

Conversation Pieces  
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The Prince of the Aquamarines &  
The Invisible Prince

Two Fairy Tales

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*For my sisters, Elizabeth Appelbaum,  
who read me fairy tales,  
and Jean Sogin, who listened to me read them*





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## The Prince of the Aquamarines

Savage Island rang out with the Islanders' cries of joy. The jagged rocks that surrounded them gave back the sounds of their weapons and their shouts. The raging waves broke against the rocky cliff around them and mixed their roars with the tumult, adding still more to the horror. These monsters took pleasure in cutting the throats of all those unlucky enough to have to take shelter there from the fury of the wind. Now they had gathered together to choose a King. Already waves of human blood had run over the altars of their gods, the shore was red with it, and the bodies of their victims were heaped on the pyre, to be reduced to ashes.

The Islanders had been dancing around the pyre when they spotted the shipwreck. Broken masts, shattered benches, split rigging, and torn sails were floating on the waves. They could see, far out, some unfortunates trying to swim to shore. The hope of safety so close gave them fresh strength, even though they had been almost exhausted. But they were hurrying to their deaths in trying to reach that fatal shore. They thought fate was trying to save them, by speeding them over the waves. But in rolling them toward the shore, it was sending them to a death a thousand times more cruel.

They had hardly gained the shore when the Islanders seized hold of them, chained them up, and dragged them to the foot of the altar. There, they slit their throats,

poured the warm blood into goblets, and drank it down in honor of their gods. They spared only one of the newcomers, one whose beauty, grace, and youth would have softened anyone but the ferocious Islanders, nourished on blood and battle.

His looks were striking; his bearing noble; his long hair, falling in curls about his shoulders. His open expression shone with gentle majesty. His eyes were dark, shining with an energy that even more than his beauty made him attractive. The Islanders planned to feed him to the King that fate was about to give them.

Their way of choosing a King was just as ferocious as the rest of their customs. Six of their most eminent tribesmen, the ones most admired for their barbarity, would be chosen, and the one who managed to shoot an arrow through the heart of the late King's widow, or his closest relative, would be the winner. They had already tied the Queen to a rock, and five of the Islanders had shot arrows into her arms and legs when the sixth candidate stepped into the arena, bow in hand. His arrow whistled through the air and flew straight at the unlucky Queen, splitting her heart in two.

A thousand shouts all together broke out. All the people fell to the ground at the feet of the new King, and he was carried in triumph around the Island. The women and girls, their hair hanging loose and their daggers in their hands, led the procession. Their chant was like the shouts of raging Bacchantes. Old men, bent by the weight of their crimes, even more than their years, followed with slow steps. And the King, surrounded by the Island's young men, closed the march. The stranger they had kept alive, horrified, followed this deadly parade, his eyes cast down.

Two Islanders, holding his chains, led him forward like a victim being taken to the altar.

After making a circuit of the Island, the people finally stopped in a clearing in the middle of a forest, where they held their rites. A thousand wild animals were stretched out on the grass, and big pots full of blood were set out. The finest wine, even the nectar of the gods, was not as sweet to them as drinking blood. The new King took his seat on a throne covered with lion skins. He grabbed hold of the stranger, and, dagger in hand, was about to begin the feast by cutting the victim's throat, when suddenly the dagger dropped, and the King himself fell dead at the stranger's feet. All the people stared in amazement at the stranger, but then met the same fate themselves. They fell to the ground, drenched in the blood that poured from the pots they overturned in their death-throes.

The young man's astonishment was too great for words, at the sight of a whole people, their lives ended in a moment, as if by some god's invisible hand.

The Islanders lay stretched on the ground, their faces twisted in the pangs of death. Their eyes, staring up at the sky, seemed to accuse the gods of killing them. Their mouths seemed to be open to blaspheme against them. Their arms, raised up and frozen in rigor mortis, still seemed to be threatening an attack.

The stranger promptly armed himself by seizing the King's weapons. Hurrying between the dead bodies, he hid himself deep in the forest. He climbed a rocky hill, where a stream ran down from the height. Tumbling from rock to rock, its noise grew louder and louder, increasing the horror of the lonely wasteland.

Standing there, thinking about his misfortunes, the stranger fell into reverie. He couldn't help shuddering as

he thought about all he had suffered since leaving Shining Island, where his father was the King. Boulders of crystal and emerald lined its shores. Precious stones lay scattered across the hills, the trees bore apples red as rubies, and the gates of the Capital opened between towers of diamonds that dazzled the eye.

It had been a whole year since he had left Shining Island and begun roaming over the seas. Everything that had happened to him since then came rushing to his mind. He couldn't keep from crying, thinking that perhaps he was parted from his father forever. The King had given him a box when he left, he remembered now, and ordered him not to open it for year. The year was up, so the Prince opened it and found inside a paper. Eagerly, he began to read it. It was in the King's handwriting, and in it the unhappy father explained the origin of his misfortunes.

"It would be in vain, my dear son, for me to try to hide from you the troubles ahead. As the gods are my witness, I did everything I could to calm their wrath, but the Fairy Blackbeard, the enemy of our island, condemned you, at birth, to fearsome torments. If only she had just taken your life! I would have been a happier man, and you would have undergone less pain. This cruel Fairy came into my kingdom just when the other Fairies had given you every gift needed to make you a model Prince. By their gifts, they meant to keep the Fairy Blackbeard from doing you any harm. But cruelty and rage are so clever when it comes to planning vengeance! The Fairy could not take away the gifts they'd already given you, but she wanted to make you a horror to the world. She condemned you to bring instantaneous death to everyone who looked at you, starting as soon as you were 20 years old. Can you imagine my grief when she spoke these terrible words! I did all I could to

make her relent, but it was useless. She even forbade me to tell anyone about it, except for you, and not even you until you were 20 years old. She hoped that I myself and all my people would perish at the sight of you on that day, and you would find yourself our executioner. I offered her my life, but she cared nothing for my tears and flew away in the middle of a fiery black whirlwind of tar and pitch. You know, my dearest boy, what care I took of you in your childhood. You know how I've wept over you, for you were the bitter fruit of my tenderness. Now I will never see you again, and already when you read this you have had the sad proof of the misfortunes the Fairy Blackbeard has condemned you to. Look for a desert, my son, where you can keep mortals from ever catching sight of you. Think of your Father, at times."

This Prince—who was called the Prince of the Aquamarines—had hardly finished reading this when his eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Gods!" he cried, "Do I deserve this? How can I find a place on earth deserted enough for me to hide myself from mortal eyes! I was lucky in the unlucky fate that threw me on this savage shore, where the monsters were the only victims sacrificed to me."

The unhappy Prince rose and left the forest. Soon he found he had reached the gates of the Islanders' city. It was built in a valley surrounded by high mountains covered with trees. A roaring torrent fell from the highest rocks and divided the city in two. The houses had low roofs, stained with blood and almost covered by dead bodies and scattered limbs. The Island's atmosphere had the property of preserving the bodies—they would never rot away there. The Prince was horrified at the gruesome sight. He left the city, taking a little comfort, in spite of his misfortunes, in the thought that he had wiped Nature clean of such cruel

monsters. He resolved to stay on the Island and live on the fruits of the earth that grew there.

He chose for shelter a cave cut into the rock, looking out to sea. The horror of finding himself alone on these unknown shores was eased a little by remembering that he had to keep away from everyone anyway. The cruel punishment that the Fairy Blackbeard had wished on him at his birth meant that he was banished forever from all people. Now that he knew what the sight of him did, solitude seemed less fearsome. At least the sight of him couldn't kill anyone there!

He might have been comforted in his misfortunes by the pleasures of a gentle, quiet life, but Love had joined the Fairy Blackbeard in heaping troubles on him. The Prince was in love. Eaten up inside by a burning fire, he sighed night and day. To make it even worse, he didn't so much as know the name of the one he loved. All he had was her portrait. He delighted in looking at it again and again, but his ardor and his grief both grew at the sight.

"I'm in love," he cried, "and love crushes me! I don't know who I love, and I can never hope to see her, except at the cost of her life. The sight of me, death to all, would kill my beloved if I saw her. O Gods! What a horrible torment you've sentenced me to!" Such were the bitter thoughts of this unhappy Prince.

The Island where he lived almost touched another island, where orange trees grew. Often he would paddle over there in a little boat he made from a hollow log, to walk in the shade of the trees. One day he fell asleep and did not wake until the thunder and lightning of a coming storm began. The waves were running high on the seas, the wind was rising, and everything showed that the storm was about to break. Even so, the Prince thought he could

make it back to Savage Island. He set out, and had almost reached the land, when a gust of wind blew him out onto the high seas.

The storm grew heavier, just then, and the Prince's boat was swept far out to sea. Calmly, he sat waiting for death. He thought there was no escape for him, but when his boat struck a rock and broke, he swam on for a while. But night was falling, and he was afraid that in struggling to get to land, he might be getting farther away. Even so, he kept on swimming until, almost ready to sink, his strength gone, he felt at his hand an iron ring attached to a tower. He grabbed hold of it and hung on, determined to wait for dawn. When day broke, he would be able to see the nearest shore.

He had begun sighing, complaining about the destiny that mistreated him so cruelly, when he heard a voice that said, "Unlucky stranger, don't bemoan your fate. Alas! If only you could put an end to my misfortunes, sir, as I will put an end to yours, by saving your life! Catch hold of this rope—the gods have not ordained your death today."

The Prince of the Aquamarines hesitated at first. He scolded himself for endangering his rescuer. She would be risking sudden death by trying to save him. But his strength was nearly gone, and he would have to make up his mind to die himself, for he could no longer struggle against the water. The dark night all around them made him bold. He grabbed the rope, climbed up into the tower, and found there a room so dark he couldn't see anything. He resolved to throw himself into the sea as soon as he saw day breaking and try to save himself by swimming to the nearest island. That way, he would not be the death of the one who had just saved him from drowning.

"Thank you!" he said to his rescuer. "How can I ever repay you? But an unlucky Prince, persecuted by destiny,

can do little for you. Your compassion in saving my life might lead me to getting into new troubles that death would have saved me from. But even so, tell me, Madam, where I am—what land is this? What winds and waves did the sea bring me through?”

“We are close to the Island of Night, sir, where my father is King,” she replied. “This tower is called the Dark Tower. It was built by the hand of a Fairy. The rays of the sun never shine here, nor the gentle light of the moon. Eternal darkness surrounds it, too dark to make out even something as close as your hand.”

These words comforted the Prince. He stopped worrying that he might cause the death of this Princess. She couldn’t die from the sight of what she couldn’t see. The deep, eternal shadows surrounding the Dark Tower reassured him.

“But what kind of land were you born in, sir,” the Princess went on, “and how did the storm come to strand you here? Please tell me all your story.”

The Prince of the Aquamarines could not help giving a sigh, reminded of his misfortunes, but he began his story:

I was born on Shining Island. My father had reigned there for a long time and grieved at seeing the Queen my mother childless. But at last she grew big with child. Several Fairies came to see me born, and they gave me all the talents that a Prince could wish for. My father, to do them honor, prepared a splendid feast in the palace for them. They were just ready to begin the banquet, when suddenly the air grew dark. A black cloud spread through the banqueting hall, and my father felt himself struck down by an invisible hand. All the other Fairies realized it was the Fairy Blackbeard playing this trick, but they had no power



over her. They wept for my father, knowing her cruelty. He came to himself soon after, but so saddened and overwhelmed that he could hardly be recognized as the same man. In vain the Fairies urged him to tell them what the Fairy Blackbeard had told him. He dared not speak. He could not speak. Grief had seized him and drew a torrent of tears from him, but the Fairy Blackbeard had forbidden him, on pain of frightful misfortunes, to tell anyone except me what she had told him.

My father had me brought up with care, but the growth that brings joy to other fathers brought grief to him. With sorrow, he saw me growing taller every year. The more I seemed to learn from my education, the more he wept. At last, when I reached my nineteenth year, he took me one day to the seaside. He spoke not a word. I followed him trembling. I had never seen him so bowed with grief. He came to a halt at the edge of a wood, and kissed me tenderly.

“Fly, my son,” he said, “fly from this unhappy land where you first saw the day. The time has come when we must part. I have hidden your departure from all my people. They might have tried to prevent it, and they might have perished in trying to save you. But you must go, my son. You will find a ship on the other side of the wood. I have had it fitted out especially for this, although I’ve hidden myself even from the servants I’ve assigned to go with you. Seeing my grief, they might have suspected something. Now you must hurry away and go where the winds lead you. Above all, my son,” he said, “you must not open this box until a year has gone by since you left this fatal shore.” He held me close while he said all this, his teardrops falling on my face. I was so overcome that I hardly had the strength to throw my arms around his neck.

“Why should I be afraid?” I cried. “How can staying cost me more than my life? No, Father, I’ll die if I must, but at least let me die with my arms around you.”

“Go!” he told me. “Be guided by the prayers of a father, and go far, far away.” He pulled himself away from me then and hid himself in the forest.

I stood frozen. I couldn’t take even a step to follow him at first. I came to myself in only a few moments, but I ran searching through the forest in vain. I couldn’t find my father. I saw that the ship he had prepared for me was ready to go, waiting only for me. He had told my attendants that I was going to the Happy Isles, which are not far from Shining Island.

So I went on board, after saying a prayer to the gods to preserve my father. We sailed toward the Happy Isles, but suddenly the wind turned and blew us to an island where we had to put into port, for the storm had damaged our ship and it needed repairs.

The island seemed to me an enchanted place, and I strolled inland. No walls of rock made the coast forbidding. A level shoreline went round the island, and the air was gentle and pleasant to breathe. In every part of the island, roads lined with orange trees ran to the central city we had seen from the water. Wide channels crossed the roads, and level borders of anemones, jonquils, buttercups, and tulips flowered beside them. Finding a path so delightful filled me with curiosity. I kept going, and then I saw in the distance an oddly dressed man, coming toward me. Soon I came up to him. He wore a long robe, open down the front and reaching to the ground, with a jacket of some kind on top, made of rich cloth, with wide sleeves, and over that a cape decorated with jewels. He held a book in one hand and a gold wand in the other.

He stopped in front of me and looked me over. Then he said, "Stranger, I see the storm has cast you on these shores. Follow me, my boy, and you will find you have gained something from having to spend some time on our Island." His words drew me on in spite of myself, and I followed him. He turned toward the city, in sight at the end of the road. As we walked, he told me about their customs and their way of life. "This Island," he told me, "where we have gathered all that is rarest in Nature, is the Island of White Magic. The number of people here is always the same. We're never jealous of each other, for we all have equal power. We're all friends, because neither envy nor self-interest troubles us. We are all the same age, and we all die on the same day. We don't keep our wives here, and we have only one son each. When we turn 25, we all get married to whichever Princesses we like best in the whole world. We have genies at our command who bring us their portraits, and we each choose one. They all give birth on the same day to one son each, and they keep the boys with them until they turn 25. By then, we have all turned 50, and as that age is too old for enjoyment, that's when we all die. We have our wives and our sons brought back to this Island, and we give them our books and our wands. Then we shut ourselves up with our wives in our tombs, for their love for us draws them down with us into Death's black empire. Today is the day we must all die. As soon as the sky, the sun, and the day have vanished from my sight, I will be plunged into eternal night and forever cease to be."

We had reached the city by the time he had finished telling me all this. The buildings were magnificent, made entirely of marble. The Magician led me through the city and then up on a rocky height commanding a view of the whole Island. There he kissed me and then said formally, "Sir, by

means of my art, I want to show you a part of what's going to happen to you. You'll have a happy life, if this can save you from the misfortunes that threaten you now."

Then he drew a circle with his wand and made me stand in the middle. He opened his book and waved his wand three times. At the third, I saw a black cloud rise up around me. The larger it grew, the less I could see. The sky was hidden from my sight, the earth disappeared, and when the cloud thinned out and vanished, I was surprised to find that the Magician who had brought me there was gone, and so were the rocky height, the Island, and everything I had seen there before.

I found I was on a ship tossing in a storm. It struggled against the waves, but it broke up on the rocks, and I plunged to the bottom of the sea. There I saw horrible monsters that fled from me, and left me holding in my arms a beautiful Princess. Fear had left her as pale as death, and there was hardly any light in her eyes. But the color came back to her face as soon as she saw me. I had never seen anything so beautiful! But she was snatched away from me in the next instant by a terrifying monster. I was trying to pull her free from its talons, when it all disappeared before my eyes. The cloud surrounded me again, but then faded slowly away, and I found myself on the same rocky height with the Magician.

I was sorry that I had not been under that spell longer. The sweet image of the Princess stayed with me, filling my thoughts. I wished the enchantment had lasted forever. Love had already stolen into my heart. I cherished the face that since then has caused me the sorest pain. I stood where I was, unable to move, imagining the sweet features I had just seen vanish. Love had etched them in the depths of my soul. I asked the Magician for pity's sake to tell me

if the Princess was only a dream, or if the gods had really made a mortal so beautiful she could not help stealing the honors due to the divine.

He answered me with a rhyme:

The face that made your heart into a slave,  
The image that, alone, has forged your chains,  
Rules a land of marshy plains,  
But you won't see it till you find your grave.

"Are the gods going to drag my life out so long?" I cried. "Why don't they cut it short, so my wandering ghost can get to the joy of that enchanting sight now? What good is it to me to live, if I'm never going to live to see the one I adore again?" My new-born love so overwhelmed me that I didn't notice that the Magician had already left me and was going toward a forest of myrtle trees. I followed after him. The sweet smell rose up toward the sky. Paths ran between the trees, all the same width, just alike. Between each pair of myrtles lining the paths was a black marble tomb decorated with splendid white marble statues.

"Here," the Magician told me, "are the tombs of all our Ancestors. Along each path, there are as many of the tombs as there are of us. Each generation can be told by which path it's on and how far down the road."

I went down the paths to where the first Magicians were buried. The utter silence that reigned in the wood, the myrtles never stirred by the least breath of wind, the tombs lined up, each the same distance from the next, inspired in me a faint horror. At last we came to a path where the tombs stood open. I asked the Magician why, and he told me they were waiting for the Magicians now alive. Soon I would see the whole Island made new.

Just then I heard a horrible din. Clouds hid the sky—thunder rumbled in the air—the earth shook beneath my feet. But all that slowly calmed down again, and the daylight came back, little by little, and I saw the air filled with chariots, coming to land on the path where I stood. I saw a Princess, leading a young man by the hand, step out of each one. They all came up to the Magicians, who were sitting there, each one on the edge of his tomb. They greeted each other with a kiss, and each Magician handed over his book and his wand to his son. Then each Magician went into his tomb, along with his wife—for these Princesses were their wives—and the next moment, each tomb closed up after them.

The son of the Magician who had taken me under his protection came up to me and told me that I could not stay on their Island any longer, because no ordinary mortals were allowed to see the rites they were going to hold in honor of their fathers. I would have to leave. He kissed me and gave me as a parting gift a portrait of the Princess I'd seen at the bottom of the sea. I recognized her at once, and the wound of love bled again at this fatal sight. Enchanted by this precious gift, I turned back toward the seashore, my eyes fixed on the portrait.



The pitying Prince of the Aquamarines looking on as the despairing Princess of the Isle of the Graces tears at her hair in Love's Palace of Revenge.