# The Spellbook in the Forbidden Room

IN THE MOUNTAINS OF POLAND there once lived a miller and his three daughters. All the eldest daughter loved to do was to gaze at herself in a mirror or in a pond, turning to one side for a pose, taking up her hair to see if that looked more fetching, then letting it down again with a flounce. The middle daughter spent her days dancing about, skipping everywhere, twirling and dipping. The youngest of the father's three daughters was quieter. Often she was lost in thoughts or daydreams. But she adored her two older sisters, and would clap with delight at her eldest sister's choice of red ribbons for the ends of her braids, then clap a beat for her other sister to dance circles around her. The father dearly loved all three daughters, but sometimes wished he could teach them to read. Only a couple of people in the village knew how to read, but they were too busy or important for the father to ask, and besides, he had no extra coins in his pocket to pay for lessons even if he could approach them. One autumn day a shivering old woman knocked on the father's door asking for a bite to eat. He quickly ushered her inside, offered her a bowl of hearty bean stew with sausage, and a place by the fire. After dinner the old woman took out a book and started to read quietly to herself. At once the father said, "May I ask, dear woman, if you would consider staying here with my family for the winter? You'll have a soft bed and warm meals, and in return would you give reading lessons to my daughters?" It was agreed, and the first lesson was scheduled for the very next morning. The eldest daughter would have come, but she disappeared in the fields to gather wildflowers for a party that night. The middle daughter would have come, too, but a traveling minstrel was passing through town with an accordion, and she couldn't miss dancing to that pumping beat. Only the youngest daughter was there for the lesson. And with the gentle teachings of the old woman, the maiden started to make sense of the strange-looking squiggles on the page. That evening, the father scolded his two older daughters. They hung their heads and said they were very sorry and promised to come the next morning. But alas! after breakfast the eldest daughter rushed off for thread to sew embroideries on her blouse and the middle daughter had to practice a new dance step while it was still fresh in her mind, and so it was the youngest daughter again who alone studied with the old woman. So it went, day after day. Each night the father reprimanded his two older daughters and they pledged to come to lessons the next morning without fail. But one thing or another got in the way and it was only the youngest daughter who learned to read. One day an evil enchanter came to the village looking for a wife. Perhaps he wouldn't seem evil to you or anyone else by looking at him - he only seemed rich - and so the eldest daughter allowed herself to be flattered by his attentions. Before long, she agreed to become his wife, and the day after the wedding the enchanter whisked away his bride to his home at a faraway castle. There, he told her, she could enjoy dozens of expensive dresses and vests, and jewels to adorn her hair. The enchanter's castle was truly marvelous to behold, and the wardrobes in the bedrooms were indeed packed with long ruffled skirts with sheer aprons, full-sleeved blouses, and vests richly decorated with beadwork and embroidery. The drawers were filled with headscarves of all colors and heaping piles of beads. On most walls rested huge framed mirrors. The eldest daughter was utterly delighted and marveled at her good fortune. One day her new husband said, "I need to go away for awhile. Anytime you're hungry, just go to the dining room, sit at the dining room table, close your eyes, and imagine what you'd like to eat. A steaming hot feast will appear before you. But," he frowned, "there is one thing you must know. You must never go into the room at the end of the corridor." It was easy enough to agree to that, and the eldest daughter promised she would never do such a thing. Yet as days passed, after the thrill of dressing up wore off - after all, who was there to dress for? - the idea of taking just the tinest peek at the room took hold on her. Before long there was nothing else she could think of, until she absolutely had to venture to the room. But the moment she pushed open the door the smallest crack, it flung wide open and she was pulled in, much against her will. Then the door slammed shut behind her and she realized she was locked inside. When the enchanter returned, he knew instantly what had happened while he had been gone. He stormed inside the room. "You disobeyed me!" he thundered, pointing at her, "You are no longer my wife!" The next instant, the eldest daughter was transformed into a yellow songbird trapped in a gilded birdcage. Back to the village went the evil enchanter. When the middle daughter saw him gallop toward the town square, she ran to him eagerly and asked for news of her big sister. "Why not visit and see for yourself?" said he. "In my castle, you may be interested to know, I have the finest selection of musical instruments in all the land." She happily agreed, and said goodbye to her family. When the enchanter arrived with his new charge, he told her that her big sister was at market for a short while but would soon return. In the meantime, she was welcome to amuse herself all she liked with the musical instruments in his castle. He had business to attend to, he told her, and must leave, and gave the middle daughter the same instructions he had given her older sister. She could roam anywhere in the castle and indulge her heart's content at the magical dining room table, but must not, under any circumstance, enter the room at the end of the corridor. At first the middle sister was content to admire and play the gleaming fiddles and violins, accordions and flutes. But it wasn't long before the notion grew on her, too, that she would like a glimpse of the forbidden room. Soon she couldn't even keep the beat to the music since thoughts about the room pushed everything else away. "My goodness, I might as well get it over with and take a look in that room or I'll never have a moment's peace." But alas! like her sister, the moment she opened the door the smallest crack, it flew wide open and powerfully drew her inside. Then the door slammed shut, sealing her in. When the enchanter returned, he knew at once where the middle sister had been. He charged into the forbidden room, shouting, "You are just like your sister! You will share her fate!" The next moment she, too, was transformed into a yellow songbird inside a gilded cage. Back home at the village, a long time had passed with no letter or message from either sister. The youngest daughter was beginning to worry. When the enchanter appeared at the village, she was very relieved and plied him with anxious questions. "Oh, they are very happy," he assured her. "So busy they don't even have time to write a note. But they both asked me to come here and tell you they'd like it very much if you came for a visit." The youngest sister agreed, though she thought it strange that neither sister had accompanied him. The youngest sister was also very impressed with the enchanter's castle, and the stacks of books in nearly every room. Because as I'm sure you have guessed by now, the evil enchanter could determine whatever was dearest to a young woman's heart and fill the castle with those very objects. The enchanter urged the daughter to make herself comfortable, saying that both her sisters would surely return soon, warning her not to go into the room at the end of the corridor, which was forbidden, and letting her know what to do when she got hungry. The youngest daughter would have been content for days waiting for her two sisters, with all the lovely illustrated books for her to pore through, but thoughts of that room at the end of the corridor simply grew and grew, until she couldn't focus on a page another moment. "Why is it such a terrible thing to look in that silly room?" she thought. She carefully stepped to the door at the end of the corridor. Ever so slowly she turned the latch so it didn't make a sound. Yet the moment she pushed the door open the smallest crack it flung fully open and the maiden was pulled inside, even though she grabbed hold of the doorway and tried to hold on all with all her might. Then slam! The door locked shut, sending a whoosh of wind that blew her hair and caused something behind her to rustle. Turning around, she noticed a bookstand in the middle of the room holding open a large dusty volume with some of its pages rustling from the wind. As she stepped toward the book, she noticed something else - at one end of the room were rows and stacks of gilded birdcages, each one containing a yellow songbird, and each bird chirping wildly. Tears welled up as she bemoaned her lost freedom, missing sisters, and the cruel fate that was sure to follow. Then it hit her. First her eldest sister had disappeared, then her next eldest sister. Then she finds herself mysteriously imprisoned in this room filled with caged birds. Could it be her sisters had also been trapped, then changed into birds? Could the other birds also be maidens suffering the same fate? And what about that large opened book - could it have a clue? Anxiously she searched the pages. It was a large spell book with frightening illustrations drawn in the margins and spells she could barely pronounce. Which one could undo her sisters' enchantment? A distant sound of footsteps meant the enchanter was entering the castsle. Frantically she skimmed the pages - there was a spell for making oneself irresistible, another for revealing a person's deepest desire, another for starting fire, one for taming dragons, one for turning creatures into mice... Her head pounded with exasperation. Closer and louder than ever came the footsteps until with a furious final stomp, the enchanter lunged into the room. "How dare you?" he roared. He pointed his bejeweled finger at her. At once, the youngest sister called out: "Bejackle wex!" Instantly all the caged birds were restored to full-length young maidens, including her two older sisters. Seeing the door open, they dashed out, pushing the surprised enchanter while rushing past. After the last maiden fled, he cursed in a rage, then turned to chase after them with fury. Alarmed, the youngest daughter saw him catching up. Before he could enchant them again she pointed and called out: "Reductus mousamillus!" - the last spell she had seen - and at once the enchanter shrunk into a tiny mouse. The maidens cheered but the youngest daughter knew that even as a mouse, he was still dangerous. A birdcase trailed behind one of the maiden's skirts (her spell didn't work perfectly after all), so quickly the youngest daughter took the birdcage, trapped the mouse into a corner, forced it into the cage, then shut and locked the cage door. The youngest daughter and her two sisters returned home, where they joyfully embraced their father. The youngest daughter set down the locked cage, and it wasn't long before their house cat found a way to unlatch the cage and have a morsel of mouse treat. And so the evil enchanter was vanquished. The sisters enjoyed a heartfelt family reunion, and all of them lived happily ever after.

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