

The Plight and Plot of Princess Penny



by Michael Mullin

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**For my Mom
Diane Dawson Mullin
3/5/34 – 7/26/11
who most certainly would have enjoyed this story**

This is the story of Penny Lemieux.
Most of it's strange, but all of it's true.
Or perhaps that should read the opposite way.
We won't ever be certain. (Well . . . at least not today.)

Penny was the Royal Princess of the place from which she came.
It was one of those oddball, storybook kingdoms that doesn't have a name.
In fact the only thing she knew was its location "far away".
"Far away from what?" Penny wondered, but never bothered to say.

Penny's Dad was King (of course), and that made Mom the Queen.
As the Princess, Penny did her own thing. Last week she turned fifteen.
She kept to herself both day and night and had her own personal style:
Dark eyeliner, six earrings total and her crooked, smirking smile.

Her jet-black hair hung over one eye as it fell around her head.
Her favorite thing was a T-shirt saying: *My Stepmom Wants Me Dead*.
She didn't have a stepmom; it was a "fairy tale princess" joke.
She wore it for the stares she got and the shock it did evoke.

Her grade point average was just that: "average". Her report cards showed mostly Cs.
The kids at school avoided her like she had some contagious disease.
The collective opinion was that Princess Penny was just all kinds of mean
And all caught up in what was known as the "V.I.P. Royalty" scene.
Her reputation was she was vain and liked things done *her* way.
They said she tried on shoes and jewelry, and counted her money all day.

Although indeed Penny had no friends, those other things were untrue.
People misjudged her left and right from their ignorant point of view.
When kids talk of one who is not in the group, it's easiest just to agree.
And repeat the rumors of nasty behavior they never did actually see.
With confidence (and more than a little frustration), Princess Penny could surmise
That one girl in particular had started all these lies.
A teenage diva named Darcy DeLupus, in an act of social survival,
Had targeted Penny as a first-class freak and called the girl her rival.

The situation irked the Princess, but she didn't let it show.
She simply stayed away from places Darcy's crowd would go.
You'd think someone with Royal Status could easily get payback.
But the solution came from an unlikely place: a convenience store magazine rack.

At the end of a boring article on forest fire prevention,
A quarter-page ad with big bold type caught Princess Penny's attention.
Reading the headline: "got enemies?" made Penny feel oddly nervous.
Someone who called herself a witch was selling an unusual service.

Penny read the ad with haste, just getting the general gist.
Standing in the store, flipping and skimming, there was some information she missed.
But she learned this advertising entrepreneur had made it her business task
To exact revenge against anyone. As a client, you need only ask . . .
(... and pay the small nominal fee that's due.)
(... and sign a contract that placed liability with you.)

Although Penny had no experience with this, it seemed like a pretty good deal.
Darcy would get what she had coming if this "dark magic" stuff was for real.
Excited, Penny paid for the magazine and rushed home to answer the ad.
She had a habit of acting on ideas, *then* deciding the good from the bad.

The next morning she got up before the sun and filled a modest sack.
Some light provisions for the uncharted walk, and more for the charted walk back.
Her trek took her into a dark and dreary (yet stereotypical) wood.
Where thick trees and strange noises gave her a chill she ignored as best as she could.

When she came to a ravine with a rickety bridge, she stopped to contemplate.
No way could this broken-down, splintered thing hold even her modest weight.
Before she had time to make a plan, a strange creature came down from a tree.
A short, wrinkled troll with big bug eyes and a scraggly gray goatee.
He said his name was Jink, and she saw his teeth were spotted with moss.
She rolled her eyes and said: "Let me guess. I answer your question to cross."
Jink looked confused. "I've no mystical questions." Then he asked the regular kind:
"Why are you here?" "Where are you going?" and "Whom do you hope to find?"

She didn't care to share her story – or even her name – with this thing.
Although he probably lived nearby, what assistance could he bring?
If it weren't for the precarious bridge ahead, she would have just kept walking.
But she was stuck with the smelly troll who wouldn't stop his talking.

He insisted that she heed his warnings and make her intentions clear.
Couldn't she sense the dangerous things that were dangerously near?
She didn't seem to him the type to have business in these parts.
She looked more at home at a garden party, being served fizzy juice and tarts.

"How rude!" thought Penny, who long ago had learned her right from wrong.
She'd decide for herself (*thank you much*) where she did and didn't belong.
These woods lacked a certain pleasantness, but they were part of all outdoors.
"My business," she finally told the troll, "is simply no business of yours!"

She stepped upon the wobbly bridge, determined not to show her fear.
Just when she thought he might call to her, Jink seemed to disappear.
On shaky legs she made it across. The whole walk she held her breath.
Three times a board broke under her foot, and she almost fell to her death.

She expected a dark and ominous castle on a treacherous, rocky cliff,
But the witch's address was a quaint little cottage that made her wonder if
She'd come to the wrong location or was somehow else mistaken.
Could the resident here cook up evil revenge that she could have a stake in?
The welcome mat was made of shortbread. The knocker was a candy cane.
The whole place had a very UN-witchlike quality that Penny could not explain.
Before she could knock she heard a click, and the door swung open wide.
A little old lady in an apron dress said: "Good morning! Please, do come inside!"

The cottage room was neat and clean. It smelled like cinnamon toast.
There was nothing scary about it at all (which was the thing that scared Penny the most!)
Her hostess was not very tall at all. She and Penny saw eye-to-eye.
Which was distracting for the witch's left one was milked over with some kind of sty.
The only thing creepier than that it seemed was her wrinkled, elastic smile.
Penny made small talk about the house and asked if she'd lived here a while.
She'd been there two years. The previous owner was part of the local coven,
Until two small children came to visit. There was some mishap with her oven.
That story sounded suspicious to Penny, who was not so easily shocked.
"Poor thing," said the witch, "But I got the place cheap, and the pantry was fully stocked!"

Penny felt she must ask a question, before things got too bizarre:
"Perhaps ... I could see some demonstration that you are what you say you are?"
Offended, the witch's eyes narrowed to slits. In a harsh-sounding whisper she said:
"Perhaps I could demonstrate thirty-eight ways that you could wind up dead."
The Princess thought that was a stupid reply. "Prove it by killing me?
I came all this way to give you a job. I'm the one paying your fee."

The witch thought for a moment. She had to concede, the young girl did make sense.
So she turned a stool into a rat instead (with some razzle-dazzle suspense).
The transformation was impressive, despite the residual slime.
But truth be told, it was the witch's anger that said this was no waste of time.
In that two-second flash of a moment, Penny saw evil on the old woman's face.
A spell was the way to get back at Darcy. She was certainly in the right place.

Penny explained how she needed revenge on a girl who was ruining her life.
Spreading lies, pulling pranks and causing all kinds of strife.
The Princess asked: "How much would it would cost to turn *her* into a rat?"
But the witch just shook her head and said: "I'd have to advise against that."
She explained how she once made a frog from a prince, and another she turned into a beast.
As for effective spells, however, she liked transformation the least.
She mentioned doing it one other time in the course of recent history.
"Some do-gooder always reverses the spell," she sighed with an air of mystery.

Turning her attention back to Penny, the witch opened the pantry door.
Shelf after shelf of peculiar bottles were stacked from ceiling to floor.

Perusing the array of magical ingredients, she offered to mix up a brew.
For full-fee, upfront pay, she explained that one of two potions would do.
The first (a drink) would make this Mean Girl see the error of her ways.
The other, when inhaled, would produce facial warts for a hundred and nineteen days.
Penny considered both of the choices. Was this some morality test?
She took out her platinum VISA card. "That second one would be best."

The witch nodded and asked for "the element" as she examined the credit card.
"The *who-what-now?*" asked Princess Penny, completely caught off guard.
She discovered she needed a *piece* of her enemy. It said so in the ad.
The witch handed the credit card back to the Princess. No job. No fee. How sad.
"I didn't read the whole thing," Penny confessed. "Or I read it, and then I forgot."
"Too bad," said the witch. "I need something to work with. A lock of her hair
or some snot."

Penny apologized for not coming prepared and told the witch she'd return.
Getting some "piece" of Darcy DeLupus was now her only concern.

On the walk home, Jink showed up again and followed her most of the way.
And just like before, he wasn't exactly at a loss for things to say.
He scolded her for visiting the cottage. His patience was wearing thin.
"Don't you ever *read*," he pleaded his case, "any stories like the one you're *in*?
You pay an old hag to give you lessons in the fine art of being cruel,
So you can attack some misguided girl who also attends your school?
Do you think your dark deed will earn you a place within the popular crowd?
That sounds like a really well-thought-out plan. Your parents must be proud."

Penny usually appreciated sarcasm, but not from this eavesdropping elf.
"You don't need a witch!" Jink called as she ran. "Take care of your problems yourself!"
That's just what Penny thought she was doing. So what if she got assistance?
Her plan will work just fine if that nosy troll-thing keeps his distance.

Sooner than expected, Penny got her chance. After school the very next day,
She found you-know-who with her gang of friends in a popular café.
There were Brian and Ryan from the soccer team, and little Annabelle Krupp,
Who followed Darcy's every move like some well-trained, short-leash pup.
Britney Brady and Peter Fink sat romantically hand in hand,
And a boy named Trevor was cracking jokes that no one could understand.

At the center of the group, as if holding court, were Darcy and her boyfriend Steve.
They held the group's undying attention in a way Penny found hard to believe.
Steve was handsome and physically sculpted like a guy in a billboard ad,
But he was quite the insufferable jerk, whose ego was pathetically sad.
Penny's parents (in the political sense) were the actual King and Queen.
But Steve and Darcy held those titles when it came to the teenager scene.

Penny recognized one other kid from Medieval History class.

The group whispered and giggled just loud enough to make it awkward for her to pass.
The mocking continued as she waited in line and ordered a jasmine tea.
If it weren't for the necessary task at hand, this was the last place she wanted to be.

At a corner table she tried to look busy by taking out some books,
But her peripheral vision told the *real* story of the teasing, hurtful looks.
She needed to think of a way to approach without giving the wrong impression,
And then some part of Darcy had to become her next possession.
She could ask to borrow a hairbrush and hear: "Are you from outer space?"
Or shout some taunting insults and hope that Darcy spits in her face.

While Penny schemed she heard them argue about homework due the next morning.
None of them had the correct assignment, so Darcy issued a warning:
"Get me that paper, and get it quick! This is no longer a friendly chat!"
She yelled at her friends like a witch (or at least like something that rhymes with that).

Penny knew the assignment in question was a long division worksheet.
In a second she found her copy and was getting up out of her seat.
The whole group stared as Penny approached. The contempt was hard to ignore.
But Penny smiled her friendliest smile and asked: "Is this what you're looking for?"
Darcy glared. Her guard went up. Why would *the Princess* help out?
There must be a catch. Some ulterior motive. Darcy had reason to doubt.

"I guess not," Penny said to the awkward silence, and then she turned to go,
But Darcy snatched the page from her to let everybody know
That *she* was in charge here and *she* would decide when any conversation
Began or changed or came to an end. This was a *Darcy* situation.
But the impulsive act made Darcy cry out. The result was unexpected:
A nasty slice of a paper cut that was bound to get infected.
Darcy immediately blamed "the Princess" for causing her finger to bleed.
While her friends (particularly Annabelle) attended her every need.
Penny took the worksheet back and said: "I do believe this is mine."
On the page was a quarter-sized stain of blood. She thought: "That should do just fine."

The next day she journeyed back to the witch with a sense of expertise.
Even the bridge was magically fixed, which made crossing it a breeze.
The witch welcomed her in with that stretchy smile and offered her a seat.
If things went well, Penny reminded herself, they'd never again have to meet.

Seeing the rat from her previous visit was once again a stool,
Penny couldn't help thinking a transformed Darcy would be an epic kind of cool.
The witch held out her bony hand and accepted the bloodstained paper.
She nodded approval then opened the pantry to prepare the sinister vapor.
This time Penny got a much closer look at all the bottles inside.
Each one had a clearly written label – and that was how she spied
On the far left side, about waist high, one shaped like an hourglass,

Was labeled: “Transformation”. Could she let this opportunity pass?
The witch found what she was looking for, and when she turned her back,
Penny thought “Nope” and slipped the bottle into her shoulder sack.
She felt a kind of rush from stealing that made it hard to think.
So she followed the witch, who hummed a tune all the way to the kitchen sink.

Penny’s assumptions were again proven wrong. First the *non*-witch house and talk,
Now she saw this witch’s “cauldron” was a stainless steel, stir-fry wok!
The ingredients included insect wings and a strong-smelling, purple powder.
When heated, the mixture bubbled up thick like a pot of New England clam chowder.
The witch warned her not to get too close as she gathered the steam in a vial.
But Penny was thinking of her stolen bottle, and a Darcy Frog made her smile.

The instructions were simple: open the lid where your enemy can breathe it in.
The physical effect will take only seconds, followed by endless chagrin.
Making a note to look up “chagrin” when she got back home to the castle,
Penny thanked the witch and apologized again for her previous visit’s hassle.

Her mind filled with thoughts of transformation, Penny was not quite done.
“You said you made a beast and a frog. What was the other one?”
All the witch would say about *that* spell was that it would *never* be broken.
No “love’s first kiss” or “seeing the good” or the touch of some “treasured token”.
Clearly the witch did not like having her handiwork reversed.
Penny concluded she’d better get going before she got caught and cursed.

Walking back through the woods, Penny finally felt like she was in control.
She would get her long-overdue revenge, and she didn’t have to sell her soul.
She peeked in her bag at the stolen bottle when she was far enough away from the witch.
But at that moment she heard a strange wheezing rise up from a nearby ditch.
She left the path to investigate and found Jink bent down by a tree.
She called to him: “Are you alright?” He had no wounds she could see.
With labored breathing he said he was fine. Just a mild asthma attack.
“I was up all night repairing that bridge, ‘cause I knew that you’d be back.”
Penny was a bit surprised and touched that he’d do a thing so kind.
“Are you still going through with your plan?” he asked. “Are you that much out of your
mind?”

The Princess still couldn’t comprehend why this creature cared so much.
For all she knew, he slept in a tree and ate leaves and bugs and such.
He told her his reason without being asked: “A witch’s spell is a horrible thing.
You do not want responsibility for the sadness it can bring.”
Although she was finally listening to him, Penny couldn’t bring herself to agree.
“What about *my* years of hurt and sadness? All the suffering that Darcy’s caused *me*?”
“Determining who deserves what,” Jink told her, “is not within your sight.
Vengeful acts of deliberate cruelty will never set things right.”
Pushing her hair from her face, Penny shrugged and said: “Nice guys finish last.”
But she proved his point by making such claims with no knowledge of his past.

She left him there after making sure his breathing was back to normal. She had to hurry, for that night her school hosted its semi-annual semi-formal. When Darcy got her “Belle of the Ball” award, Penny would make her move. She’d use the transformation spell. She didn’t care who might disapprove.

Finding a gown was not a problem; she had many from which to choose. She opted for purple, mid-calf length, above canvas, high-top shoes. Most girls went with a date or friends, but Penny would take her chances. When she got there, the kids all did double takes. (She’d never been to any school dances.) Darcy and Steve stood full of themselves like a catalog bride and groom. Penny felt her lunch might make a comeback, so she stopped in the little girls’ room.

The evening dragged on with pathetic songs about “shaking it all night long”. The awful lyrics and monotonous beats inspired dance moves that were just plain wrong. After what seemed like something just short of forever, Steve and Darcy were called to the stage.

They each got a crown made of golden foil that made them look half their age.

Reminded of a scene from a horror story, Penny imagined blood dumped on Darcy’s head. But the effects of the stolen, dark-magical potion would have to be the show instead.

Darcy would soon be a frog . . . or a rat . . . or maybe some other creature. She realized she had no way of knowing the exact nature of the night’s main feature.

Penny made her way through the adoring fans with hardly a hint of detection, When she opened the bottle, a hazy mist wafted up in Darcy’s direction. Onstage, Darcy made a sour face that proved she breathed it in. Penny smiled and waited for the awesome reptilian freak show to begin.

But nothing happened. No transformation. No slimy long tail or webbed feet. Darcy still looked like the poster girl for superiority and conceit. She locked eyes with Penny, put her hands on her hips and spoke into the mic: “Look who’s graced us with her *royal* presence! It’s the Princess we all dislike.” “WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT ME?!” Penny shouted, but Darcy kept her cool. “You read letters and numbers backwards and mixed,” she said. “That’s why you’re dumb in school.”

Penny’s jaw dropped in disbelief; the blood rushed hot to her face. Darcy humiliated her again. She had to get out of that place. As she ran for the door, she felt the chilling bite of building, mocking laughter. It was only a few kids, but Penny had no interest in seeing what happened after.

Once outside she lost the battle to hold back the rush of tears. Now the whole school knew the embarrassing truth she’d kept secret all these years. She’d been taking tests and doing therapy to help what was wrong with her brain. “Not wrong, but *different*,” her parents would say to comfort and explain.

But words like that never helped her much. There was no comfort to be found. She took out the other potion (the one she *paid* for) and smashed it on the ground. How could that spell leave Darcy unchanged? What the heck was going on? Unless that “witch” was a scam-artist thief, running some kind of con. The rat-from-a-stool was smoke and mirrors! A parlor trick! She *knew* it! But the sad truth was, there was no going back. She had her chance, and she blew it. On the way home she vowed to quit school and stop speaking to everyone, She had no idea that her night of surprises had only just begun.

At the castle gate was Jink the Troll, looking worried and distinctly unclean. Knowing he was an eavesdropping stalker, she figured he saw the whole scene. Penny didn’t want his “I told you so” lecture, but that speech was not on his docket. He produced a tissue that was surprisingly fresh (given the general filth of his pocket).

“Thanks,” said Penny as she wiped her eyes, not wanting him to see her so sad. He did fix that bridge, and now he’s here with a tissue. Perhaps Jink wasn’t so bad. When he said: “I suspect some important parts of your story remain untold.” She conceded: “You have that talked-about wisdom that comes with being old.” He flapped his arms in a tantrum of sorts, as if controlled by a stealth puppeteer. “And you have the judgmental ways of a teen. I’m much younger than I appear.”

Penny shrugged her bony shoulders. Like she cared when Jink was born. But he had been nice, so she told him this and tried not to make it forlorn.
*When we were kids, Darcy and I were inseparable best friends.
Then we had a falling out with no effort to make amends.*
She looked at Jink as if to say: “That’s it,” but he held her stare.
“Wow! What vivid detail!” he exclaimed. “I feel like I was there!
One minor suggestion – just thinking out loud. I hope it’s not absurd,
But you might want to try expanding the part *where something actually occurred.*”

She hated the way Jink called her out and made her think things through. With nothing to lose, she told the whole story (which happened to be true):

*“I told Darcy about my learning problem. How it bugged me like a curse.
Reading letters and numbers was sometimes hard, and other times it was worse.
She vowed to keep my secret forever. She even helped in each early grade.
And then one day she told me the time had come for my side of the trade.
I realized her help - and even her friendship - were half of some twisted deal.
She had a design for a “social system” she was anxious to reveal.
Created so classmates would know their place. She saw status as a thing to enforce.
When I asked her where our “place” would be, she said: “Duh! On top, of course!”
I told her I’d never be part of such a conceited, mean-spirited plan.
And from that moment on, everything changed. Our enmity began.”*

When Penny finished this second version, Jink seemed satisfied. But she still couldn’t figure out why he cared, no matter how hard she tried.

He said he was sorry that happened to her. When she brushed him off, he asked:
“Why do you think you’re the only one with a troubled, unfortunate past?”

“It’s not that,” she assured him as she opened the gate. “I’ve just got a lot on my mind.
I appreciate you coming to help me out. You’ve been a pest, but not unkind.”
She was still upset that the witch was a fraud, and she’d gotten a very raw deal.
But Jink said he knew *from personal experience* the witch’s magic was real.
All wrapped up in her own life’s disaster, Penny didn’t get the hint.
She couldn’t help thinking he needed a bath (or at least a strong breath mint).

Jink didn’t know what else he could do. Should he drop to his knees and plea?
“Then maybe there’s something,” he finally muttered, “that you could do for me.”
Penny couldn’t believe her ears. “So you were nice to get something in return?
Gee, where have I heard *that* before?” she added with a glare of spurn.
“No, no,” Jink insisted. “You misunderstood. I’m not that kind of guy. ”
But the turn of her back and the slam of the gate said clearly: “goodnight and goodbye”.

Inside the castle, Penny snuck upstairs so her parents wouldn’t know she was there.
Which was a bad idea, for in her room she found the witch in her reading chair!
She’d abandoned the “grandma’s kitchen” look and was now dressed all in black.
When she asked: “How’s my little thief tonight?” she gave Penny a panic attack.
Before the Princess knew what was up, the room filled with crimson smoke.
When it cleared she was back in the witch’s cottage and realized this was no joke.

She found herself locked in an iron cage that hung from a ceiling beam.
So frightened was Penny by the turn of events, she’d forgotten how to scream.
Not that a scream would have done much good, out there in the darkened forest.
It was not like she’d be found and saved by some conveniently passing tourist.

The witch held the bottle Penny stole from her in her spotted, wrinkled fist.
She laughed. The bottle was obviously mislabeled. This was a truth-telling mist!
The ancient, all-natural spell gets an honest answer to any one question.
“But that’s neither here nor there,” the witch added. “Tonight’s about *your* indiscretion.”

But Penny didn’t remember asking a question when Darcy was up on that stage.
Then it came to her: “*What do you know about me?!*” she’d yelled in a fit of rage.
The potion kicked in, the secret came out, and Penny was crushed with shame.
And the worst part was, Penny made her own mess. She had only herself to blame!

In the kitchen the witch set out four small bottles, the wok and a mason jar.
She looked like an eerie, late-night version of a Food Network reality star.
She returned to the pantry and rifled through bottles, knocking her hat askew.
“I’m out of snakeskin,” she called to Penny. “Did you happen to steal that, too?”
Penny called back an emphatic “no”, like a sworn-in eagle scout.
The witch walked to the cage and stroked Penny’s hair, then rudely plucked one out.
“You won’t be needing this,” she said in a voice that was way too lighthearted.

“Sit tight,” she added, “I’ll be back before morning. Then we’ll get this party started.”

The witch hobbled slowly out the cottage front door with a laugh that made Penny feel ill. A minute later she heard a BUMP at the window. A small, grubby hand grabbed the sill.

Penny knew it was Jink even before he climbed up and fell clumsily into the room.

She hoped for a rescue, but after their last meeting she knew she couldn’t assume.

He repeated his speech on the dangers of witches with all of their spells and potions.

“You can’t be in charge of ruining a life,” he said. “No matter how strong your emotions.”

“Perhaps we can talk outside?” she pleaded. Each second her hopes were diminished.

“If I don’t get out of this cage very soon, my days as a human are finished.”

“Wouldn’t that suck,” muttered Jink to himself as he took down the key from its hook.

When he told her she had to stay locked up, she said: “Thanks, but I’d just rather book.”

“To where?” he asked her. “Back home to the castle? Do you really think that’s wise?”

A person who crosses a witch more than once is a person who usually dies.”

Penny thought *any* plan was better than waiting for the angry witch to return.

“You weren’t safe the last time you were home,” he reminded. “Are you ever going to learn?”

Penny found it odd that Jink knew so much. He went straight to the hidden key.

Then her eyes went wide with the spark of discovery. Could it actually, possibly be?

Jink’s story was sketchy. He wasn’t exactly the model of communication,

But she now had a hunch: “Are *you* the witch’s not-talked-about third transformation?”

He offered a sad kind of smile and nodded enough to remove any doubt.

“Maybe,” he said, “you can help me, now that you (finally) figured it out.”

Jink explained how he was unable to talk about the things that had happened to him.

It was a condition of the spell cast years ago, which made his life grim (and Grimm).

Excited, Penny said: “We just need a ‘do-gooder’ to reverse the spell and you’re free.”

Jink sighed with exhaustion making Penny realize: “Oh, wait. The do-gooder. That’s *me*?”

Jink touched his nose and pointed to her, then gave her an all-knowing wink.

It was time to inspire Princess Penny to action (before she had time to think).

He stood on a chair and spoke in earnest, like a king in a Shakespeare play:

“The witch is the enemy. She must be defeated before the break of day!”

“Defeated?” asked Penny. “Are we playing checkers? That kind of plan seems futile.”

“That’s fairy tale speak for killing,” he told her. “The method can even be brutal.”

“How do we do that?” Penny asked. “With her magic and me in here.”

She found it doubtful that a worthwhile solution would suddenly appear.

Jink told her she wasn’t alone in knowing the witch had magic for sale.

“I ordered a Rigor Mortis spell and sent the element by mail.

I secretly watched her make the brew so the process was crystal clear.”

Penny listened, but couldn’t help thinking to herself: “What mailman comes out here???”

“When she was finished,” Jink continued, “I replicated the spell on my own,

Using an element and ingredients I took from the witch and a cauldron I got on loan.”

“So you stole from her, too?” Penny asked in surprise. “Then how come I got caught?”

“I didn’t take whole bottles,” Jink replied. “My actions came after some *thought*.”

“Whatever,” said Penny. “Can’t we splash her with water? If she melts, that would be ideal.” Jink took a small bottle from a fold in his sock, and said: “Focus. And please . . . get real.”

He popped off the cork and added small pieces of what looked like dried-up fruit.

Penny’s mind wandered. “So before the spell . . . were you, like . . . you know . . . cute?”

“I’m not a prince, if that’s what you’re getting at. The spell wasn’t meant for me.”

Jink rolled his eyes at the silly question. “Never mind,” she said sheepishly.

“So if we ‘defeat’ her,” Penny changed the subject, “your spell will be reversed?”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Jink shrugged in reply. “But first things must come first.

When the witch comes back, I must calmly and coolly pour this potion on her head.”

“Calmly and coolly?” Penny skeptically asked. Then thought: “That’s it. I’m dead.”

He explained as the potion soaks into her skin, the witch won’t be able to move.

“And I stay locked up?” Penny asked in a tone that showed she didn’t approve.

Jink nodded. “I can’t let you out. Don’t you see? She can’t know that anything’s changed.”

“But I *DO* know,” said the witch as she stood in the door, holding snakeskin and looking deranged.

Penny screamed like a banshee, then Jink did too, and he let the bottle fly.

When it smashed on the witch’s pointed black boots, Penny felt herself starting to cry.

The witch, on the other hand, laughed then yelled: “You’re *done*, you little *brat!*”

“And as for *your* plan,” she sneered at Jink. “My spells don’t work like that!”

With evil in her eyes (Penny knew that look!) the witch turned for the pantry door.

But she just bent at the waist in an awkward twist. Her feet were stuck to the floor!

She writhed and cursed, but they wouldn’t budge. The potion had had some effect!

When her legs froze, Jink yelled: “It’s creeping up!” And they all knew that he was correct.

“You *fools!*” the witch shouted. She tried to sound mean, but she was clearly in a panic.

When the spell reached her waist she flailed her arms in a way that was wildly manic.

Jink and Penny watched in awe as the rigor mortis continued its steady rise.

The all-powerful witch was being “defeated” right before their eyes.

Suddenly Penny had a panic of her own, and she rattled the iron lock.

“The key!!! Let me out!!!” she shouted at Jink who stood frozen aghast in shock.

He snapped out of his trance and set Penny free as the spell froze the witch’s left arm.

Penny raced to the pantry and grabbed a potion before the witch bought the farm.

She held the open bottle to the face of the witch, who turned her nose at the stink.

Knowing the mist had entered her lungs, Penny asked: “How do you reverse the spell on Jink?”

The witch’s eyes widened in angry surprise. She’d been duped by her own truth mist!

Through gritted teeth she answered the question, despite her attempts to resist:

First you must wait for a crescent moon, and while wearing a true king’s crown.

(Jink thought the instructions might not be simple, so he scampered to write them down.)

You must hold eight apple seeds under your tongue and submerge yourself in a lake.

You only have one chance to get it right. The spell’s permanent if you make a mistake.

With that, the stiffness rose up her neck and past the point of her chin.

She fell silent (of course) then her eyes iced over as the blood drained away from her skin.

Penny and Jink just stood and stared, not believing what they had just seen.

The witch now looked like some spooky decoration you'd put out on Halloween.

"Thanks," Penny said and she patted Jink's shoulder. "You pretty much saved my life."

"I'd say we're even," said Jink, showing his notes. Then he took out a pocketknife.

He cut pieces of rope and wrapped up the witch leaving just a little slack.

Penny saw he was making some kind of harness to carry the corpse on his back.

"You should get home," Jink said to the Princess. "Your parents will be worried sick.

I'll bury the stiff somewhere deep in the woods. I brought my shovel and pick."

Her fear was gone, but a new kind of nervous made Penny want to joke.

She knew Jink had a sarcastic side, so she couldn't resist one poke:

"When you threw that bottle, was that 'cool' or 'calm'? It was hard to know for sure."

"Shut it," said Jink. "Your scream freaked me out. It wasn't exactly mature."

"Point taken," said Penny. The pace of her heartbeat had just then begun to slow down.

"We'll meet Tuesday night at Whisper Lake. You bring the seeds, and I'll bring the crown."

The next night Penny hung out by herself, which was pretty much routine.

(A decaf tea and a YA novel about a vampire who was half machine.)

Tuesday was only two days away, but to Penny it seemed like longer.

She'd noticed her feelings for Jink as a friend went from zero to something stronger.

She thought about taking a walk in the woods and perhaps running into him there.

But that seemed lame. She didn't *like-like* him. And he probably didn't care.

On Tuesday night she'd help him change back to whatever he was before.

Then they'd part ways, and she'd have to deal with an all-out Darcy war.

Her return to school the next day, however, was not what she expected.

Instead of an insult, Darcy said "Hey." (A greeting Penny figured was misdirected.)

"I don't know why I told your secret," she continued with a look of guilt.

She seemed to be truly, *believably* sorry – yet that wasn't how Darcy was built.

"It actually wasn't your fault," Penny told her. "I'd explain, but it's complicated."

Then out of nowhere came that jock-strap jerk. The one whom Darcy dated.

"You buggin' my girl?" Steve barked at Penny, who rolled her eyes at the threat.

"It's *fine*," Darcy growled, then she shooed him away before she got too upset.

"She's still stuck-up," Steve added as he left. "I thought that was well understood."

Penny thought that a mirror and a dictionary might do him a world of good.

"Anyway," Darcy tried to continue, but struggled to find words to say.

When she managed: "Well ... yeah", Penny grabbed her books and replied: "Okay."

As she walked to class, Penny tried to imagine what looked like it could be a truce.

But was she just supposed to forgive and forget all the years of bullying abuse?

Penny hoped it was sincere, but had to take everything into consideration.

Like the idea that perhaps this new Friendly Darcy was just an affectation.

That night, when the moon showed its crescent form, Penny made her way to the lake.

(Penny's father, the King, thought crowns were "flashy", so his was easy to take.)

She found Jink on a rock on the eastern shore, fidgeting like a nervous wreck.

Instead of "hello", he called over to her: "Where were you? You're late. What the heck?"

“I am?” thought Penny, knowing the moon and the lake weren’t going anywhere.
But she didn’t come to tease or argue; that wouldn’t exactly be fair.
Worry and fear put a look on his face that was oddly cold. Even ruthless.
He respectfully took the crown from Penny and said: “Thanks.” Then added: “Let’s do this.”
Walking in so the water was up to his knees, he suddenly stopped as if stuck.
Penny waded in too and stood by his side. Then she kissed his cheek for luck.
He took out a pouch that had the eight seeds, plus several more reserves.
In case he dropped and lost any of them (which of course, he did, due to nerves).
As the correctly counted number of seeds were carefully fixed in place,
Penny felt a strange sadness that this was the last she’d see of his ugly face.

When he dunked himself under, the water glowed green like a radioactive slime.
Something magical was definitely going on, and Penny wondered just how much time
Did he need to hold his breath before the re-transformation was done.
Whatever happened, she knew the witch was dead, and that she and Jink had won.

After what seemed like the longest half-minute Princess Penny had ever endured,
Jink stood up, all wet and panting, and Penny thought he looked (*ahem!*) . . . cured.
His dark, curly hair spilled from under the crown. He had blue-as-a-summer-sky eyes.
He was so unlike the Jink Penny knew, the change caught her a bit by surpris.
Besides the obvious, physical attraction, Penny felt some hint of recognition.
There was something familiar in his bookishly charming rock star restored condition.
When he took off the crown and handed it back, it came to her sure enough.
He looked like Darcy’s boyfriend Steve, only not as coiffed and buff.
She must have said “Steve” out loud without knowing as they stood and stared at each other,
Because Jink nodded and responded by simply saying: “Steve is my brother.”

“Steve is your *what-now?*” Penny asked in a way that put a strange look on her face.
Jink smiled. “The witch didn’t like the way he acted, but I volunteered to take his place.”
It made sense to Penny, because Steve was a jerk like those others the witch had cursed.
“I tried to negotiate,” Jink said with a shrug, “but she refused to be coerced.”

The way these stories go, Penny recalled, they should now be in love and kiss.
She fearfully wondered if Jink thought that too, so she offered a quick: “How about this? . . .
You come back to school after a good long shower and a change into normal clothes.
We’ll hang out, walk to class, sit together at lunch. We’ll just see how it goes.”
Jink was fine with that slow-speed plan. He’d been out of the loop for a while.
He was scared to death to be part of a couple, but he agreed with a confident smile.

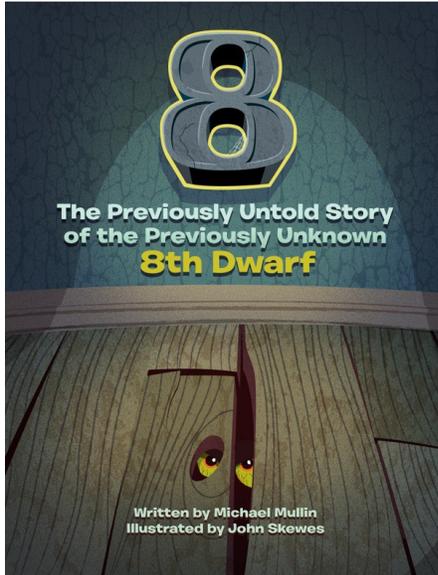
And that’s how it went the next day at school. Jink and Penny shared quality time.
What a pleasant change to have neither tormentors nor social ladders to climb!
At their lockers Darcy accosted Penny and asked her: “Who’s your friend?”
“Don’t even,” said Penny as her story came to what is *for you, the reader*

The End

MY STEPMOM
WANTS ME
DEAD



Also available by Michael Mullin



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