

Creative Writing Manuscript:

The Inner Conversations of a Fairy Tale Princess

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of:

Master of Arts

Date: 11 May 2023

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University of Puerto Rico

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Abstract

The Inner Conversations of a Fairy Tale Princess is an ongoing YA novella that combines satire with Euro-American fairy tale tropes. The story follows a princess who grapples with her status as the least favored heir after her political marriage-to-be falls through. Presented via both third-person and first-person narration, the novella incorporates common fairy tale tropes (i.e. a heroine princess, evil stepsisters, a witch antagonist) and repurposes them. The heroine princess is an anxious girl unable to fulfill her happily ever after; the evil stepsisters are instead her comedic support system; and the witch antagonist is her would-be therapist. The purpose of this project is to re-examine the Euro-American fairy tale, which continually captures generations of impressionable minds: notably, those of young girls.

The Inner Conversations of a Fairy Tale Princess

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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Dannabang Kuwabong, for his guidance in the crafting and writing of this project. My gratitude is further extended to my thesis committee, comprised of Dr. Elidio La Torre and Dr. Loretta Collins Klobah, for revising my work and offering their valued feedback. A special thanks also goes to fellow peer, Prof. José R. Rivera Belaval, for readily offering his advice whenever necessary. Finally, no less important is the unanimous support and encouragement of my friends and family. I appreciate every single contribution, big or small, all of which enable me as I continue to work on this project.

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Introduction

Growing up, I was immersed and heavily influenced by both print and movie versions of classic Euro-American fairy tales (e.g. *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, etc.). These stories present common tropes that include: a heroine princess, evil stepsisters, and a witch or evil stepmother for an antagonist. The princess subsequently finds happily ever after with prince charming and his true love's kiss. Such themes popularized by these fairy tales are cultural constructs cued into children's minds—notably young girls—which result in the expectation to achieve their own happily ever after and seek fulfillment in romantic love. *The Inner Conversations of a Fairy Tale Princess* is a satirical novella that responds to these themes that dominate the mindscapes of their impressionable audiences.

The narrative follows Princess Eleira (pronounced *eh·LEH·ee·rah*), the youngest and least favored heir to her kingdom. After a failed engagement, Eleira finds herself navigating through her sense of inferiority while yearning for love—especially her mother's. In this story, the evil stepsisters are instead a trio of emotional support and humor. Eleira is also accompanied by a talking cat for a pet; the aloof, widowed Queen; and some less than charming princes.

Presented by a cheeky absent narrator and the heroine's inner thoughts, the story devolves into a recurring segment titled "Therapy with a Witch." This segment tackles the inner critic—an instigator and a source of insight. For our protagonist, that inner voice takes the form of a playful witch who enjoys crawling into the minds of the distressed. The following is an excerpt of this unfolding narrative I hope to soon complete.

The Inner Conversations of a Fairy Tale Princess

Chapter 1

Meet Eleira. She, is a quintessential fairy tale princess. And like any fairy tale princess, she has a dead parent, mommy issues, and as the only mortal in a family of magic users, she is the lesser of her older sisters. You've heard this story before, I'm sure. But if she could steal you for a moment. You see, Eleira has a lot of feelings. She has a pet cat she could air out her emotions to, but unlike yours, presumably, hers talks back. Yours might glare at you and have you wonder what's on their mind—she doesn't have to wonder. Then there are Eleira's sisters. Though they are superior to her, they are neither *step* nor *evil*. They do, however, have their husbands and lives to manage, and, well, the princess hates to be burdensome. So that leaves you. Not that she wishes to burden you either, but alas, she's in a desperate predicament.

Shall we elaborate?

We open with a scene between the princess and her betrothed.

"-ness... -ighness... Your Highness!"

"Yes?" Eleira responds after a delay.

"Are you all right?" her fiancé asks, searching her dazed eyes with concern.

"Yes, of course!" she says, in her best attempt to sound, well, sound. "I'm happy for you. So few of us get to know true love."

Ah yes, *true love*. You must've known there would be mention of it sooner or later. But as it turns out, Prince Damian has found it, not in our quintessential princess, but in a commoner. Ever

the romantic, he just had to rush over to his fiancée and confess his love for another woman mere weeks before the wedding.

Guilt pangs him.

“I cannot help but feel I’ve betrayed you.” Romantic *and* self-aware.

“I do consider you a friend, first and foremost. Though I’d understand if you no longer do,” he adds.

Eleira falls silent. *A friend?* To hear this said aloud by him confirms that this is real. He really has found another outside of their arrangement.

There is no real reason to be stirred by this. It doesn’t make much of a difference whether the two wed, as there is no particular demand for their kingdoms to merge. As it happens, both Damian and Eleira came of age at the same time, and so, it was only natural for them to seek out partners. A few marriage meetings later, the pair matched up. It was strictly political—the love would come after.

In reality, the arrangement bore more weight for the princess. Being the least favored in her kingdom, the anticipation of the royal wedding had cast a somewhat positive light on her. In a family whose prestige comes largely from their gift of magic—which Eleira lacks—at least she was performing the duties of a woman.

“Your Highness?” the prince again rescues the princess from her thoughts.

“I don’t feel betrayed,” she resumes, “I’m just... surprised, it’s all. You’d never mentioned her before. I’m caught off guard.”

Prince Damian casts down his gaze.

“That aside,” Eleira continues, “I have no ill will toward you. As you say, we’re friends! And friends... support... other friends!” She forces that sentiment out as convincingly as she’s able.

The prince lifts his gaze. With caution, he asks, “So... you accept this?”

Eleira steels herself. “Yes. Our engagement is hereby dissolved,” she answers resolutely.

“All right...” says the prince, albeit still ridden with guilt. “If you ever need anyth—”

“All the best to you, Damian.”

Refraining from saying more, the prince bows and takes his leave.

This engagement hadn’t been about love, the princess reminds herself as she watches Damian’s retreating back. Yet, embarrassingly, she recalls the giddiness that’d begun to tickle her in the time the two spent together. A time that’d become something she looked forward to. Anecdotes she would exchange with her sisters had started to have an air of “love talk.” She had fooled herself into believing this marriage would serve more than just her public image, but her heart as well. All these thoughts and feelings flood the princess at once. With no desire to entertain them further, she reprimands them and tucks them away.

“That’s some bullsh—”

“Athalie!” scolds oldest sister Catherina. Middle sister Athalie has less problems with embracing *her* true feelings and emotions.

When Eleira is done telling them about her and Prince Damian’s dissolved engagement, all three have varying reactions. You’ve just heard Athalie’s. Catherina maintains a listening ear, not

as rash to offer up premature opinions. While Scarlett, the second oldest, fans herself while giving a scrutinizing glare that appears to agree with Athalie's remark.

"This is why I don't make long-term commitments after just a couple' garden strolls," voices Athalie.

"It's not as if anyone's propositioned yo—Ow!" that shriek comes from Atlas, Eleira's talking cat, who stands by the princess' feet.

Releasing Atlas' tail from the sole of her shoe, Athalie chimes in again. "That's right! I have no need for a husband, and neither do you," she says, addressing Eleira now.

Eleira looks at her circle of sisters, all gathered around a tea table amidst the palace garden. She contemplates them one by one.

First, Catherina. Seated to her right. Twenty-three, and the first to marry. Her hair is half tied up, half loose; neatly combed and decorated by a simple ornament. She holds Eleira's hand while offering a gentle gaze. Being the oldest sister, she's regarded as the most serious and motherly. Or, as the others oft put it, uptight and a nagger.

Then there's Scarlett, seated across the table. Twenty-one, also married. The ringlets of her hair dance amid the wind her hand-held fan produces. The multiple, strategically placed jewels on her head allow for light to reflect on her at all times. She's a tad vain if you ask the rest.

Next, to Eleira's left, sits Athalie. At 19, she's but a year older than the princess. Her arm hangs from her sister's shoulder while she eyes Atlas, who licks his throbbing tail from Eleira's lap. A flower she's no doubt plucked from the garden is tucked above Athalie's ear. She is, as evidenced,

Eleira's only unmarried sister, and, as displayed, far more unconcerned about etiquette and protocols. She has the menacing charisma to get away with it too.

And then there's Eleira. She has played out this exact scenario in her head countless times before: sitting in a circle with her sisters, going one by one, cyphering through each of their distinct qualities. But then, when her turn comes, a hypothetical voice asks: *Which one are you again?*

She, is the last-born. Her most notable quality is her thick ginger hair. While the rest inherited their mother's modest, dark brown locks—Athalie's being blonde at the moment—Eleira got their father's bright tresses. His emerald green eyes too, but those were bestowed upon Scarlett first. Her loud appearance aside, Eleira's place in the family is irrelevant at best, a bad omen at worst. She not only shares her father's looks, but her birthdate with his demise.

Eleira is a reminder of the fallen king—unknown to her, beloved by all. She's an imposter mini-me. To compensate, she does as she is told and never causes trouble. Study magic she can't use, find a husband, maintain overall decorum.

An imposter mini-me, and a doormat to boot.

“What did Mother say?” asks Catherina, interrupting Eleira's far-off thoughts.

“I haven't informed her yet,” answers Eleira, visibly tense.

“Word's probably reached her by now,” intuits Scarlett.

That is both a relief and unnerving. On the one hand, that means wedding plans are being dismissed as they speak. On the other, the Queen likely awaits an explanation. Moreover, it also means it's only a matter of time before the public catches wind of the story and embellishes it however it suits them.

“You think she’s upset?” Eleira asks.

“At whom? You? Or your deadbeat fiancé?” Athalie—again—gives her two cents.

Atlas attempts to ease Eleira’s nerves. “It’s hard to know what Her Majesty’s ever thinking.”

“You know what *I* think?”

“Yes, you’ve made yourself very clear, Athalie,” responds Catherina. “Eleira, whatever happens—whatever people or Mother say—Damian made his choice. That’s on him. You did nothing wrong.”

“As far as anyone’ll be concerned, I didn’t do anything right either,” says Eleira with a half-smile.

At that moment, the halting sound of Scarlett’s fan gathering is heard. She makes to speak.

“You know what you need?”

“Oh no,” mutters Atlas, while Catherina presses a hand to her forehead.

“A song,” declares Scarlett, with conviction.

We have yet to mention that the second princess is a gifted vocalist! She’s made a name for herself as a performer among nobility. Much to her family’s irritation, however, she imposes her talent whenever possible.

“Ugh, Scarlett, no one’s asking you to sing. Why do you have to make everything about yourself?” Athalie reacts.

“Eleira **loves** my singing,” insists Scarlett.

Eleira intervenes, “That’s true, I do, but—”

“I can mend your heart with a lullaby.”

“Oh, my heart is fine—”

“I was saving this for the wedding, but alas...”

Alas, Eleira’s sisters, everyone.

~

Scarlett’s heartbreak lullaby turns into the perfect group dispersal. Only Eleira is left to listen. Mostly out of courtesy, partly because Scarlett holds her from the side and makes theatrical gestures towards her chest—à la her “broken heart.”

“Most people would have to pay to see that, but *not me*,” Eleira teases.

“Yeah, lucky you,” is Atlas’ monotonous reply.

As the two make their way through palace corridors, a staff member approaches. “Excuse me, Your Highness.” They bow.

“Oh, you’re excused. What is it?” Eleira kindly relents.

“The Queen summons you,” the staffer announces.

Chapter 2

My meeting with Mother didn't run long. In fact, our meeting wasn't really between her and I. Recalling it muddles my mind, but what it came down to was this. Evidently, word of my broken engagement had in fact reached her, thanks to Damian himself. According to Mother, he 'spared the details' of why we decided to part ways.

After this revelation, I was introduced to... another prince?

"I'm sure you'll recall Prince Johann," said Mother from behind her desk, gesturing to the man standing in front of it.

"Of course. Pleasure to meet you again," I said, though try as I might, I couldn't place the perfect stranger.

"His Highness has come to personally extend you an invitation to his palace," Mother proceeded. "They have a wealth of scholarship that we here do not. Your stay there would be an opportunity to expand your studies."

Though I can't do magic myself, I've always studied it alongside my sisters. I grew up watching them learn and cast spells. It fascinates me. Any literature on magic I soak up.

"I understand you have a talent for potion-making?" said the prince.

While I wouldn't call it a 'talent,' I certainly practice potion-making, yes. Mainly for medicinal purposes. That is my way of enacting magic.

As he listed all the different titles and articles available at his estate, I marveled at his generous offer. I'd almost forgotten how tense I'd been walking into this meeting. And then, I remembered.

“That all sounds wonderful, but how come I’m the only one you’re inviting? What about my sister Athalie?” *I asked. Catherina and Scarlett have long graduated from their courses and have their own curated libraries at their husbands’ estates. I thought it only logical that both unmarried sisters still living in the palace should be extended the same opportunity.*

Prince and Queen went quiet at my question. Then a voice cleared. Mother’s.

“In exchange for your stint at his palace, His Highness here has made a request...”

‘A request?’ I thought. Next it was Prince Johann’s throat that cleared, as he took a step forward to speak.

“Yes, that is correct. You see, the reason I have come here personally is because this invitation isn’t merely for academic purposes.”

There was a pause. I looked to my mother. She didn’t look back.

“I would like for it to double as a courtship,” *I heard Prince Johann say.*

There it was. Mere hours after my broken engagement, I was being proposed to, again! Which made me realize others knew my engagement would end before I did. And here I thought I was the one who’d ended it.

I took a pause to collect all my intersecting thoughts. Then, I had to ask.

“Pardon, but, the timing is... I suppose I’m wondering what you could gain from courting me at this precise moment.”

“I’ll admit, I did consider your sister initially,” *said Johann, glancing over to Mother, “but I understand she’s not taking any marriage meetings at the moment...?”*

'Garden strolls,' he meant. And he didn't answer my question.

"That is beside the point," he corrected himself. "My council has been egging me on to settle down for a while now, and I finally decided to take their heed. So, I humbly present myself to you, Princess Eleira, as a potential suitor."

'No amount of bad press will deter me,' he insisted, prostrating himself for this charitable deed. He'd wanted my sister. And when that wasn't an option—in what was likely a strategic move from his 'council'—he sought the next available option the moment the pipelines confirmed I was indeed available.

I turned to my mother once more, waiting for her to interject in any way. I so desperately longed to know what was on her mind. And if some part of her had any regard for me as a daughter and not as a royal.

I wonder now if it was an overreaction on my part. I mean, thinking about it rationally, what was so bad about Prince Johann's offer? It fell on my lap at an opportune time. I should be grateful. This is damage control. This... this is good, no?

Anyway, with a polite smile I said I would think about it. And, to dispel any doubts of how "appreciative" I was, I topped it off with a gracious curtsy.

Chapter 3

“I don’t think you’re supposed to do that,” cautioned 9-year-old Eleira.

Early on in their magic lessons it was determined that, outside of schooling hours, there needed to be somebody in the study room to monitor Athalie any time she was experimenting. On this given day that responsibility had fallen on baby sister Eleira.

“It’s just a taste test,” said 10-year-old Athalie, offering a spoonful of their freshly concocted potion to a—at the time—nonspeaking Atlas.

“Testing on animals?” quipped Eleira, one feathery ginger brow arched up.

“Oh, what harm could it do? It’s supposed to be an antidote.”

“Exactly. *Supposed* to be. And it’s meant for *people*?” scoffed Eleira.

“Did you hear that, Atlas? She doesn’t think you’re people,” said Athalie. The gray short-hair gave a blank stare, visibly unaffected.

“He’s not,” retorted Eleira.

“He’s family!” shrieked Athalie.

“Doesn’t mean he’s people,” Eleira persisted.

Atlas stood patiently between the girls, his head following the pendulum of back-and-forth banter.

“Careful! You’re gonna drop the sample!” warned Eleira as Athalie carelessly swung both the uncapped potion and its teaspoon serving.

“Caaalm dooown. Look, I’m putting it back.” With a haughty grin, Athalie delicately tipped the antidote bottle over.

“Athaliiee!” Eleira whined.

That's when the entrance door swung open.

“I’ll take that.” 14-year-old Catherina appeared from behind, snatching the bottle away from Athalie.

“And I’ll have this. You guys are loud,” commented Scarlett, who followed suit and snatched away the teaspoon.

Both girls handed the items back to Eleira. She received them with a pout. “You’re late,” she said.

“I know, I’m sorry. Our *brief* trip to the marketplace ran long because of this one,” Catherina sneered, gesturing toward Scarlett. At just 12-years-old, the second sister had a growing collection of trinkets and eccentricities. Everything from jewelry to portraits and knick-knacks, with rich histories made up by cheeky vendors and their tall tales. As a matter of fact, this collection is currently displayed in its own gallery. Scarlett’s husband had it built for her as a wedding present—though more and more he fears an expansion is in order. But we digress.

“I brought presents!” shouted an enthused Scarlett.

“That she did,” muttered Catherina.

On cue, the escort who’d accompanied the older sisters to their shopping trip appeared. Hoisted over his shoulder was a bloated bag. He let out an excruciating grunt as he set it on the floor.

Scarlett relieved the man of his duties, tossing him a handkerchief to wipe off his sweat on his way out.

“All right, let’s see...” she said, scanning the contents of the bag. Clatters of tins and metals could be heard from her rummaging. After pulling out miscellaneous items, she settled on four. For Athalie, a hand-held distortion mirror to make faces at. For Atlas, a new collar, with a matching crown he’d have to grow into. For Catherina, a ring that could allegedly track her “adolescent moods.” And finally, for Eleira, a gold chain.

“It’s to replace the one Mother gave you. I know how sorry you were when it broke,” explained Scarlett. Eleira looked at the chain and then looked back at her sister. It was as Scarlett said, she’d recently broken this important amulet on accident, and had been devastated by her own carelessness. Touched by the thoughtful gift, Eleira wrapped her arms around Scarlett’s waist, uttering a muffled: “Thank you.” Scarlett returned the hug. Catherina joined in on the tender scene, stroking their little sister's hair.

“That was very sweet of you, Scarlett. Now, explain this ring you gave to me,” Catherina importuned. This began an argument between the senior princesses.

Eleira pulled away from Scarlett and stepped into a corner. Her attention was solely placed on the gold chain. She took out an adult-sized band ring to insert in it. Though she didn’t know the significance of this ring, for as long as she could remember, it had hung around her neck. The Queen had placed it on her the day she was born. To Eleira, this amulet was a memento from her mother—evidence of her love.

Entertained by her own gift, Athalie placed her distortion mirror in front of Atlas, cackling at his disfigured reflection. That's when she noticed the lonesome bottle of antidote.

"Psst. Atlas. Come here." The rebel princess lured the kitten over to the potion-clad desk. With her sisters distracted, no one noticed when she offered another spoonful of the antidote to their pet.

"So? How is it?" she asked.

"Mmm. It's an acquired taste. A tad bitter though," a male voice responded.

"Huh?" uttered Athalie.

All heads in the room turned.

Two things happened that day: (1) Atlas said his first words, (2) Athalie lost all custodial rights of the pet in the foreseeable future.

Chapter 4

Today I helped Athalie make an invisibility cloak.

“What could you need one of these for?” I asked.

“Errands,” she said. I didn't ask what kind.

I knew this sudden project of hers was her way of keeping me distracted. News of my canceled wedding were made public this morning. A week after Damian's visit, we signed the annulment of our engagement and had a joint statement drawn up. No time wasted.

I don't know anything about his new relationship, but I hear his parents didn't take too kindly to his declaration of love for a commoner. I do hope it works out. I meant it when I told him I was happy for him finding true love. I also meant it when I said so few of us do. That's the part I'm envious about.

When Catherina got married, that was the first time I saw it: true love. It was an arranged marriage, like mine, but theirs had been agreed upon since their infancy. In their years of courtship—from childhood, teenage years, to adulthood—real feelings blossomed. This happened with Scarlett and her husband too, though they could not be a more opposite match. She, a performer who loves attention; he, a shy introvert, and a scholar as well as a prince. I suppose it's ambition that binds them, while their differences complement each other.

Seeing love happen consecutively among my sisters, I couldn't help but start imagining things when I got engaged. But what were the odds of Cupid striking thrice in a row here? I suppose he did, but only my prince lucked out.

As for Prince Johann, I'm yet to give him an answer. Mother hasn't pressed me on the matter either.

Amid my long-winded thoughts, I find myself fidgeting with the ring that hangs down my neck. The chain is long enough to where I can properly slide the band through my finger. I suppose I could do away with the chain altogether these days. I don't, of course, as that in itself holds sentimental value. Did the ring hold any value for my mother, I wonder.

My eyes drift with my thoughts. They land on Athalie's invisibility cloak. I have the sudden urge to visit a friend.

Chapter 5

“So, you wake me from my nap, and drape that thing over me, to then have me parade up and down the halls? I knew I was Athalie’s guinea pig, but I thought you and I had a better relationship than that,” *says Atlas as I carry him in my arms.*

“I’m sorry, I just needed to make sure the cloak actually worked,” *I try to justify.*

“Aha...” *he utters, skeptically.* “Why couldn’t you wear the cloak and have me tell you whether it worked?”

A smile escapes me. “Can you blame me for wanting to play with my adorable pet?”

His yellow eyes glaze over. “I knew I should’ve been Catherina’s when given the chance,” *he mutters.*

It’s sundown when I decide to sneak away from the palace and head into town. The invisibility cloak successfully conceals me and my cat from hood to hem. On our way out I hear some of the chatter my sister had been shielding me from during the day. From bouts of pity to ‘I saw it coming’ and falsehoods. Whispers of Damian having fathered a love child. Me desperately having forced an immediate proposal out of Johann. Johann having been my lover all along. The entire ordeal having been a ploy for attention on my part. Nothing cuts, until I hear, “I’m told it was Her Majesty’s idea to have Prince Johann propose. If you ask me, I’d say she’s sick of her husband’s mini-me still walking around the palace. Why else would she be so intent on marrying off Princess Eleira when her other daughter is still philandering about here too?” This comes from the very guard who escorted me to my meeting with Mother and Johann the other day.

I feel Atlas’ intent stare. He makes to speak.

“Let’s just go.” I prevent him. He looks over to the gossipers with a wagging tail. Suddenly, he’s wedging himself out of my arms.

“What are you—” I begin to say, when I see him produce an all too familiar guttural sound.

The sour aroma of vomit follows.

The gossipers disperse as soon as they realize the royal cat, and possibly his owner, are within ear shot. Immediately, I smuggle Atlas back into the invisibility cloak. As the maids dash to clean his vomit, I dash out of the palace.

~

“That was so gross, and so completely unnecessary. Ugh, what did you even have for dinner?” I gag.

“That’s a strange way to thank me,” is Atlas’ blasé response. He’s proud of his misdeed.

“We almost got caught!” I shout in a hushed tone.

“About that, you haven’t told me where we’re going,” he says.

Still concealed under the cloak, we cross through the marketplace, walking past vendors working their last shift of the day. What must have been crowds of customers in the morning are now smatterings of people strolling by. Streetlights begin illuminating the pebbled road.

“I felt like seeing someone. And I needed some fresh air, though we’re off to a rotten start.” I wave off the remaining vomit stench from my nostrils.

“That still doesn’t sound like gratitude,” replies Atlas in his monotonous way.

We approach the town plaza, where children are running amok. An evening breeze carries some printed headlines about me and Damian. I ignore them. My attention is set on a large statue with my father's likeness—the plaza's centerpiece.

Atlas looks at me, "So when you said you felt like seeing someone..."

"That's right. Usually, I'd visit his portrait at home. But today I thought I'd make the excursion here," I explain, my gaze never leaving the statue.

Atlas drops to my feet, remaining within the confines of the cloak. With my hands now free, I pull out the ring from my neck.

"Did Mother receive this from you?" I ask my father's statue. I shut my eyes to receive his imagined response, and escape to a drawn-out conversation. Atlas sits by patiently, allowing me the space for my hypothetical father-daughter dialogue. He's witnessed them before.

Chapter 6

It's past midnight. The invisibility cloak hangs in a corner of Eleira's room, right by the dresser. Atlas is rolled up in his pillow bed, long asleep. The princess too lays in deep slumber. But somewhere in her rest, something changes.

Inhale and... Inhale and... Inhale and...

This unfulfilled breathing persists.

Inhale and... Inhale and...

It gnaws at her more and more.

Inhale and... Inhale and...

Eleira tries to hold onto what is left of her comfortable slumber, to no avail.

She sits against her pillow, hand on her chest.

Inhale and... Inhale and... Inhale again, she goes.

Chapter 7

I'm back on my feet for the night. The room is painfully dark. I feel for my pulse as it accelerates. My heart may stop at any given moment, or so I fear. I keep my hand glued to my chest, so I'll know instantly if it does.

I pace, and I pace. In my panic, I consider alerting someone. Two or three times I go out to the dim hallway. "Let me not," I tell myself each time, and turn back.

"Eleira?" I hear Atlas' groggy voice as he comes to. "Why are you up?"

"I... I don't know... I..." I struggle to get my words out.

"What's wrong?" he says, alarmed now.

"I... I..."

"I'll go wake Athalie—" Atlas motions himself off his bed.

"No!" I yell.

It'll pass. Whatever this is, it'll pass.

Inhale and... Inhale and...

Everything's fine.

Inhale and... Inhale and...

I'm just being dramatic.

Inhale and... Inhale and...

What if something's really wrong?

Inhale and...

“Eleira...” Atlas watches me with marked concern.

Before long I’m sobbing. I can’t utter a single word anymore. I’m stock-still as my chest heaves up and down. The ambient sounds of the night feel distant. My own thoughts are background noise. Until one resonant voice emerges.

“Oh, my,” it says.

I hear it, clear as day, but I don’t recognize it. I look over to Atlas and realize he’s no longer in the room. He has likely gone to find my sister.

I’m alone.

Inhale and—Inhale and—

“Don’t fret.” The same voice resounds again.

I’m paranoid.

Inhale and—Inhale and—

I have no control.

Inhale and—Inhale and—

It won’t stop!

Inhale and—

“Take a seat,” I hear the voice say.

It’s pitch black now.

Therapy with a Witch #1

My name, is Eleira. I, am a quintessential fairy tale princess. And at this moment in my story, I am engaged in what must be my descent into delirium.

One moment, I'm struggling to catch my breath. The next, my eyes close involuntarily. And then that voice—

“Feeling better?” That voice I don't recognize asks with severe familiarity.

“Wh-what happened? Who are you?” I ask, wary and confused.

“The name's Lena. How do you do? Not well, it seems,” she says, all smug in her gravelly tone.

Still trying to make sense of things, I mutter, “Am I dreaming...?”

“Sure! Except I'm the one in control. You should be glad of that. I saw what your mind had in store for you. Let's just say you were better off not bothering with sleep tonight.” Again, Lena addresses me with such casualty.

I, or, I should say, the manifestation of me I see, stares blankly at her. Our surroundings are pitch black, with only a spot of light illuminating both of us. I'm sitting in a loveseat while Lena faces me in a cushioned chair of her own. She observes me intently. Her eyes are dark brown and cunning. Her cropped hair matches in color.

“So, tell me, what troubles this pretty little head of yours?” she says, gesturing to the space we're in—a.k.a. my mind.

“Why would I tell you anything? I don't understand any of this!” I'm exasperated now.

“No need to get agitated, dear. I’ll explain. You see, I have a sense for distressed beings, much like yourself right now. Every other night I get bored and wonder, *Who’s miserable right now?* And then, I follow their scent and creep into their minds. So, here I am.” *She spouts frivolously. It’s unsettling.*

I do little to hide my unease. “Wh-what are you planning to do to me?”

“Frankly, I’m more interested in what you can do for *me*. Like I said, I’m bored. Entertain me,” *says Lena, brazenly.*

“And what’s that supposed to mean? You want me to sing and dance for you?”

“If you feel so compelled,” *she quips.*

I scoff! “I’m sorry, but did you miss the part where I was sobbing uncontrollably? Mere seconds ago, in fact.”

“Yes, yes. By chance, has that ever happened to you before?” *Her eyes narrow, as though she’s studying me. I can tell she’s teasing, but not to what extent.*

“No. I don’t know what that was,” *I answer sharply, averting her gaze.*

“Was there a cause? Perhaps something’s weighing on you.”

I shake my head, irritated. “I’m not doing this right now! I refuse to, quote unquote, ‘entertain’ you!”

“Ooh, you’re a stubborn one,” *she remarks.* “You should be grateful, you know. I put you to sleep. Thanks to me you’re not struggling anymore.”

“So what? You want a reward?” *I reply with contempt.*

“Precisely,” *she answers.*

I scoff again and turn my head away. Does she actually think this is a relief? Is this the better alternative? Having a strange woman squat in my brain?!

Arms crossed, I turn back over to her. “What are you anyway? H-how’d you get in here?”

“I suppose I’m what you’d call a witch,” *she says.*

Oh, wonderful. Not a ‘strange woman,’ but an authentic witch squats in my head.

“And what could a witch find entertaining about a ‘distressed’ princess?”

“You nobles are amusing,” *replies Lena.* “The strange rules you set for yourselves and others never cease to confound me. It’s like you all enjoy living in cages. There’s plenty to unpack there, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, there isn’t much to unpack here. I’m not particularly interesting.” *I hunch up my shoulders. Arms remain crossed.*

“Reeaally,” *she says.*

I don’t fold. “Really.”

Her knowing gaze says she’s on to me.

“Well, all right. I can take a hint. Seems someone’s here for you now anyway,” *she relents.*
“Take care, Your Highness. I’ll be in touch.” *As she utters those parting words, everything distorts.*

I come to.

“Eleira!” *I hear Athalie call out. She and Atlas hunch over me as I lay on the ground. I sit up with my sister steadying me from the side.* “What happened?” *she asks, shaken.*

“I don’t know...” I say.

I clutch my chest. My heart is steady.

Inhale and... exhale. Finally.

“I’m ok,” I whisper to myself. Though I’m not so sure.

***This project is to be continued.**