there will be no mercy, Princess Odette.»

The witch walked slowly, but without pausing for a moment. Her eyes threw lightning, they killed at first sight into their bloody depths. They made the heart of a common man tremble with horror, and Odette did not know how to escape from them, from whom to ask for help, and who could help her now, she was trapped, from which there was no way out.

When the witch's hand almost touched her, Richard, as if waking up from some numbness that suddenly seized him, he could not understand what was wrong with him, he seemed to be mesmerized, but now he has become the same again. He stepped forward, blocking Odette from the witch, not letting the terrible creature come to the princess.

The witch did not expect such an act. A vicious hiss escaped from her black chest. She raged, but this could no longer help her, Richard was going to either win or die.

«Move away,» she hissed, «the princess belongs to me, and there's nothing you can do.»

«No,» he answered firmly and clearly, looking into her bloody eyes with unshakable dignity, and the witch realized that he would rather die than give in to her.

«Brave knight,» she burst out, «dark battle prince, you're really just an unfortunate lover, right?» she asked so that everyone could hear her words, but Richard was silent. He had nothing to say or answer to this, the witch was speaking the truth, and how bitter this truth was.

Odette stood behind him, but even at such a distance, she was terribly frightened by the eyes of the creature who came from the world of darkness to take her soul and life, was it really all true, and not a dream. Why was Richard silent, why he could not answer her a word, were her words really bitter and undeniable truth.

The witch with an insidious grin looked into Richard's bold eyes, she laughed, she rejoiced, she felt her victory over human love and triumphed. She knew what lie or truth she had to tell in order to destroy and frighten to death a common man.

«Do not you understand?» she chuckled. «The princess is dressed, she is not available to an ordinary person, one look at her, and your heart is already broken, and I want to make sure that no one else suffers because of her beauty, I want to take her with me to the world of death.»

«Never,» Richard answered with a selfless gleam in his eyes, nothing frightened him.

«Well, well,» the insidious voice sounded in the silence, «be it your way, dark knight, if I don't take her with me, then someone else will come in handy.»

For a minute she stood, grinning so smugly and viciously that the laughter was breathtaking, and then something bright and dazzling flashed in her hand, and she threw a pinch of gold dust in Richard's face, which immediately flew in different directions and gilded the stuffy air of the throne room.

Immediately a long hand reached out to the princess, but Odette dodged and ran away across the marble floor of the hall, but in front of her, as if out of the ground, a red-haired witch rose again, as if she knew how to move in space easily and imperceptibly, like a ghost.

Odette did not know what to do or where to run, the ghost of the witch would find her everywhere. The witch looked around Odette's white dress, with the same envy and mockery she noted her wondrous beauty.

«Beautiful as a princess, sweet as a swan,» she hissed right in Odette's face, «you will be a princess – a swan, and it will be your eternal damnation.»

She threw lightning with her eyes, and a huge window swung open, a storm shone behind it, so dark and hopeless, violent and rebellious, like the heart of a black swan, and a white swan flew through the window with a lightning strike. It was beautiful and snow-white, like a snowy winter, it was charming and gentle.

Odette had never seen such a beautiful bird, but a trickle of blood shone on the swan's right wing, it was wounded. Who could injure such a beautiful bird, some soulless person or the king of the dark land himself, Rothbert. Odette had a glimpse of him, that he turns the girls he liked into swans and settles them on the lakes in his country near his gloomy castle.

Odette did not know if it was true or just a legend, but she felt that there was something special about this swan, its eyes were almost human eyes of a young beauty, they were the eyes of a young girl, not a white swan.

«Look,» the witch whispered, «look and enjoy the spectacle, this is your future fate.»

Odette glanced at the snow-white swan, it circled almost exhausted under the ceiling of the throne room. After all, it was injured and, for sure, in pain, and so it fell. A few minutes later, the entire body of the swan was engulfed in a bright golden glow, similar to the pollen in a witch's hand.

The princess recoiled, but she could not help but see how the swan's body began to grow, turning into a human silhouette, it grew with incredible speed, and in front of Odette on the floor was no longer a dead swan, but a beautiful young girl in a light dress. Her blond hair scattered over the cold marble, her eyes were tightly closed, as if in an eternal dream, her lips in the moment of their death tried to whisper, probably, the name of the one whom she loved during her life, this was another victim of witchcraft.

The witch laughed, and her laughter echoed through the hall, she showed Odette her future destiny, and the princess stood in disbelief in herself and her eyes.

Suddenly, steps were heard outside the door, rapid and loud, and the witch touched Odette's eyes with her hand, plunging the princess into a witch's sleep.

«Sleep, dear Odette,» she whispered ominously, «your prince does not know and will not be able to save you.

Etienne was not at all happy about the forced journey, but nevertheless he submitted to fate and, reluctantly, to amuse the convoy sent to him by the queen, went to the palace.

He stood for a long time under the gates of the palace before deciding to jump off his horse. Suddenly a strange voice said:

«Prince Etienne, Prince Etienne!»

Who could call him by name where he first appeared. In none of the taverns, no one except Fritz knew his name.

It seemed to him that in the distance, behind the trees, a wave of someone's hair, red as fire, flashed. Hallucination or not. He approached the blue lake, not knowing why, perhaps, in order to recover at least a little before his own wedding, it is good that his mother, the queen, did not see the young prince in such a state.

He looked into the water, it was transparent and clean, and water lilies with lilies quietly slept in it. Who had the idea of having a wedding and coronation at midnight?

Strange, no one was guarding the palace tonight, no one was on duty, and not a single guard was to be seen.

Etienne entered the folding doors and found himself in a dark, huge room, where, as well as outside, there was no one. The heavy door slammed shut behind him, as if leaving him a prisoner of the palace. Suddenly all the candles around flared up, Etienne stood illuminated by their glow and could not understand what was happening. A minute ago, complete darkness reigned in the hall, and

now a bright light flooded the walls and furniture around it, but it was some kind of strange light, it seemed bright, and at the same time, the whole hall remained in some strange and even creepy for human eyes in the semi-darkness.

Etienne stood in one place and did not dare to step forward, some incomprehensible fear kept him on the threshold, as if some magic circle was inscribed here, protecting him from witchcraft and death..

Even from his place, Etienne could see all the wonderful decoration of the room, even more beautiful than that in his palace. Each piece was selected with such taste and combined with the entire environment around it, giving the hall a mysterious mystical shine.

It was the most beautiful and mysterious place that Etienne had ever seen during his short and, as his friends would say, dissolute life, but full of duels and fights. Everything here was so beautiful in the gloomy semi-darkness, even candles burning with a bright, hot flame could not dispel it, and there were many of them here, in exquisite candelabra with figures of fairies and goddesses, in golden candlesticks and even on the walls.

Suddenly, an invisible hand took a goblet of wine from a small table, it flew up right in front of Etienne's eyes and toppled down in the air so that all the wine in a thin stream, slowly, like blood, flowed onto the floor.

The same invisible hand raised a sword in the air, which it easily tore from the wall, and directed it straight into the heart of the young prince, but Etienne managed to draw his sword from its sheath and repel the first deadly blow. One blow fell on him after another. But Etienne seized the moment and thrust his sword into the body of the enemy. He did not know where his blade had hit, but at the same moment blood flowed from the void, the bright crimson blood of the magic knight who fought with Etienne, God knows why.

A strong hand clung to Etienne's shoulder, blood flowed down it, and the features of a man began to appear in the darkness. Finally, before Etienne stood a knight in dark armor.

«Odette will never love you, only I am her real fiancé,» he hissed through his teeth..

Then his hand began to weaken, and finally released Etienne's shoulder from its steel grip, and the knight himself began to slowly dissolve into the darkness.

For some reason, Etienne was in pain. It seemed to him that he fell in love with his own bride, which was in fact the love of a completely different person, or even not a person, but the devil.

A sharp gust of wind, and another door opened in front of Etienne. He entered the open doors and froze in place. In front of the throne, on the marble floor, lay a young girl of amazing beauty.

She was wearing a white ball gown, blonde hair scattered on the floor, and a crown shone on her head – the symbol of the queen of this country, but her face was pale as chalk, was she really dead. Etienne had no doubt it was Odette, but she fell asleep forever. The prince touched her lips with a light, short kiss. He fell in love with a sleeping beauty, a white swan wearing a royal crown.

Her heart did not beat, she slept in a witch's dream, and it was not in his power to awaken her to life. Suddenly, he accidentally knocked over a goblet with a scarlet, blood-like wine standing next to it, and as soon as it spread on the floor, the beauty opened her eyes.

«Odette,» he whispered, grabbing her cold hand, «aren't you Odette?»

«Yes,» she answered barely audibly, «who are you?»

«I am the one who crossed the entire witchcraft world to find you,» Etienne replied, squeezing her hand, but Odette involuntarily recoiled.

«Go away,» she said, «save your life, the witch will return soon.»

«No way in the world, I will not leave you,» said the prince, but Odette involuntarily remembered the fierce eyes of the red witch.

«Promise,» she said, «if we have to part now, you will not believe the day when they tell you that I love another.»

«On such a day, my heart will be broken, because I love you,» he admitted honestly, «tell me that you love me too, tell Odette,» he begged. Suddenly, the wine that spread across the floor took on not a scarlet, but a crimson hue, and the smoke went from it. Immediately the light in the hall faded, the wind burst into the hall, and the figure of a red-haired witch appeared in the clouds of smoke.

«You want to stay together, but you are doomed to be forever apart,» she said mockingly. «If you resist my curse, then death awaits both of you.»

Etienne grabbed Odette by the hand and rushed away with her, they ran to the stairs, and then for a moment Etienne stopped.

«You heard?» Odette asked, «we cannot stay together.»

«It's all nonsense,» he replied, trying not to show his fear, «I will never part with you.»

If you stay here, they will kill you, not ghosts, but my knights, everyone is against you and me, but if we meet in a few years, then we can find our happiness.»

«For several years,» he blurted out, «I cannot stand such a period.»

«You have to,» she said. «I will never forget about you.»

«Me too,» Etienne vowed, «I will love you forever.»

Lightning flashed outside the palace windows, and its flash severed their hands. Etienne's arm had a deep wound from the fiery touch, but he held back a cry of pain. The red-haired witch stood before him again.

«Where is Odette?» Etienne whispered, but she only laughed deafeningly in response.

«Where is Odette?» he repeated, but more clearly and demanding.

«You will never see Odette again,» the witch cried viciously and triumphantly.

«Although,» the witch hissed and thought for a few minutes,

«maybe someday you will see her, but she will already love another, more worthy in our kingdom of evil than you, but it would be foolish to let you out of here just like that.»

Something rushed at him right out of the dark and knocked him to the floor

Sharp claws began to rip at his clothing, blood gushing from his arms and shoulders.

Etienne managed to break free and light the fire. The fire for a moment blinded the monster that attacked him, and Etienne quickly ran out of the palace.

Fritz ran up to Etienne.

«God, what's wrong with you?» he exclaimed.

«Oh, you probably got into a fight with the royal guards,» his friend finally realized, «but, well, I'm not surprised, you never wanted to marry.»

«I came to save you,» Fritz said proudly, «I tried to tell Her Majesty that this marriage...»

«I don't care anymore,» Etienne interrupted him, «I will marry Odette.»

Fritz could not recover from surprise.

«What are you saying?» burst out from him.

«I love Odette,» Etienne repeated, «as soon as I reach the age of majority according to the laws of our country, I myself will ask for her hand in anyone, even the devil himself.»

If at first Fritz was surprised, now he considered his prince to be simply insane.

«Etienne, what happened in the palace,» he could only utter.

Etienne paid no attention to him. He knew what he would do: for these few years he would learn to fence like a real knight, fight in wars, travel. He will become such that Odette can love him and be proud of him as his fiancé.

«I promise you, Fritz, I will be worthy of her,» Etienne promised from the bottom of his heart, «I will give my life, if only she could love me, I swear to you.»

He threw one last long look at the palace, almost not paying attention to the surprised Fritz, who could not believe what the prince spoke so ardently and passionately.

Years will pass, they will both grow up, but Etienne will find his love again, it will be eternal, but he did not know only one thing that witchcraft would not sleep either, but would make his life unbearable until love breaks the evil spell.

Black Swan

On a hill, under an eternally stormy sky, rose a gloomy old castle, the human world was nothing in front of him, the whole land of people, their prayers, their dreams, their desires faded here, in front of his high bulk, he was the only ruler of the whole world and the most beautiful thing on earth.

How powerful were its walls, every stone here personified evil, every inch of the earth under its vaults was given to darkness and witchcraft, every moment spent here became the death of any person who found himself in this land of dark forces.

The lord of the castle was called the devil, but no one knew that it also slept in the heart of the demon – living human love, which was the secret of his black heart. No one knew that the princess of the cursed castle, the daughter of the evil King Rothbert, had a living and loving heart.

A thunderstorm that night hung over the castle, and it was terrible, the rain poured incessantly, and the thunder echoed, and the sparkling lightning now and then illuminated the gloomy and majestic castle. On this stormy night, a prince from another kingdom hurried to the castle to meet his death, for him everything had already lost its meaning, because he was in love with the princess of shadows, his black, but beautiful swan. He was not frightened by the thunderstorm or thunder over his head, he boldly rode forward to the accursed castle and did not want to turn back.

If his brother Prince Etienne preferred to spend time in taverns, then Christian became the best knight in the kingdom and the most handsome cavalier among all the men of the country. His long black hair, wet from the rain, fell on his face, his clear blue eyes were gazing into the distance, and his handsome face seemed the most beautiful in the world, all the ladies adored him, but, unfortunately, he loved only one – the king's daughter in bewitched countries. Love and courage were the strongest in the world, and he understood this, now he was driving to her, still not knowing what lay ahead, but he was not tormented by fear of the future, he firmly decided: either to achieve Odile's love, or to die.

He was ready to accept death, just to look once more into Odile's dazzling green eyes, because he loved her more than life.

If his mother – the queen knew now where he is, but he didn't care what his family and his eccentric, but beloved brother think, they have been dear to each other since childhood, but now his heart called him forward to where the gloomy old castle of King Rothbert towered.

Christian grew up early, took up arms early, and fell in love even earlier. He didn't care who Odile really was, even if the black swan, as everyone alive called her. He was not afraid of the curse, he just rode boldly forward and did not think to turn away from his path, love was most important in this world, full of strife and danger, where everyone was enemies, everyone except him and his beloved princess.

The storm was noisy outside, but inside it was cozy and warm.

The guests of King Rothbert sat at a huge table, filled with various dishes and precious cups. The king sat at the head of the table. Everyone was afraid of him, except Odile, because she was his only and beloved daughter. He never showed his feelings for her, but she knew that he loved her as much as he loved her dead mother. She knew how he suffered because of her death, although he did not say a word, but she could see it in his eyes.

Odile's hair was adorned with a gold diadem with diamonds. She was the only princess in the country, the heiress of the greatest king in the history of the world, but she was not pleased with either luxury or wealth, because she was a dark beauty.

Like a black swan, she shone with her beauty. Odile was a dark princess, beautiful and mysterious. People said that she had neither a heart nor a soul, that she was the same as her cruel father, albeit beautiful, but also magical, but no one knew that she had a heart, no one knew that Odile was in love.

She sat with her head down sadly, not daring to look into her father's black eyes, and he did not say a word, what if he guessed, because the king of evil knows all human secrets, and this was the secret of her heart that Odile could not reveal to anyone...

Her father sat silently at the table, but his fiery gaze pierced right through, his eyes burned with fire. Today he was as sullen and gloomy as ever. He had something in his heart, if only he had it, and did not want to give it out to anyone.

«Our night has come,» he said, and everyone in the hall was startled, «today the dark ritual will be completed.»

And although Odile did not understand absolutely nothing, the gazes of all those sitting at the table in an instant were directed at her in a kind of ominous expectation.

«But there is one more thing,» said Rothbert, and it seemed that he became even darker than he was, «this damned prince from the neighboring kingdom.»

«Yes, it's him,» there were exclamations at the table, and everyone confirmed:

«He must die.»

«He is a hindrance on our way.»

«He spoils all our plans.»

But as soon as Odile looked up, everyone was silent, and a dead silence reigned at the table.

«No,» said Odile, «Father, you don't know, you're telling a lie, this prince is not so bad, he is brave, courageous and he is also very handsome,» she added, lowering her eyes, and Rothbert's fiery gaze pierced her through and through...

«Do you know him?» sternly, as never before, he asked, so Odile had never seen her father.

«No,» she hastened to object, and although it was a lie, she succeeded, «I just heard about him...»

«And that he is in love,» the king grinned maliciously, everyone knows that he has been not indifferent to you for a long time, isn't it, Odile?»

«Forgive me, father,» she whispered, but now she was thinking that Christian was rushing here, and what he could find here, besides death and eternal damnation.

«You have not drunk wine, Odile,» said Rothbert in a strange way, «you must drink for tonight, it will make you even more beautiful than you could ever dream.»

His eyes lit up with a furious fire, and Odile involuntarily realized that something special awaited her tonight, perhaps even terrible, the king's gaze spoke of this, there was some kind of secret hidden in it.

Immediately one of the luxuriously dressed servants approached Odile and poured a precious glass of sparkling wine into her. Odile did not touch it, she was afraid of something, and which she did not know herself, but her fear intensified with each beat of the clock and with each minute spent at the table.

«Odile,» repeated Rothbert, «today is a special night for us and for you, today you will be initiated into the secrets of our witchcraft, and it will be so, beautiful black swan.»

Christian was already at the gate of the castle, but he was not going to wait all night for the guards to let him in or kill him. He grabbed the ledge of the wall and in a minute climbed into the window of one of the halls. He was not afraid of anything except the words of Odile herself, although he knew that she would not reject him, they had already made vows of love.

Odile looked at her hands, they glowed as if they were on fire. Her scarlet dress turned black, like the plumage of a black swan, a green light flashed in her eyes, and only the golden crown on her head remained the only one that did not look like a swan in her. Did the prediction come true, and she became a dark princess.

Odile could not understand what was wrong with her, but immediately the air around her burst into triumphant laugh of Rothbert, and a transparent tear flowed down Odile's cheek, her love was lost forever, she became a black swan.

Suddenly the silence of the night was broken by a roar, and Rothbert, in anticipation, raised his eyes to the wind-blown window, the whole sky behind him became flaming. Odile stepped back from the window and saw a golden dragon with wild, fierce eyes hovering in the sky like a gloomy bird. He was so terrible, so disgusting, but how could he be here in the land of darkness.

Odile watched him, forgetting that her dress had turned black. He flew into the open window and occupied almost all the empty space in the hall. Its tail curled in rings, and golden scales glittered in the darkness, as if combined with a golden crown on Odile's head.

Fiery breath was bursting from its mouth, its paws were so strong that it seemed that if they wanted to, they would destroy the entire castle, but this was impossible, the castle of King Rothbert was indestructible.

With the dragon, something began to happen right before Odile's eyes, its tail and paws began to shrink and grow into a golden body, golden color and scales began to shrink and disappear, and now, it was no longer a monster, but a young man. Odile recognized him, he was a frequent visitor to their castle. Now Odile understood why, at nightfall, he politely said goodbye to her and left any ball in order to quickly hide in the dark.

«Edwin,» she barely managed to say, not believing what she saw. Odile looked frightened now at her father, then at her friend, but now both of them, so dear to her, turned into fiends of darkness.

«It is finished, Odile,» said Rothbert, «stop hiding, the young prince is not worthy of you, look at yourself, you are a black swan.»

«No,» Odile blurted out.

She could no longer bear what was happening to her, Odile ran out of the hall and rushed away.

She paused in the dark hallway of the castle and looked into the huge oval mirror in a gilded frame that hung on the wall. Yes, now, in fact, she could be called a black swan, beautiful, but given over to darkness. Suddenly, behind her in the mirror, she saw the reflection of her father, although it changed so that it was almost impossible to recognize him. All the former beauty disappeared from his face, only his eyes remained the same as they were, but now an evil, furious light sparkled in them, destroying all living things around him.

«Now you know everything, Odile,» he hissed and his eerie, deaf voice was even more terrible than his face, «now you are also one of us, I will make you the queen of evil, you will forget the young prince, our goal is revenge on everyone for the death of my love and your mother, now you are a black swan.»

«But I can't,» she whispered, «I'm not like that.»

«You are a black swan, and you are the queen of the beauties stolen for me and turned into swans,» said the king of darkness, and Odile saw the golden dragon wriggle in the darkness, and her white hands slowly turn into the plumage of a black bird.

Odile felt how slowly and inexorably she herself was becoming evil, she could never forget the beautiful eyes of Christian, but now she herself was becoming a part and queen of the dark forces. Her hands were covered with feathers, and now, not a girl, but a black swan with a golden crown on a proud head, flew away into the darkness of the night, where a fierce wolf howl was heard, and Rothbert looked after her and grinned viciously.

Meanwhile, Christian made his way into the castle hall. Where to go, where to find Odile? Suddenly, on the floor, he saw something that looked like a black feather, he bent down to get a better look at it, but suddenly a black swan flew right over his head, and then Odile appeared in front of him, as if it had appeared right from the ground.

«Odile,» he exclaimed joyfully, but she was cold and only now, tearing his eyes away from her face, he saw that she was in a dress black as night and a golden crown on her dark-haired head.

«Run,» burst out from her, «rather escape from here.»

«Odile,» he repeated, grabbing her hand, but her fingers were cold as ice, there was no life or warmth in them, like in any ordinary person.

He looked at her, he could not take his eyes off her face, and she, too, seemed ready to look at the prince for ages, but something dark appeared in her gaze.

«Go away,» she said, «you have no idea what could happen to a person here.»

«It doesn't scare me,» he replied, «today I could barely get out of the palace and came here, we can run away from here together, this is the only way.»

He glanced anxiously, remembering his life away from Odile.

«My uncle became the king of Spain,» he continued, «they wanted to send me there so that I could learn to rule the country and wield weapons, we can escape there together, and no one can find us there.»

«You have no idea what you're saying,» Odile closed her eyes for a moment, now she was a black swan, and love was irreversible, and she so loved that sweet face of Christian, from whose beauty it was impossible to take her eyes off. She could not betray her love, but the evil genius was already awakening in her.

«I'm a dark princess,» she said. «I'm damned, like my father, find yourself another.»

«No,» he said, going up to her, «you are the most wonderful girl in the whole world, you are the most beautiful, and I don't care that you live in a cursed castle, that everyone is afraid of the king – your father, I love you, even if you are a black swan.»

Prince Charming didn't know he was caught in the net of the new princess of darkness, but he didn't care. He would never have been able to stop loving her, he would never have been able to forget her marvelous features. Even though there was more dark than light in her, it no longer mattered.

«I love you, Odile,» he repeated, and going up to her, he wanted to kiss the black-haired princess, but suddenly a terrible roar was heard over the castle. The silhouette of a huge dragon flashed through the window.

Odile looked at Christian in horror, now she could not do anything, nothing could help her beautiful, but mortal lover.

Lightning flashed over the castle and reflected in the hall itself. Christian stood and did not believe himself, a man stood in front of him in clouds of blue smoke. He saw him somewhere, but he just did not remember where, and it was hardly an ordinary person. The prince was brave and was not afraid of anything, he was not going to hide from those who surrounded his love with their evil spells, he wanted to fight them in a real war and defeat those forces that no one else could defeat but him.

However, Odile died of horror, she did not expect that so quickly her mysterious friend and witch's father would understand that the prince had come to her to ask for her hand, and they would give him a hearty welcome.

Edwin looked at them, and his eyes were bloodshot. Anger twisted his attractive face. He wanted to destroy their love because of his dark passion for Princess Odile.

«The time has come for you to die, Prince Christian,» he hissed.

«How do you know my name,» broke out from Christian, but his enemy only grinned viciously, it was not for nothing that he kept this secret, but Christian looked at him closely.

«I know you,» he said, «we've met somewhere before.»

«Everything in this world is unknown, handsome prince,» Edwin grinned and raised a sharp sword glittering in the darkness in his hand.

Christian looked at him, and suddenly he remembered the dark night and the uprising in the palace, his eyes narrowed for a moment, he could not believe it.

«I know you,» Christian repeated. «You killed my father, didn't you?»

A wicked grin ran over Edwin's spiteful lips. Odile involuntarily recoiled and from the side, leaning her hand against the wall, watched their duel. The rivals' swords crossed. Odile watched them and did not know what to do to save the one she loved.

The duel continued, Edwin's sword gleaming in the darkness as if forged from magic steel. For a moment their swords lingered against each other, and Edwin's eyes flashed with fire, and the hiss of a dragon escaped from his lips.

«This is your death,» he said, but it was too early for him to triumph. Odile with a wave of her hand blinded Edwin for a moment, and Christian's sword sank into the shoulder of the opponent.

Blood gushed from the wound and Edwin grabbed his shoulder with a hand in an urge to stop her.

Odile ran to Christian, they were just children in love with enemies, but they loved each other as much as those who separated them could not even imagine.

«Run,» she whispered, giving him one last hug, «save yourself, for my sake.»

«I'll stay with you,» he replied boldly.

«You must leave,» Odile replied, «I will never forgive myself if now you die here because of me, you must leave.»

He looked at her for the last time, they were not parted forever, and he knew it.

«I'll come back for you,» Christian whispered, he knew that Odile was now cursed forever, but he loved her, even if she was a black swan.

He disappeared into the distance, and Odile looked after him with sadness. She didn't even turn to look at Rothbert who had come up. Her eyes were full of tears. She has no way to a simple human life, but the love in her heart will never disappear. And now she could only look after Christian, leaving for distant Spain, to forget about her.

Death lilies

Today, all the noblest and richest people of the kingdom have gathered in Odette's palace to celebrate the princess's coming of age. Odette became different, life made her joyful and beautiful, she was an adornment of her kingdom, but today sadness crept into her heart, she remembered the dazzling eyes of her handsome prince, but fate separated her from him, and even today for some reason she remembered Richard, her faithful friend.

What happened to him? Where has he disappeared so mysteriously? It was impossible to find him anywhere, but he was alive, Odette knew this and hoped that someday she would see him again.

The dance ended, and Odette sat down in a graceful curtsy to the gentleman who danced with her. Finally, she was able to quietly leave the ball and go out into the garden by the palace. Here the lake shone in the light of the moon, and its water shone with all the shades of night beauty. The lake both amused and soothed, it was Odette's favorite place, and now, not knowing why, she came down here.

Swans swam on the clean and transparent surface of the lake. At the sight of them, the legend of the king of darkness was recalled, the king bewitched the girls he liked and turned them into swans.

«Where are you, Richard,» said Odette and before she had time to say it, the whole lake was lit up with bright light, and on the dark road to the palace flames flashed, creating a whole bridge of light.

A rider on a black horse appeared in the distance. Odette immediately realized who it was. All in black, on a shining stallion and in a black mask, from under which dazzling blue eyes shone, it was he, who was called the dark prince. The one about which legends were made, but how could he find himself here, a ghost on a black horse, a prince from the kingdom of elves.

He drove onto the road of blazing lights, his horse whinnied, and flames burst from his nostrils, his hooves beat impatiently against the ground, he was waiting for something and could not wait. Odette could not believe what she saw, the dark prince jumped off his horse and, approaching her, knelt down in front of her.

«Leave with me, Odette,» whispered the elf, who came to the realm of mortals, he raised his face to her, and Odette recognized Richard's fiery eyes.

Who was in front of her: her old friend or the prince of the fairies? She did not know what to think, her thoughts were in confusion, and she closed her eyes for a moment, who could believe that the prince of elves was once a mortal man and loved a mortal girl, and now he came for her to take her with him to the kingdom of witchcraft.

He bowed his head in respect, and Odette did not know what to do, she could not believe that Richard was standing in front of her, her old friend and faithful lover. Did he come for her from the kingdom of witchcraft, again came to the world of mortals. She did not know whom she loved more: the mortal prince Etienne or the dark prince.

Yes, it was him, her friend Richard, but how he had changed. He became the king of darkness, not light. He had long suggested that she run with him, but now she had to decide, and Odette did not know what to do, she could not escape from her kingdom, she was his princess and could not leave it. On the other hand, she was drawn to the world of elves and fairies, from which Richard came for her to take her along with him to the wonderful world of endless witchcraft.

Richard was on his knees before her, raising his beautiful eyes to her, he begged her to leave with him, but Odette could not make up her mind.

«Richard,» she whispered.

«Now I am the prince of darkness,» he answered sadly.

She squeezed his hand, but suddenly lightning tore their hands. In a minute, Richard was no longer with her.

Where did he go? He always appeared and disappeared like a ghost, like a vision, now he was the prince of the elves, and this divided them in a way that the enemies could never separate.

And in the thicket, not far from the palace, beautiful eyes followed her and a voice whispered: «I would give my life for you, but my life belongs to witchcraft.»

Odette turned around, it seemed to her that some quiet voice called her, but there was no one here, and she alone stood by the transparent lake and could not recover from this short meeting.

Richard disappeared as he had many years ago. She didn't know if he would ever return.

Suddenly Odette saw a dark figure in the light of the lights. Suddenly, the shape of the figure began to change, the dark folds of his clothes turned into locks of red hair, and a red-haired witch stood in front of Odette. Odette froze with horror, but the vision faded, and before her stood only an old woman in tatters. She walked over to Odette and bowed her head politely.

«Hello, Princess Odette,» she said.

«How do you know my name?» Odette was surprised, but the old woman just grinned.

«Who doesn't know Princess Odette,» she said, «everyone in the country says that she is the most beautiful girl in the whole kingdom.

«Thank you,» she burst out.

«And seeing you,» the old woman continued, «one can understand why you are considered the most beautiful.»

The old woman walked around Odette, peering at her, as if at some antique statue.

«Today is the day of your majority,» she said, «believe me, this is the most wonderful day that can only be in the life of a girl like you. You are very beautiful.»

How did the old woman come here, since the gate to the garden was guarded by guards?

«How did you get here?» Odette asked.

«By chance, and at the same time not,» she replied strangely.

«But the gate is guarded.»

«Nothing can be so well guarded that no one gets inside.»

«There are guards there, how did you get in?»

«Witchcraft can slip anywhere.»

«Witchcraft?»

«Yes.

«I do not believe you.»

«It doesn't matter,» the old woman said, and took out from the folds of her clothes a wonderful sparkling flower – a white lily.

«What, besides flowers, can decorate the holiday,» she said, «lilies grow here on the rocks, you could collect a bouquet.»

«But it's dangerous on the rocks,» Odette tried to say.

«This is nothing,» answered the old woman, «go and you will be happy.»

Wanting to get rid of her interlocutor, Odette walked away, and it was not the eyes of the old woman who were following her into the darkness of the night, but the eyes of the red witch.

Odette noticed from a distance one rock, where the most beautiful lilies grew. The princess simply could not resist the sight of them.

The wings of a huge black bird flashed at the top of the cliff. The bird flapped its wings and again became part of the rock, but Odette did not notice it, she was too carried away, picking flowers,

Odette plucked a few more flowers, but she couldn't reach for the next one. It grew high on the edge of the cliff, and she, without hesitation, climbed there and picked a fragrant flower. It sparkled in her hand, and at that moment the huge wings of a bird – a demon covered her. She tried to escape, but nothing worked; the wings squeezed her tightly. She herself did not understand how, but her hands were covered with feathers and golden dust of the witchcraft ritual, she was another beloved of the devil, whom he turned into a swan. Her hair shattered in the wind and turned into white plumage. The

dress was slowly covered with white feathers. In a moment, a white swan was swimming along the calm surface of the lake. It was an unusual bird, with a golden royal crown sparkling on its small head.

Rothbert has finally avenged his damned love, his broken heart.

Now she has become a magic bird, Rothbert took revenge, but this revenge could become a punishment for himself. Once he was already in love with the beautiful Diana, now he could fall in love with her beautiful daughter. No, it was just a fairy tale. His love died with the death of the queen, not his, but someone else's bride. He loved her, and his love died with her and her beauty. Could he really fall in love with the one he was supposed to take revenge on, the one he turned into a princess – a swan?

Prince's love

Years passed and Christian returned. Travels, wars, duels, battles tempered him and made him an invincible knight. He won fame and honor with his sword, but he did not rush to the palace to meet with his family. Of course, he loved them, was attached to them, but now he was called by a stronger love, love for the black swan. He has to see Odile at all costs.

His brother Etienne has changed a lot over the years. The taverns, booze, drunken fights were forgotten. University education and military training. He became flawless. Love for Odette completely cured him of drunken fights and noisy taverns, now he did not look at any girl, he was waiting for the moment when he would return to Odette again.

Rothbert went to the lake and flapped the flaps of his long black cloak like the wings of a black bird. The white swan on the lake sparkled with magical colors, and now it was no longer a swan, but a beautiful girl with blond hair. As if after a long sleep she ran her hand over her face, she was again a man, she, Princess Odette, enchanted by a swan.

«Remember everything,» said Rothbert, and like flashes of lightning in Odette's head flashed a moment from the past, but not her, but her beautiful mother.

She seemed to see how Diana ran across the hall, how she bends over the corpse of the young king, how she receives the kiss of death from the golden bowl of the red-haired witch.

«Yes,» whispered Odette, «yes, I remember you, because of you my mother died.»

«I avenge the death of the one who was your mother. She has doomed you to suffer forever, far from your love, forever to be a cursed princess, a swan girl. At night you will take on a human form, and during the day you will become a swan with a golden crown on your head. I can give you just one day, one day you will be human and make sure that your prince has long forgotten you.»

«It will never happen,» she said boldly.

«Just remember one day, princess,» the evil genius hissed. The flaps of his cloak swept, and a large black bird flew away from the lake.

Etienne drove up to the caves located in the depths of the forest, far from the capital.

He jumped off his horse and, tying it to one of the trees, entered the cave.

Voices rang out from afar. Where did the voices come from in the domain of the old hermit, and in addition female voices, which was even more alarming.

«Prince,» someone invisible called, and another voice continued:

«Come to us!»

«Come!» It sounded in silence and echoed from the walls of the cave, «come to us, we have been waiting for you for so long!»

Etienne could not believe what he was hearing. The owner of the caves, his old friend, the hermit, had no relatives. no friends, but he was the greatest sorcerer in the whole kingdom. With this in mind, Étienne boldly moved forward.

«Prince Charming,» came from behind him. He turned and had time to catch his gaze, as a shadow flashed, dark and fast as an arrow. Suddenly the cave was lit up with light, and three girls appeared in front of him, looking like oriental princesses.

One of them was red-haired, the second was a brunette, the third was a blonde. They were undoubtedly beautiful, but for the prince, only Odette existed in the world.

The red-haired beauty looked straight into Etienne's eyes, trying to find at least some response to her beauty, but in vain, Etienne's eyes remained impassive. She put her hands on Etienne's neck and grinned.

«I look like her, Etienne,» she asked. How did she know his name?

«And I? And I?» The other girls moaned to her.

«It's stupid to think about the one so far away,» the brunette echoed.

«There are other girls in the world,» the blonde continued.

«Stay with us, Etienne,» continued the red-haired girl, «even if we are not her, but we can replace her for a while.»

«Never,» Etienne replied, removing her hands from his neck, but the red-haired beauty did not pay attention to it.

«Is she really so beautiful,» she interrupted.

«Yes,» the prince answered firmly, «more beautiful than all earthly girls, and even ghosts.»

«Go away,» came an imperious voice behind him. The three girls rose up like smoke and disappeared, and before Etienne stood his old friend, his second father, a hermit and a sorcerer.

«You came,» he said, and slightly tilted his head in greeting.

«How could I not come,» Etienne replied to his words, «you became a second father to me.»

«And you have changed,» said the hermit, «now you are a handsome prince, and soon you will become the king of your country.»

«One thing scares me,» said Etienne honestly, «marriage, I cannot marry any girl, except...»

«Her?»

«Yes,» said Etienne, not even knowing how the sorcerer knows his secret.

«Princess Odette,» said the wizard thoughtfully.

«Yes, but where is she?» The prince roused himself.

«I don't know that, but there is one thing that I can know.

He led Etienne forward, and they found themselves in another, dark and huge cave. On the table with books lay a skull, and above it, on the wall, hung an old sword, decorated with precious stones and a golden hilt. Next to the table, on a dais, was a mirror. They approached him.

«Look,» said the hermit and ran his wrinkled hand over the smooth surface of the mirror. The mirror reflected a lake with swans swimming in it, and then Etienne saw Odette's face. She has grown and become even more beautiful.

«Yes, it's her,» Etienne burst out, and immediately the vision disappeared.

«Will I find her?» The prince asked.

«Yes,» said his old and wise friend, «but believe me, I know how hard it is to lose your love.»

«How do you know,» Etienne was surprised, «tell me!»

The old man moved away from the mirror, and his face was not visible behind the long gray hair, but Etienne could swear that for a moment, just for one magical moment, it again became the young and beautiful face of a prince in love with a red witch.

«It was a long time ago,» he began, «in that kingdom that no longer exists, War and death destroyed it, after the beautiful witch killed the king and the king's brother, who was handsome and young, and...»

«And it was you,» the Etienne continued, fascinated.

«Yes,» his friend nodded his head and continued his story, «I was young and brave, I was looking for glory and battles, but she appeared, a beauty from a dark fairy tale, and crossed out my whole life. She became the wife of my older brother, the king, and broke my heart forever. She did not need love, her selfish heart longed for power, and I could offer her nothing but my heart. I left the palace and went into voluntary exile. When my brother died suddenly, she was accused of witchcraft and sentenced to death at the stake.

The day she was to be executed, my life was shattered forever.

«Was she executed?» Etienne asked excitedly.

«No,» was the answer, «she sold her soul to the devil, and by this she was saved from death. She disappeared right from the place of execution, and I have only one memo about her.»

«Which one?»

«A piece of her dress,» the hermit replied. He clutched a piece of scarlet cloth in his hand, and suddenly it slipped out of his hands.

«What's going on,» Etienne asked excitedly as a strange glow lit up the entire cave.

«I'm even afraid to think,» answered the sorcerer, but the radiance has already illuminated the whole room, and a piece of dress fell on the mirror and began to grow. Now it was not a fragment, but a royal scarlet dress.

Then, against the background of a scarlet dress, white hands and a neck appeared, and then everything was over, and a red-haired beauty stood in front of them. There was something eerie, blood-curdling about her beauty, and a long cross-shaped brand on a long chain stretched around her neck.

«You called me,» she whispered, addressing the king's brother, and a cold grin ran across her lips, «I had a dream,» she said, «and I became young again, as I did many years ago, but this is just an optical illusion.»

«You're back,» he said. She walked over to him, her face beaming white. He was old, and she was very young. Her beauty shone like a bright star, like her red hair against his gray hair.

«I was always afraid that old age would touch me,» she said as if in thought, «but it happened even worse: the devil made me vicious and ugly, like himself.»

Her eyes flashed with life and hope.

«Come with me,» she said, «come with me, and you will look younger again.»

«Violetta,» he said, moving towards her, but the scar on her neck reminded him that she was different.

«Will you come with me?» she asked.

«I can't,» he replied, and at that moment her eyes again filled with anger and hatred.

«You will regret it,» sounded in the silence, and the red-haired witch disappeared.

«Go away, Etienne,» said the hermit, «don't make me fear for your life.»

«Remember, now you know the secret of the red-haired witch, and danger will haunt you.»

Etienne rode for a long time through the forest, heading back to the royal castle. He did not leave the feeling that someone was watching him, but so far the enemy had not attacked him openly. Odette's face was in front of the prince's eyes, and now he was going to find her, no matter what it cost him. The price could be high, but he was not afraid of anything.

Etienne's coming of age has long been celebrated at the royal castle. Both the peasants who loved the good prince, and the noble people who highly appreciated him, all gathered here, and each of them celebrated this event in his own way, although it was equally dear to all.

The peasant girls immediately ran up to the prince, and Etienne barely managed to free himself from their circle and approach his friends. Fritz and Ben, as always, were ready to leave any fun company for the sake of the prince's company.

«Etienne, where have you been,» Fritz asked first of all, «some very beautiful girls are waiting for you here, they want to congratulate you.»

«If you knew what real beauty is,» Etienne sighed sadly.

«What happened to you,» only his friend could squeeze out, «before we went around all the taverns in the district and if you have no desire to resume all this, then I have it.»

«I was in an old hermit's cave,» Etienne said quietly.

«Now everything is clear,» Ben cut him off. «They say that getting into the world of witchcraft there is as easy as crossing the entrance to a cave.»

«You're right,» Etienne admitted honestly, remembering what happened in the cave today.

«I also saw witchcraft,» as if by chance, Fritz threw, «by one swan lake, no one comes there now.»

He was silent for a moment, as if with difficulty remembering the features of some misty ghost.

«I saw a girl there,» he finally said, with such admiration as if he were talking about the heavenly angel itself.

«Girl,» Etienne burst out.

«Yes, she was very beautiful. So beautiful that I cannot compare her even with you and with the prince, I mean your strange brother.»

For Fritz, Christian has always been strange, because, unlike Etienne, he spent his youth not in a tavern, but in duels.

«It was like a vision,» Fritz continued. «She was wearing a luxurious ball gown, although she was standing in the middle of the swan lakes. I have never seen such a beautiful girl. She had blonde hair and clear eyes, I was struck by her look, and then right in front of my eyes, but I swear I wasn't, and it didn't seem to me, she turned into a white swan and flew away into the distance.»

He expected Etienne to protest, but he was stunned.

«You say she had blonde hair,» he could only say.

«Yes,» answered Fritz without hesitation, «do you believe me?»

«Still a swan girl,» Ben laughed at him, «you can tell stories. anywhere, but not at court, you will be immediately sent to hell, deciding that you are insane.»

«I swear to you, I saw her,» Fritz objected, but Ben cut him off.

«Hush!»

A group of young peasant women came up to congratulate Etienne. One of them handed the prince a bouquet of wildflowers.

«Meet, Etienne, this is Marie,» Ben said.

Marie sat down before the prince in a graceful curtsy. She was very attractive, with golden spike hair, and reminded him a bit of Odette, but this was not his favorite princess.

«Today is a wonderful day, your highness,» said Marie, and her eyes flashed merrily, «are you happy?»

«I doubt it,» Etienne replied honestly, he did not want to lie or dissemble, he did not see this sweet girl as a threat to his happiness.

«You should be happy on a day like this,» she said.

«It's too difficult, my happiness is far from here, in the land of swan lakes.»

«Do you love the girl, or maybe,» she smiled slyly.

«Perhaps what?» he asked.

«Perhaps you love the swan girl. It's just a fairy tale, but I wanted it to be a reality, right?»

«I do not understand?»

«Do you know the legend?»

«Which one?»

«It doesn't matter,» she replied.

«What legend?» Etienne could not resist.

«About girls – swans who become fabulous beauties at night if they are on the swan lake.»

«No, I don't know,» said Etienne.

«BUT it's just a fairy tale,» she shook her head sadly.

«Why is it only a fairy tale?»

«Do you believe that this is reality?»

«Let my friends laugh at me, but I would like to believe it.»

«It's impossible to laugh at you,» she replied coquettishly.

«Why not?»

«Because today is a holiday in honor of your birthday.»

«But there is no happiness in it.»

«And you would be happy if there was a girl who would love you with all her heart.»

«I only love one girl,» Etienne began, but did not have time to finish, as the heralds announced: «Queen!»

The Queen was accompanied by a large, luxuriously dressed retinue. Almost next to the queen was a girl who was simply hated by Etienne. Her name was Rosalyn, and it was her, after Odette's disappearance, that Etienne was predicted to be a bride.

Fritz was not taken aback and led the peasant girls forward.

«Your Majesty, let me introduce them to you, they have come to congratulate you and the prince. They have a present for you,» he said, as politely as possible. The girls sat down in graceful curtsies, and Marie brought a small ginger kitten to the Queen in a basket of flowers.

«What a charm,» the queen burst out, «I'll call her Clarice,» she said after a little thought, «that was my grandmother's name, and I think this name is especially dear to me.»

The kitten immediately realized that it had fallen into the hands of the one who would herself and make everyone love it, like the most adored kitty in the kingdom. With joy, it immediately fell asleep in the arms of the queen. Neither Etienne nor Christian had such a favor as children, but they were not cute tricolor kittens.

«Etienne, escort this charming lady to the castle,» the queen ordered, placing Rosalyn's hand in Etienne's. Etienne almost gritted his teeth with anger, but obeyed.

«Your Highness,» Rosalyn began as soon as they were together, «I want to congratulate you.»

«Yes, thanks,» Etienne responded somehow awkwardly, looking aside and counting the moments until the moment when they finally parted.

«You are sad,» she said. What a question, and who would have fun in the company of a silly cutesy doll.

«I'm a little thoughtful, I'm sorry,» he said in response.

«About what?» With obvious curiosity she asked.

«It does not matter.»

«Open up to me,» she smiled.

«I was thinking about...» Etienne hesitated.

«About what?»

«About the legend.»

«How interesting.»

«But this is just a legend.»

«Many legends turn out to be true,» Rosalyn said.

«You think,» Etienne shrugged.

«What legend disturbs you,» Rosalyn continued her interrogation, «maybe you can tell me.»

«The legend of the swan girls,» said Etienne.

«They say they have a princess.»

«Princess?»

«Yes, the most beautiful girl in the world. The king of evil is in love with her, but she loves another, and the king of evil has vowed to destroy him.»

Etienne froze in surprise, but he did not have time to ask another question. A knight approached him – a guard from his mother's retinue.

«Her Majesty asks you to come to her,» he said respectfully bowing to the prince, and Etienne, barely nodding to his unwanted companion, hurried to the queen's chambers.

She was waiting for him in her apartment.

«Etienne,» the queen began, «isn't it time for those to take a more serious look at some very important things for the country?»

«For the country,» the prince repeated with a sinking voice.

«You must marry Rosalyn.»

«Yes, I would rather marry the first peasant woman I come across, or a girl from a tavern.»

«Don't say that, Etienne,» the queen ordered, «why don't you want to marry Rosalyn.»

«Because I'm in love,» he said finally.

«You are in love,» the queen burst out, «with whom?»

«I don't know where she is now, but I'll find her.»

«Who is she?» the queen repeated her question.

«The princess is a swan,» Etienne answered, not understanding what he was saying, «I love the girl – the swan, I love the princess Odette.»

The queen was about to faint.

«This is what communication with hermit sorcerers brings to,» she concluded.

«Think,» the queen has already begged, «today is your coming of age, today you must prepare to become king and choose your queen, Rosalyn would be so suitable for this role.»

«Never,» Etienne burst out, and his face flushed with anger.

«I'll only marry Odette,» he shouted as he left the room. The queen brought her thin, graceful hand to her forehead, well, what a trouble she has with her sons.

Etienne decided to go in search of Odette. He entered his room only to take his cloak and sword. Rosalyn suddenly appeared next to him. Her hair was loose and the collar of her dress was unbuttoned. A long, curved scar in the shape of a five-pointed star glittered on one of the exposed shoulders.

«God,» Etienne whispered, looking at the scar, «what is this?»

«The kiss of hell,» she replied in a dream.

«Then...» Etienne began, but she stopped him.

«You are leaving,» she asked, and her lips lit up a faint smile, «believe me, you would be much better off staying here.»

«Why?»

«The curse of a rejected bride can be the worst,» she said.

«I don't understand,» said Etienne.

«There are forces in the world that a mortal cannot compete with.»

«How do you know?» Etienne asked.

«Trust me, I know the king of evil. Don't leave,» she whispered.

«I must leave,» Etienne answered resolutely, and, grabbing his cloak and sword, ran out of the room.

«Well, let it be so,» she shouted after him with malice and rage, «remember my curse, you will never find the one you love, and she can never become your bride because she is cursed, she is a princess – a swan...»

Well at the end of the world

Etienne drove for a long time through the forest, he was heading to the place where legends about damned beauties are born, to the swan lakes. By evening, he got lost and was only glad to see a small tavern behind the trees, in a clearing.

The prince entered the tavern and sat down at one of the empty tables. A servant immediately approached him with a jug of wine. Pouring wine into a glass, she whispered:

«If you want to save your life, leave here!»

«I don't understand,» he burst out, but she hurriedly moved away from the prince, the owner himself was approaching him.

«Welcome to our land,» he greeted Etienne. «Are you a traveler?»

«Yes,» Etienne confirmed, «I'm just lost and can't find my way, I'm here by accident.»

«Maybe you are looking for something, no one just wanders here. The whole world knows the bad reputation of this place.»

«No,» Etienne assured him, «in my country they don't know anything about this place.»

«Your country?» the owner grinned, «you want to say that you are the prince of some country.»

«No,» Etienne hastily lied, «no, that you, I'm just a poor traveler,» he assured him, and at the same moment he thought what his friends, mother and brother would say if they knew about his adventure.

«Well,» said his involuntary interlocutor, «you disappointed me.»

«Believe me, I didn't want that,» Etienne turned away from him and was about to end the conversation, but the innkeeper did not want to leave him, as if he was trying to get something from the young prince.

«You are from afar,» he asked.

«I can't say,» said Etienne, «this place is probably far from my country, but I don't even know where I am and what kind of tavern it is.»

«Trust me,» the owner assured him, «this is the best tavern in the whole world.»

«The best?» Etienne chuckled.

«Yes, here you can find not only wine, food and snacks, but also everything that the human heart wants.»

«And what is it?»

«Otherworldly forces,» the owner whispered to him so that no one else could hear.

«Are you laughing?» Etienne burst out, but the owner only shook his head mysteriously.

«Whatever you want will be here, no matter you are a prince or a simple wanderer, the dark forces help everyone without a choice, just call them. You know about the castle of the witch's roses or about its master.»

Etienne shook his head, but he began to suspect that something was wrong.

«What are you trying to say?» Etienne burst out, and the owner moved a little away from him.

«That you are finished, Prince Etienne,» he said, smiling slyly, like a snake.

This smile pissed off Etienne, how the owner of the tavern at the end of the world could know about the prince of another kingdom. There is not much time left for blurring. At the same moment, knights in black burst into the tavern, the black knights of the king of evil, and there were many of them.

«Here it is,» shouted their head, «death to Prince Etienne!»

Etienne drew his sword, the first blow he put down one of the black knights, but there were too many of them. Etienne retreated and suddenly faced another enemy. He put his sword to the stranger's chest. Suddenly, the helmet that covered his head fell off, and waves of dazzling blond hair

fell over his shoulders, so beautiful it was hard to believe. Miraculously, Odette stood in front of him in the clothes of a young man.

«Odette!» not believing himself, he whispered.

«Etienne!» burst out from her.

«I've been looking for you all over the world,» he said, forgetting about the battle and danger.

«I was looking for you,» she replied.

Etienne and Odette retreated before the onslaught of the black knights. Odette pressed herself against the wall, and suddenly something crunched in her, and Odette found herself on a dark staircase leading down somewhere. The door slammed shut behind them.

«Is it a trap again,» Etienne whispered.

«This is our salvation,» Odette said, grabbing his arm. The staircase was lit by rare torches. There was only one thing left for them, to go down. There was no turning back and could not be, but Etienne nevertheless found Odette and was happy

«God, where have you been?» he asked.

«Don't ask me about it,» Odette whispered sadly, «I'm not in my power to confess everything to you.»

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