

## “The Witch of the Dark Woods”

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Once upon a time there were a little girl and a little boy who loved to read books, and were nice to animals and other people, and so therefore they were picked on. They talked to the cats who lived in the barn across the meadow from their humble cottage about their problem, and the cats told them they should run away with them to the gentle kingdom. The cats said they needed a king and queen in the kingdom, who were good and kind, and the children had the very qualifications for the positions. The cats told them that there was a little problem, though. The big fluffy white cat stepped forward, and he explained that there was a mean witch in the dark forest, which they must cross to get where they wanted to go, and that she would try to stop them.

"How do we get past her?" asked the little boy named Charlie.

"King Carol -- that is the white cat's name -- will help us," answered Sarah, the little girl. She pulled some cheese from the little basket she was carrying and gave some little treats to the cats.

"I will show you the way to the Scholomance," answered King Carol. "There you will learn everything you need to know." Then the little kittens, black, grey, striped, and spotted trotted and scampered, the head of one kit running into the rump of another, the littlest black kitten rolling right over on its little paws in a somersault, as they gathered around King Carol. The King began to groom the kits, holding one down with his left front paw, and another down with his right front paw, while he went to work with his rough pink tongue, scrubbing the dirt off the fluffy little kittens. The little kittens were giggling and purring, a little embarrassed at being bathed in front of strangers.

The little boy and the little girl each held an armful of kittens and were busy kissing their little faces and asking them their names. They were having so much fun they almost forgot they had to go to the school in the forest.

"It's time now to start our journey to the Scholomance," proclaimed King Carol, standing erect upon a fallen log. "Mother and father cats, gather your little kits, and follow me through the forest, to the Scholomance, for our little friends' sake."

The little group of pilgrims put one foot or paw in front of the other and began their march into the forest. Once inside the forest of tangled trees, the bright yellow sunshine went away, and the forest became darker and darker as they moved on. The leaves were worm-eaten and crumbly, and the ground was damp and moldy. The birds which had sung on the outside were nowhere to be seen. The newborn kittens were mewling, and they had to take rest stops so the mothers could give them milk, and when they were tired the fathers would carry them in their mouths, careful not to hurt them with their teeth. Eventually they decided they all needed dinner, and Charlie and Sarah ate apples and berries from the trees, while the cats went hunting for mice. After they ate, all the cats gathered around the children, and even on top of their laps and their heads, and they waited for direction from King Carol.

The air grew cold, and the little girl was shivering. Charlie gave her his coat. The wind grew strong, and the sound of cannons shook the ground. Lightning began to flash. Leaves began to swirl. "It will rain soon," said King Carol, "therefore, we should take shelter." The party trotted to the big room beneath the huge fir tree. It was such a large tree that a grown person could stand tall and not touch the ceiling formed by its lowest branches, and the branches stretched so far and wide and touched the forest floor, so that it formed a little house wherein the pilgrims could keep safe from the storm.

"Are you frightened, children?" asked the kingly white cat.

"No, Your Majesty," said Charlie, "We know we are safe in your care."

"Me, too," said Sarah.

"Then stay close by me and do as I say, for the Witch of the Dark Woods is nearby. You shall know her by her raging storms. We must be careful as we journey through the forest to the Scholomance," said King Carol.

"My whiskers are twitching, and my fur is ruffled, Your Highness," said Radar Cat, as he put his nose to the ground and his rump in the air before the King.

"That is cause for concern, Sir Radar Cat," said King Carol, and he thanked him for his faithful service. "Sir Radar Cat has given three of his lives to protect our clowder," he explained to the children, "You may scratch his head now." The children did as they were advised, and the orange tiger cat purred and rubbed their ankles; he even lay down on his back and indicated that he should like his tummy rubbed, which task Sarah was pleased to perform.

The pilgrims used their time wisely by telling tales of the never-ending war between good and evil. They spoke in story, they spoke in rhyme, and they spoke in song. They told of struggles against bullies who picked on children who were kind and liked to read books, and of the no good end to which those who did evil would come. They sang of heroes who defeated the mean ones who hurt little puppies and drowned little kittens (the mother cats wept whenever they heard this story). They spoke of knights of the gentle kingdom, whose golden armor shone in the sun and blinded the evil witch whenever she attempted a siege against the castle. Then stepped forward Remember Cat, a tabby with three white paws and one black, and a stub where a tail had been, a tail tall and proud until it was cut off by a man who was hurting a woman: Remember Cat had clawed at the man's legs to save the woman, and the man had turned on Remember Cat.

Remember Cat was proud that his tail would remind people to protect the ones they loved. King Carol had appointed him the historian cat of the clowder, to prevent the good people and cats from forgetting what was important. Sarah told how she threw her books at a boy who had cornered Charlie on the playground. King Carol gave her a medal of valor.

At last the storm ended, and King Carol said it was time to be going. Every minute in the dark forest was risky. The children needed to be taken to the Scholomance, where they would learn what they needed to know in order to reach the gentle kingdom. The strong young tomcats led the way, and the weaker cats followed behind them. By this time it was very dark, and it was a good thing that cats have good night vision. They also have good hearing, and their ears pricked up, and they turned their heads, and the King gave the command: "Take cover at once!"

The children and cats were well-hidden by the time the troop of deputies of the Black Sheriff came pounding by on their big black horses, whipping the shrubbery to flush out the runaways. The children were afraid, but they didn't cry, for they knew that not only their own lives, but those of the cats, were at stake. The men on the horses kept on going, right past their hiding place, and Charlie and Sarah and the clowder kept close for a good while. When they thought the danger had passed, they crept out of their holes and burrows and convened around King Carol, who issued a Declaration of War: "The Clowder of Cats hereby declares war against the Black Sheriff and his Mean Men, for they have engaged in acts of aggression against little ones and defenseless animals." He did not blame the horses, who were captives of the men. He said they must resume their journey immediately and recommended everyone eat and drink and ready themselves for travel. They resumed their journey, and Charlie asked the King to tell him about the Scholomance.

The Scholomance, said King Carol, is a school of black magic, run by the devil. Pupils were taught the languages of animals and other magical things. The devil took as his price a pupil for his own -- but no worry, said the King -- the devil always chose the pupil who was the most evil one of the lot and who would end up going to the devil anyway. Sarah said it was a frightening kind of school, but Charlie said there were a lot of devils in the place they were running away from, too. King Carol agreed: there are devils almost everywhere, and good and gentle folk needed to be aware of them and learn to protect themselves, and that was one of the things they would learn in the Scholomance. Sarah told the King that she and Charlie liked to learn things, and that they learned many things from books. The King told them they would be great scholars and wise rulers when they grew up, and that the world certainly needed those.

A very large and very loud screeching owl swooped from the reaching branches of a gnarled tree, and the King made a great leap and avoided him. Charlie spun around to see what had whooshed past, and the owl circled around and toward Sarah, who was nuzzling a little white kitten and not looking up. Charlie grabbed a log and swung it like a baseball bat to scare the owl off, and Sarah put the kitten in her pocket for safe keeping. The tomcats, hearing the screeching of the owl and the caterwauling of the King, came bounding through the brush. Frances (the Abyssinian) scampered quickly up the trunk of a dead tree, slinked out along a branch high up, and swatted the owl as it flew past, and knocked him to the ground. While the owl lay stunned, Charlie tied him up in Sarah's apron, and put him in her basket, to keep him from hurting anyone else. "Great work," said King Carol. "The owl is the servant of the Witch. She is close on our trail, and we must keep moving." The company drew bravery from their leader and began to move forward once more.

Down, down, down, down very deep, through a cave dark with drip-drip-dripping water and fluttering bat wings, and slippery floors, down a narrow-ledged cliff, past a subterranean lake, and down again, far below the surface of the earth, far below the craggy snow-topped Black Mountain, very, very far below the moon and stars in the heavens, was the domain of the devil. Vast and dark chambers of ebony and black marble echoed with the squeals of rodents and the buzz of flying insects. Past a labyrinth of serpentine corridors, some which led only to dead ends, and down a steep and narrow stairwell lit dimly by dark iron sconces holding fat smoky tallow candles was the Scholomance. Thirteen children at thirteen desks, heads bent over copy books and fingers holding pens with which they copied out spells, were monitored by the cloven-hooved professor, who snorted green vapors and passed sulfurous emissions. The students labored to learn all they could, so that the term of their education in the bowels of the earth would yield them some benefit on the day of their release back to the surface. No one knew who – but each pupil feared to find out who – would pay the price of the devil’s tuition and be conveyed to the underworld ‘til the end of time. They studied and practiced and learned to conjure and to do the devil’s bidding, always remembering that at the end of seven years, all but one of the Solomonari would be released to the sunshine.

Grigori Perfidius vowed not to be the one to remain in the pits. He painted the canvas of his mind with brushes dipped in bold crimsons and dark yellows, with sharp angular dashes of black, envisioning a fearsome portrait of himself wielding the power he was accumulating by toil and by wile in the cold, dank Scholomance. He leaned to the right and pulled the hair of the girl sitting next and looked at the answers on her slate, and he flicked a paper wad at the boy on the left and read the answers on his scroll. He would gain the knowledge to control the beasts and

the men above ground, to make himself the dark lord and the master of the world, and what he did not learn he would steal. He picked the legs off a spider, then squashed him, and thought how he would amuse himself when he was in charge, pitting armies one against the other and coloring the earth red, burning villages to see the people run and the sky turn to flame, and taking every good thing he saw for himself. He was going to get the highest marks of all the Solomonari, and he was going to outwit the devil. Grigori was very sly, and held his cards close to his vest, to all outward appearances a devoted and humble scholar, but plotting devious and deadly plans within the inky recesses of his heart. The devil said, "Two more pupils draw near, a boy and a girl."

Hell hath no fury like a young girl torn from her dollhouse, ripped from her grandmother's arms, abducted from the land of yellow sun and green grass, hurled into the abyss, imprisoned in the Scholomance, forced to learn the devil's spells, made to breathe his sulfurous miasma, compelled to feel his hot and slimy breath, to toil over spellbooks and parchments, and ne'er to see the blue sky and her china dollie for seven long years. Grief fermented into rage within the breast of the beautiful (tall and willowy now that she was grown) girl with the green eyes and the wrist-length raven hair; rage ignited the flame of wrath in the cauldron which had once been Veronica's heart. The Dark Woods Veronica claimed as her domain, banishing the light of a world which had been denied her, a world she remembered from long ago, but which was not for her. She summoned the damp and dismal, the crawling and lurking creatures. The owl she claimed as her own, the wriggling snakes and the crawling spider, the creatures shunned and abhorred by the dwellers in the sunlight: "This is our kingdom -- the kingdom of the forsaken and the damned. Misery and death shall be the portion of those who dare trespass," she

proclaimed. The earth quaked and the sky thundered as the evil which Veronica had endured poured forth from her black and shriveled heart into the world.

Extending the graceful form of her well-turned arm, Veronica allowed the approaching raven to roost upon it. Putting his beak down and spreading his tail, the raven made obeisance to his dark and beautiful lady: "If I may be so bold, Milady," quoth the raven, "I have news to impart."

"Very well, Raven, what intelligence have you?" replied the Witch.

"Dame, I bring news of the approach of two children on their way to the Scholomance. They travel under the protection of a clowder of cats. They travel through the dark forest, your own demesne."

"Raven, thou knowest that the miseries of hell shall be the portion of all who enter here, and death the only release," spake the Witch in all her fury, "for all who dare to trespass." The skies turned black, blacker than the darkest eclipse. Lightning crackled and flashed and split some trees, and the smell of smoke wafted through the dark forest. Howling winds blew leaves from the trees and rendered them barren. The Witch of the Dark Forest quivered with all the years of anger burning through her eyes, scorching thereupon she gazed.

The clowder, meanwhile, steadily made their way through the thick woods as the sun sank lower on the horizon and the shadows thrown by gnarled trees stretched out longer, until there was more shadow than light. King Carol ascended a stump and called to his subjects: "Look to yonder forbidding Black Mountain, my good people. In the deep recesses of the earth beneath the dread mountain is the Scholomance." The cats huddled close to the ground, and the kits snuggled next to the adults. Sarah and Charlie squeezed each other's hand, and Charlie said, "King Carol, Sir, this is frightening country. Must we go to school there?"



“My boy,” answered King Carol, “That is the very place the sainted Sir Bloofer Cat foretold as being the source of powerful dark knowledge, wherewith to arm the champions of good in their struggle against evil. There it is prophesied the future monarchs of the gentle kingdom shall gain the wisdom to defend and protect their citizenry. Brave and good children like yourselves will grow into noble and fearless leaders through your education in the devil’s Scholomance.” Sarah and Charlie, standing shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip, nodded their heads to signify they understood, albeit with reservations. “Let us hasten on, for the end of our journey is within sight,” said King Carol, as he rubbed the children’s ankles, and when they bent to pet him, he licked their faces.

The pilgrims continued walking toward the Black Mountain, which got bigger and bigger, and rockier and craggier, as they drew nearer to it. The damp, cold leaves and mud of the forest floor began to turn white with frost, and they could now see their breaths, as the air became chill.

Radar Cat’s ears went up and he began to meow; he told the King that he heard the sound of a weeping woman, and the King sent two of his tomcat scouts ahead to reconnoiter. They returned with a report of a beautiful raven-haired woman with flashing green eyes, rimmed red now with weeping, lying huddled on the ground beneath a dead elm tree. The King and the children followed the toms back to the place where they had found the woman, and they approached her.

“Dear Lady,” said Carol, “what unhappiness has caused you to weep and moan so pitifully?” whereupon the dark and lovely Veronica rose to her full height and reached her arms to the skies.

“Know Ye,” she thundered, “that you stand before the Witch of the Dark Woods, and that you have trespassed into her domain, forbidden to all living things who dwell in light. My wrath

is great.” Veronica turned toward the north, and the biting polar wind blew hard from the Black Mountain, and snow began to whirl around them.

“I call forth the black and the cold and the fanged and the clawed and the slimy, slippery and the poisonous demons and creatures of the dark realms. I command you now to destroy these who have dared invade my forlorn and forsaken domain.” Black leathery-winged hairy beasts with snouts full of bared teeth and bloodshot eyes and six legs with claws circled above. Slithering green crackly-scaly serpents slipped down the tree trunks and inched toward the clowder.

The kittens made for the cover of the foliage, and King Carol drew himself up before the children, signifying that he would protect them with his nine lives, if necessary. Frances (the Abyssinian) caterwauled orders to his troops, and the young and strong cats assumed offensive and defensive positions according to his directions. Radar Cat slipped quietly away, behind enemy lines, to gather intelligence of their movements and plans. King Carol said to Veronica, “My lady of the Dark Woods, we have come in friendship. We have naught intention of disturbing your peace. We are charged with taking this boy and this girl to the Scholomance, where they may prepare for their destinies as the rightful sovereigns of the gentle kingdom. I beg your pardon if we have inadvertently offended Your Ladyship.”

Veronica was giving some consideration to King Carol’s polite speech just when the groaning of heavy iron gates being forced open drew her attention. She knew that sound. She had heard it before. The sound of the metal groaning pulled her back to the awful past, so that she nearly forgot what was happening in the present, so strong was the effect of the groaning gates upon her ears. Veronica called to her dark creatures to follow her, and she led the way toward the

horrible, rusty metal groans. King Carol called for Frances and his warrior cats to follow, and they went forward to discover what it was that drew the witch from them.

The devil climbed up the slippery, narrow stairs, and crept along the tiny ledges, scaled the dripping walls, and worked his way up from the depth of the Scholomance, to the gates at the tip-top of the steep passage. He pulled open the heavy wood and iron-clad doors to reveal the dismal, dark bat-filled cave on the side of the dread mountain, which could be seen through the heavy rusted iron gates embossed with fiendish skulls and swords and cups. Rats scurried in and out of the cave entrance through the bars of the gate. Donning a rainbow-hued robe, and a beard of gold to cover his pointy chin, the devil picked up a pile of beautiful blue and green and yellow silk-bound books with golden clasps and went forward to lure Charlie and Sarah into the Scholomance, where they would toil the next seven years under his tuition.

Grigori Perfidius, rushing from behind, pushed the diabolical schoolmaster out of the way, just as the devil was forcing the groaning iron gates apart. The devil pulled his errant pupil's long brown locks in his fist and yanked the escapee back toward the underworld. As they struggled the heavy iron gates clanged shut, catching the scholar and crushing him to a pulpy mess, even as the devil was still gripping his lovely brown hair. Casting the handful of hair, which was all that was left of Grigori, upon the ground, the devil pushed the weighty gates apart and squeezed himself through.

The rainbow robe was caught in the gate, and the golden beard was lost in the scuffle, and the devil emerged from the Scholomance without his disguise, as Veronica and her creatures of gloom drew nigh. At the sight of her erstwhile teacher, the green-eyed witch's hardened heart cracked and splintered, purple flames bursting through the fissures, so that the witch glowed

violet with the heat of hatred contained no more: “Foul fiend, author of misery, destroyer of joy, cesspool of corruption and filth. You are my true enemy, my jailer for seven long years in the sewer of the damned beneath the dread mountain. It is you who are my true nemesis. You are the rightful object of my wrath. Perish hellish abductor of children!” She unleashed her lightning upon him, and a whiff of smoke rose from the tip of the devil’s tail. The devil stung her face with his bristled tongue, which spooled out from his fanged mouth and over his cracked lips and began wrapping itself around the witch’s waist.

Veronica called to her fiendish menagerie, and her flying creatures, reptilian and mammal, with claws and sharp incisors dove at the devil and drove him back. Frances (the Abyssinian) led the charge of the soldier cats. The devil, his thorny tongue still wrapped around the witch, tried to cast a spell, but could not, for Remember Cat was sinking his teeth into his outstretched tongue. In fury, the devil sliced off Remember Cat’s right ear with his taloned fingers, but Remember Cat maintained his hold on the devil’s tongue until he bit clean through it.

Forced to retreat, the devil vanished in a puff of green smoke, and the Solomonari escaped through the open gate back into the world. Veronica smiled – her first smile since she had been torn from her grandmother’s arms – at seeing the children run as fast as they could, as far as they could, from the Scholomance.

“Lady of the Dark Woods, you are bleeding. You are wounded with the stings of the devil’s barbed tongue. Please accept the comfort only a cat can give,” said Felicity, a long-haired cat of a patchwork of every cat color. Veronica acceded, and Felicity began to lick her wounds, and after a while curled up on the lady’s lap and purred.

“Good cats and children, and slimy creatures, too,” Veronica said as they all rested under the scraggly trees, “I ask forgiveness of all whom I have harmed in my own misery. I have lived a

life forsaken by the light and shorn of all joy and knew no better in my pain. You have come to my rescue, and have helped soften my hard heart, and I wish to make amends.”

“Please, lady, join our pilgrimage to the gentle kingdom,” King Carol answered, “for you have rejected vengeance and will henceforth be the good and gentle creature you were born to be.” And to the pilgrims he called, “Let us be on our way, for I see shining through the trees the sunshine of the gentle kingdom. We are almost arrived.” The kittens and cats trotted and pranced, pleased as pudding, and Charlie and Sarah skipped and ran through the edge of the forest into the light of day.

The citizens of the gentle kingdom, cats and horses, garter snakes and shopkeepers, bunny rabbits and farmers, bluebirds, and dogs big and little, artisans and duchesses and dukes, came running to the green meadow to welcome the ragged troop approaching from the Dark Woods. King Carol gave thanks for their hospitality and Remember Cat told of the adventures of Sarah and Charlie on their way to the Scholomance, where they had been going to prepare themselves to reign in the gentle kingdom, and how they would be perfect for that job after they had grown a little. He told how the devil was routed and the Solomonari were freed, and of how the Witch of the Dark Woods repented and wished to make amends.

The citizens excused themselves and held a council, after which they reported to King Carol that they were very glad to welcome the adventurers into their kingdom. They asked Veronica to accept the position of High Minister of Good Magic, to which she agreed. They offered Remember Cat the job of Minister of Education, and they sent him to the veterinarian to have his ear attended. As per King Carol’s recommendation, they offered the golden throne to Charlie and Sarah, to be their own good and gentle rulers. King Carol they asked to be regent until the sovereigns reached their fifteenth birthdays. Carol agreed and appointed Frances (the

Abyssinian) the Defender of the Good and Protector of the Little, in recognition of his meritorious service. As the years passed, Remember Cat would educate the people of the surrounding countries about the fate of the devil and of the Scholomance, and the devil's old school would fall into oblivion and become a legend for want of pupils. Henceforth, the devil would have to go somewhere else to make trouble.