

A Strange Week For King Melchion The Despicable

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Introduction

In the magical land of Generica, a wondrous region ruled by the harsh and not particularly fair King Melchion the Despicable, you are Davor, a humble wizard trying to make his way in life. Having no time for those earnest young men and women with frighteningly unblinking stares, who waste their magical talents on adventure and do-gooding, and lacking the raw talent to be one of those pointy-bearded cretins who sits on top of a mountain plotting world domination, you offer your services to those who can pay for the privilege. Usually you spend your time ridding cellars of rats or casting love enchantments for pimply teens. But today you are to be hired by a client with a very different problem indeed.

The Rules

How to Use this Book

A cursory glance through the book will reveal that reading it in order makes no sense. The book is divided into numbered sections. After reading through these rules and the Background section, you should read section 1. From then on you should follow instructions in the text as to which section to turn to next.

Your Note Sheet

Below is your Note Sheet. Use it to record any objects you pick up and anything else the book instructs you to note down.

Note Sheet

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Now Begin

That is all you need to know to play *A Strange Week for King Melchion the Despicable*. Please read the section marked "Background" before turning to section 1.

BACKGROUND

'Time to get up! Time to get up! Time to – ow!'

You wipe the remnant of your latest alarm homunculus from your fist. You really need to stop doing that; such creatures aren't the easiest thing to create, and the price of puppy dogs' tails is rising steeply. Yawning and stretching, you clamber out of bed and pull your curtains open to allow the uninspiring grey trickle of dawn into your cluttered bedroom. Heading downstairs, you head over to your front door to check the job requests that have been posted through your letterbox. Today looks like it will be a busy one. Mrs. Hedgeweed is having trouble with some carnivorous cabbages and a party of orcs gatecrashed Baron Blueblood's soiree last night and are apparently still partying like its 3999 (Third Age of Man). Still, you have no intention of doing any work on an empty stomach.

You are just tucking into your third slice of toast when the door is thrown open and several hulking brutes wearing the armour of the Royal Guard burst through.

'That's him. Grab him!' barks the unshaven sergeant and before you have time to demand an explanation, mutter a cantrip or indeed, even swallow your toast, you are seized by your arms and hauled roughly out of your home. Unrelenting either in their harsh grip or their stony silence, your captors march you over the hills towards the king's castle. Without ceremony you are dragged through the great basalt gates and led into the sumptuous throne room, awash with purple silks and ornate tapestries, and deposited on the stone floor. The richly-robed courtiers stare and snigger at your plight as the king, sitting upon his ivory throne, assesses you with his penetrating emerald eyes, stoking his impeccably waxed beard. Behind the throne is a statue of Salibria, Goddess of Light and the king's patron deity, her countenance almost as severe as Melchion's own. Despite the heat of the throne room, you notice the king is wearing a full fur robe and sweat is pouring from his forehead down his handsome face.

'You are the wizard Davor?' he demands in a voice squeakier than how you remember it.

'That's right, your Majesty.'

'Leave us,' he commands. The assembled courtiers bow and one by one flock from the chamber, leaving only you, the king and the guardsmen.

'You too!' barks the king.

'But Sire -' starts the sergeant, before the king silences him with a wave of his hand.

'I am sure I am quite safe with this loyal citizen,' shouts the king, his voice verging on a shriek. 'Now begone!'

The guards bow and leave. Once all are firmly out of earshot, Melchion turns to you.

'I wish to hire your services,' says the king, his voice even softer than before. 'If you succeed you will be made my new court sorcerer, with all the money and privilege that comes with it. If you fail I shall have you boiled in your own blood. Do you accept?'

'Of course, oh high one,' you answer, knowing any other response would leave you with scant minutes to live. 'What service does your Lordship require?'

In response the king seizes his beard and tears it from his face to expose a perfectly smooth chin before pulling off his robe to reveal a silk shirt straining to contain a pair of breasts that could only be described as "heaving".

'Well, perhaps you can tell me why I'm turning into a woman!'

NOW TURN OVER

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1

You stare dumbfounded at your liege for several seconds before you can manage to voice a question.

'And, um, how complete is the change, if I may be so bold to ask, Sire?'

'Well, the royal orbs and sceptre are still present if that's what you mean,' Melchion snaps in his almost amusingly lady-like voice. 'But my fabulous beard has all fallen out, my muscular chest has swollen into a pair of melons, I sound higher-voiced than the chief eunuch and pulling my hunting trousers over these child-bearing hips is beyond impossible!'

'Is anyone else aware of your condition, Your Powerfulness?'

'No. My valet made a remark when he was dressing me two days ago and his head now sits on a pole at Southgate Bridge.'

'Very good, Sire,' you manage, the thought that such a fate is also quite likely for you playing heavily on your mind. 'And when did you first notice the change?'

'Three days ago; the night after the Full Moon Party.'

'I see. And did anything unusual happen at the party?'

'Not that I can remember,' he rubs his brow with delicate long fingers. 'Wait. There was that old woman.'

'Old woman, Your Legendariness?'

'Yes, some old crone asked for shelter during the party. I had my guards turf her out.'

'Well, that does not seem so odd, oh Awesome One.'

Melchion fixes you with a cold stare, as if trying to work out if you are mocking him. You can't help but feel it makes him look quite pretty. 'No, you are right,' he says eventually. 'I would have thought nothing of such an incident except as she was being removed, she apparently cursed me in the name of Salibria. And then the next day is when I first noticed these . . . changes.'

You rub your chin. 'I believe this old woman may have been a witch, Your Wonderfulness. Do I have your permission to cast a simple Detect Magic spell on your royal personage?'

'Go on then. But make it quick!'

You mumble the words of your cantrip, feeling the currents of magic that flood back from the king's form.

'Odd,' you remark. The king raises a slender black eyebrow. 'All I can sense is that a powerful magic is in place. It could be either an illusion so strong that it has convinced even yourself that you are becoming a woman, or it could be an enchantment that is actually changing your sex. How I fight the curse will depend on which it is.'

'So which is it? An illusion or an enchantment?'

You rub your chin again. You have no way of telling, but the king is unlikely to accept this. Will you treat the curse as an illusion (turn to 15) or an enchantment (turn to 97)?

2

You find the old-woman's cottage on the far side of town. If you were expecting something of the gingerbread variety, you may be disappointed to see its more stone cladding and thatched roof, surrounded by an overgrown garden where obscenely long red roses grow from the foliage. Following the stone path to the front door, you knock loudly on the green-painted wood. You hear a shuffling of feet before the door is slowly opened by a hunched old crone. Except now she looks like a stout, middle-aged woman. And now a young girl with flowing flaxen hair. And now the crone again.

'Can I help you?' the rapidly changing figure asks.

'Um, yes,' you manage. 'I hereby demand you remove your enchantment from King Melchion!'

'King Melchion?' she laughs. 'No king, he. Or should I say "she"? What I have done I did for his own good and no-one can get him through it but himself. Now, begone!'

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She starts to close the door. Will you insist she remove her curse (turn to 38), challenge her to a wizard's duel so you can force her to remove the spell if you win (turn to 11), or plead with her to restore the king to his former self (turn to 78)?

3

You are just getting into one of Droomsbury's "Forbidden Tomes" in your new chambers when you hear a woman's scream followed by another woman's scream and the sound of scampering feet on the flagstones. Pulling your chamber door open, you see a fair-haired chamber-maid dash down the corridor in a state of undress. Seconds later she is followed by Melchion in a similar lack of attire. Much to your amazement he is once again beardless and not only have his breasts returned but his openly-displayed nether-regions are now no longer those of a man!

'Don't just stand there gaping like a moron!' he shrieks. 'Get after that idiot girl before she alerts the whole castle!'

Nodding you dash after the chamber-maid. She races into the servants' quarters; a poorly-lit area filled with knobby faced-cooks, scarred men-at-arms, maids in all shapes and sizes, and wide-eyed page boys. They watch in surprise as you and the girl hurtle past them. A scar-faced usher steps in your way.

'Ere, wot do you want with our Millie, then?' he demands. Cursing, you wave your arms muttering a spell of transmogrification. The scarred usher becomes a scarred squirrel which goes racing off towards the kitchens.

'King's business,' you announce, which seems to dissuade the other servants reaching for makeshift weapons. You have lost sight of the girl however. Dashing down the corridor you saw her nip into, you arrive at a T-junction. The way left leads to the kitchens, right leads to the courtyard. Will you go left (turn to 28) or right (turn to 30)?

4

As you cry out the final word of your spell, there is a disgusting belching sound and a sickly yellowish fog surround everyone. There are calls of dismay and yelps as people collide with one another, completely blind in the murk. You are no better off than the others and twice you are nearly jabbed by a panicking swordsman. You finally manage to get your back to the wall and are just starting to ease yourself towards where you think the exit lies when the fog suddenly vanishes.

'Stay right there,' yells out a voice. 'I have your king!'

All turn towards the voice. The lead vagabond is behind a beautiful raven-haired woman in rich robes, a knife to her throat. Melchion must have lost his beard in the pandemonium! 'That's not our king,' says one confused guard. 'That's just some woman. There's our king,' he says pointing at you. The guards all close around you, the rest of the bandits backing off. The vagabond leader looks anew at his captive, brow furrowing in confusion.

'Alright, so I ain't got your king,' he admits. 'But unless you want this girl to get a second smile, you'd better let us go with the contents of that vault.'

'Who is she anyways?' drones one guard. 'And what happened to that fake king who was with them?'

'That must be her, she must have been disguised to look like me,' you declare. A look of betrayal spreads across Melchion's face. 'But I believe she must have been forced to act against her will. Stand aside!' You begin muttering a spell, both guards and vagabonds mystified as to what you are doing; everyone knows the king is no magician! Will you use an earthquake spell to help free Melchion (turn to 50) or let fly a lightning bolt at the bandit leader by turning to 93.

5

As you approach the castle you are surprised to see the gates are wide open and all the common people are cramming inside. Suspicious, you barge past them, receiving angry abuse as you push through to the courtyard.

'What is going on?' you ask a rotund red-faced woman.

'They're about to hang the king's assassin,' she replies.

'King Melcion's been assassinated?' you gasp.

'Yes, by some woman. Even disguised herself as the king for a while before she was found out. Pity, she's a pretty thing.'

Ignoring her, you force your way forward, emerging at the front of the crowd to see Melchion, head bowed standing on the platform of the gallows as a hooded hangman slips a noose round his slender neck. The king looks up at you and a faint look of hope glimmers in his exquisite emerald eyes. But can you help? If the masterbard is with you, turn to 55. If not, there is nothing you can do. The hangman pulls a lever and the trapdoor opens, the rope going taut as the king's neck snaps, his body dangling limply. Shaking your head, you barge back through the cheering crowd. You have failed your monarch and he has paid the ultimate price.

6

You bring the potion to the king. He grabs it hurriedly, dismissing his guards and courtiers from the throne room. As the last of them leaves, he tears off his false beard and gulps down the entire potion with one swig.

'It's working!' he cries. And sure enough thick dark hair begins sprouting from his chin. Soon he has a handsome beard once more. Only it doesn't stop there. The hair keeps on growing into a huge bush of fur. The hair on his head is growing thicker too and his eyes are turning from green to a bright orange as his frame begins to expand and his teeth turn into long, razor-sharp fangs! The monster that was Melchion gives a bestial roar, causing his guards to race back into the throne room, drawing their swords as they converge on the monstrosity before them. The creature bats them aside effortlessly, the multiple blows it receives seeming to have little to no effect. Will you aid the guards by blasting the beast with a fireball (turn to 25) or will you run while you still can (turn to 45)?

7

You climb the ladder into the treehouse, peeking inside to see a small figure crouched in the shadow, a brown cloak wrapped around it and hazel eyes watching you warily. You pull yourself inside, holding out your hands in the sign of peace. As you approach, you see the figure is a girl of maybe fourteen or fifteen winters, her freckled face peering out from behind an unruly mass of red hair.

'Who are you?' she asks, her voice brave considering the situation.

'I am Davor, a magician. Don't be afraid.'

'I'm not a bit afraid,' she says sweeping back her cloak to reveal a dagger clasped tightly in her hand. 'Now, what do you want?'

'I seek the masterbard. Do you know him?'

She laughs. 'Oh, I know the masterbard. But you won't. Not unless you can get the lyranthe back from those elves.' She points outside in the direction of the cheery singing.

'The elves stole his lyranthe?' you ask.

The girl nods. 'That they did. And the masterbard will stay hidden until it is returned.'

'Then I guess I'd best get it,' you sigh.

Climbing back down the rope ladder, you stalk onwards through the forest towards the melodious

singing. Crouching low in the undergrowth, you spy out the elves. They are beautiful in the way of folk who are fully aware of that fact, their fair hair complimenting their angular features as they laugh and sing around the campfire while the fairest one of all strums a lyranthe dreamily. How will you win it off him? Two spells suggest themselves. You could craft an illusion of a horde of orcs descending upon the fair folk in order to get them to flee, hopefully leaving the lyranthe behind (turn to 22 to try this). Alternatively, you could send a fireball careering into their campfire, hoping the ensuing explosion will cause them to run (turn to 29).

8

You decide to ask the king's minstrel if he knows where the masterbard can be found. He gives you an unfocused look, before hiccuping and smacking his lips.

'No one can ever find the mashter, burp, bard,' he slurs. ' 'cept them that knows o' course.'

'And who would that be?'

He puts his arm round you, a conspiratorial smile on his lips. 'Try, ol' Geherras, the shongsmith. You'll find him in the Fox and Badger.'

You thank the drunken minstrel and take your leave of the castle, heading into the city and the Fox and Badger tavern. It is as usual crowded with the great unwashed, whose hollering and regular brawls cover the tune a grey haired man in the corner is strumming on his lute.

'Gaheras?' you ask over the hubbub.

He looks up at you with eyes that look to have witnessed a life time of disappointment. 'Yes?'

'I seek the masterbard.'

He nods morosely. 'Travel to the top of Mount Golder.'

'And there I'll find him?'

He lets loose a humourless rumble of a laugh. 'No. There you'll find answers.'

It takes two days travelling south through the rolling plains of farmland to reach the foothills of Mount Golder, an almost flat peaked lump of rock that stands out for miles around. Another half-day is spent scrabbling up the stony sides, and many a time you are forced to use a spell of levitation to clear treacherous overhangs. At last you reach the top, surprised to see an almost featureless stone hall awaiting you.

You enter the torchlit building, empty apart from a dais where sits a completely hairless and powerfully build man, a cerulean headband around his bald head. He watches you approach without a word.

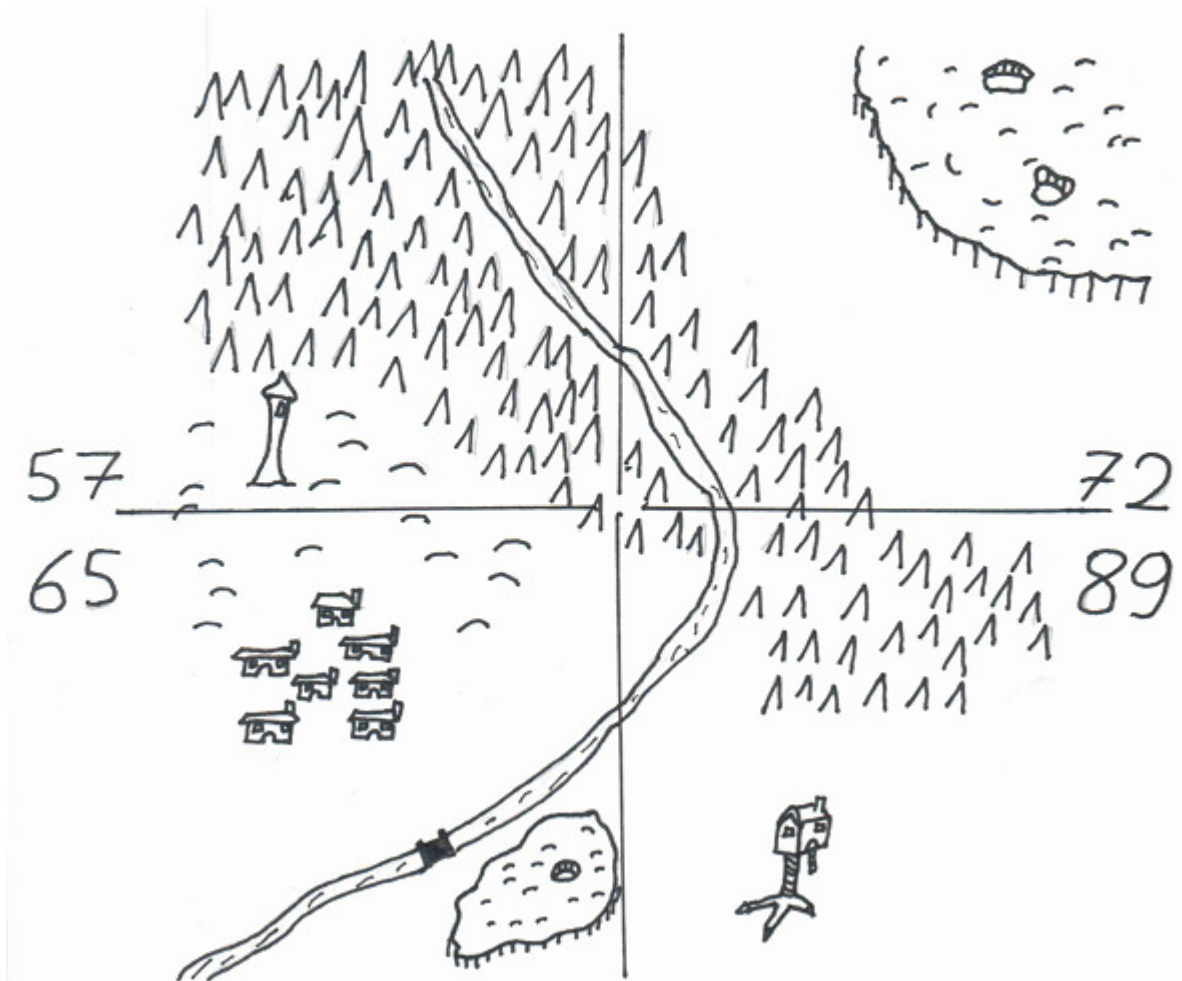
'Um, hello?' you try. This elicits no response. 'I seek the masterbard.'

The figure bursts into song in a voice so powerful and pure that it takes your breath away:

*'Away in the lands of the east,
Where dragons soar and ogres feast.
Beyond the flow of the bounty blue,
Beyond the heights scaled by few.
Where resides nature's kin,
You will find the bard within.'*

'Um, could you be more specific?' The figure does not respond, and continues to stare unblinking. You decide you had best leave and you begin the long journey back down the mountain.

In three days time you have reached the eastern borderlands of the kingdom and purchased a map of the area. But where should you begin your search for the masterbard? Turn to the reference of the quadrant of the map below that you would like to explore. You may return here later, though you may not search an area you have been to before.



If you are ready to give up on your search for the masterbard and return to the castle, turn to 47.

9

The king stands up, a sneer on his face and a finger pointed in condemnation.

'A doppelganger dares to try to take my place! Guards! Kill this creature!'

'Wait,' you protest, but the guards are already upon you with swords drawn, inclined to believe the man on the throne rather than the one before it. You cast a spell, conjuring a wall of flame before you, but this just convinces those assembled that you are not Melchion. You rush back out of the throne room, but the alarm is soon sounded. Your magical skills keep you hidden for some time before you find yourself cornered by two pikemen in the portrait gallery. A hastily cast fireball brings down one of them before the other thrusts a pike into your chest. Your adventure ends here.

10

'You do not wish to hear my music?' he exclaims, seemingly genuinely affronted.

'Yeah,' shouts a man in the crowd. 'How dare you take our bard away from us without even letting him share a song of farewell?'

'Maybe you should clear off!' shouts a red-faced farmwoman.

This could turn nasty. Will you relent and allow him to sing by turning to 73? Or will you insist that he leave with you now without further ado (turn to 94)?

11

'I challenge thee to a wizard's duel!' you cry. She looks at you in surprise for a second, her ever changing face going through the whole spectrum of the emotion. Then she lets out a boisterous laugh that sets your teeth on edge.

'Well, as you know I cannot refuse, but I offer you a chance to think again. You may not be a match for my power.'

Will you demand that she fight you (turn to 27)? Or do you take her offer of rethinking your challenge and return to the castle in the hopes of finding another solution to the king's predicament (turn to 44)?

12

The girl screaming all the while, you wave your arms about and speak the words of transmutation. A second later, a stone statue in her perfect likeness is before you, its arms still raised to ward off your spell.

'Oh look, what a wonderful statue,' says a courtier as he comes into the courtyard from a nearby archway.

'Indeed,' remarks his barrel-chested companion. 'It looks somewhat familiar to me.'

'Um, the king had it commissioned in the likeness of one of his most trusted servants who he has just on a diplomatic mission to lands afar,' you offer before departing the company of these two gentlemen. You can't help but feel a bit guilty, but you can always restore the girl to her original form once you have solved the king's problem. If you can solve the king's problem.

You find his Majesty in his chambers, thankfully more covered up than the last time you saw him.

'Sire,' you protest, 'I thought I advised you to refrain from any strenuous activity!'

'Oh, I'm sorry to put you out, mage. Only I have a few problems on my own. Like not only how your "cure" having worn off, but that I am now wholly, and completely, a woman! Now give me one reason why I should not take your head?!'

'The old woman!' you blurt out in panic.

'Excuse me?'

'The old woman who cursed you. If we can find her, she can undo her magic.'

Melchion's expression softens slightly. 'But of course. I should have thought of it myself. Take as many guards as you want. Round up all the old women in town until she is found!' You stroke your chin. You could go about it that way (turn to 24 to do so). But perhaps a bit of subtlety is in order. There is a diviner known as Portas the Portly who lives just outside town. Perhaps he could help you find the old woman. To seek him out, turn to 18.

13

A massive gust of wind bursts forth from your hand, scooping up the swarming mass of insects and scattering them into the distance. Portas curses and mutters another spell. Sparks appear in his hands, the electrical discharge radiating from him enough to make your hair stand on end! Will you quickly conjure a shield to protect you from the lightning bolt he is preparing (turn to 67) or will you cast an intangibility spell on yourself by turning to 91?

14

'I'm sorry, your Worship,' you say. Clerus has barely time to gape in alarm before you spread your fingers and unleash a torrent of flame upon his cowering form. Soon his screaming ceases and only a lump of ash remains. Smirking, you take your leave of the cell - to find three guards outside with swords drawn. With panic, you notice one is wearing a half-sun medallion; a symbol of the goddess Salibria.

'We heard screaming. You killed the high priest,' states one the guards. 'You'll pay!'

The three charge on you. You manage to blast one of them before you are knocked to the ground. The guards hold your arms behind your back and march you out of the dungeons to the battlements. The mob below bellow up at you as one of the guard lifts you high above his head.

'This wizard whelp murdered our beloved high priest! Visit your retribution upon him!'

With that, you are flung into the baying crowd. You are torn apart by the howling press of people. There is not a piece of you left bigger than a cat's head.

15

'I believe the curse to be an illusion, Your Irrepressibleness,' you state. 'A potion of truth should undo the spell. I ask Your Majesty's permission to retire to my home to consult my apothecary book.'

'You shall do no such thing,' states Melchion, pulling his furs about him once more and putting his false beard back in place. 'The old court wizard's chambers hold every book on the subject you might ever need and barrels of spell ingredients too.' He summons the guards in his fake masculine voice and has them bring you to the wizard's chambers. You shudder as you cross the threshold of the place. Tylanax Droomsbury, the old wizard, was infamous for his demon summoning antics until a creature he summoned brought him back to the hells with it. The scuffed chalk pentagram on the floor of his chambers is testament to this. The guards close the door behind you, leaving you to sort through the clutter of cobwebbed tomes, blackened skulls and homunculi foetuses to find Droomsbury's apothecary book. In the end you find it supporting the short leg of the dust-encrusted desk. You flip it open, turning to the page on truth potions. It seems you will need three drops of platypus oil and a mixture of owl tears and walrus whiskers though the proportions depend on the current phase of the moon:

To those who seek the truth, three drops of the oil of the duck-billed mammal must be used. Then, if the moon be waxing, four times as many owl tears as drops of oil must be used and added to six times as many walrus whisker as owl tears. If the moon be full, a mixture of twice as many owl tears must be added as well as eight times as many walrus whiskers as there are owl tears. If Lady Moon be on her wane, then it is five times the drops of the platypus oil that must be added as owl tears and complimented with four times as many walrus whisker as owl tears. If naught but utter darkness is above, then a simple mixture of three owl tears for every one drop of platypus oil must be added to walrus whiskers in the amount of five time as many as owl tears.

Fortunately all these ingredients are scattered amongst Droomsbury's crowded shelves. You hurriedly brew the potion, but how many walrus whiskers should you use? Turn to the section that is the same as your answer. If the section you turn to makes no sense, turn instead to 6.

16

As you cast the spell, the tapioca gets a bit smaller and less gloopy. Unfortunately, it also looks a good deal harder. Before you can cast another spell, he smashes you in the stomach with a fist that feels like granite. You crash to the floor, doubled up in pain, your eyes squeezed so tightly that you do not see the tapioca beast bringing a heavy foot down upon your head, crushing your skull into dust.

17

You awaken to find yourself naked and manacled to a stone wall which is never a good start to any day.

'Well, looks like sleeping beauty is finally awake,' says a voice to your left.

You turn to see a man massive in both the belly and red beard department, similarly manacled next to you.

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'Leave em alone, will ya?' snaps an old man restrained to your right. 'He's going to get some pretty rough treatment soon, being the new boy and all.'

'I'm just glad it isn't me anymore,' whimpers a skinny young man with haunted eyes.

'I've seen many things,' says the last captive in the room, a black-maned barbarian with a deep baritone voice. 'I have seen demons summoned from the netherhells by cackling sorcerors. I have seen beings from beyond the sixth dimension. I have seen the atrocities of war and known the sickly scent of torture. And yet I would know all these things again rather than submit to the mistress' punishments one more time!'

'Please don't say her name,' whines the young man. 'You'll bring her here!'

'Too late,' says the red-bearded one, nodding towards the open doorway before you where someone is coming from the shadows. A ghastly thing on all fours emerges first, black-haired, pale-skinned and naked apart from a loin cloth and a collar and leash. As it looks up at you, you are shocked to see it is the minstrel from the inn. Holding the leash and following close behind is a stocky figure with a thick brown beard. Yet its large breasts betray it for what it is: a dwarven woman, clad in a spiked helmet and leather armour and brandishing a whip in her free hand.

'Hello, playthings,' she says with a crack of her whip. All the captives shudder uncontrollably. 'Who shall it be today? Oh yes, the new one.' She advances upon you, licking her lips as the man who claimed to be the masterbard giggles to himself. You have a chance to escape however. The manacles that constrain your wrists are not made of iron, but bronze, meaning you can still cast your spells. Hurriedly you prepare a spell of illusion. Will you conjure a mighty warrior in the hopes he will chase the dwarf woman off (turn to 69) or will you create the illusion of a huge, slavering monster to descend upon her by turning to 54?

18

You find Portas the Portly tending his rose garden outside his straw-roofed cottage. He rises as you approach, dusting the soil from his knees.

'Welcome, Davor,' he says genially. 'I had a feeling you'd be dropping by.'

'Then you know why I've come?'

He nods. 'You seek the witch who cursed the king. I can tell you where she lives. But my services do not come cheap.' You reach for your bulging coin purse, but he waves his hand. 'No. I need a component for my divinations: A wizard's eye.'

'My eye?'

'Just your left one. I know that one's a bit more short-sighted than the other.' He returns to tending his garden.

'If you know the future, you'll know what my answer is, right?'

He shrugs without looking up. 'The future sometimes has a way of surprising me.' Will you agree to let Portas have your left eye (turn to 64) or refuse (turn to 52)?

19

You haven't been walking for long when suddenly you are seized from behind and a cloth bag is pulled over your head. You try to mutter a spell, but your voice is too muffled for it to work so you resort to trying to throw your captors off you. A heavy blow from behind puts an end to your struggles and you collapse into oblivion.

You awaken to find yourself tied to a chair with an apple in your mouth, a sword held you your throat by one of the sullen eyed, scar-faced men arranged before you.

'My Lord,' mocks the swordsman with a gold-toothed smile. The others burst out laughing. You try to

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speak, attempting to bite through the apple only to find it is made of wax. This just amuses your captors more. The swordsman pulls back his weapon, tearing the waxen fruit from your mouth and giving you a stinging slap across the face.

'H-how dare you!' you attempt, with more enthusiasm than you feel.

'Do not be afeared, Your Despicableness. We have no deSire to harm you. Provided you do exactly as we tell you, of course.'

'And what might that be?'

'You're going to lead us into your treasure vaults,' he replies with another glittering grin.

An hour later, you find yourself leading the unruly lot through the twilight up to the castle gates. The guards stationed there look puzzled as you approach.

'My Lord?' says one. 'We did not realise you were not in your chambers. Who are these fellows?'

You consider yelling the truth out, but the lead vagabond already has a dagger pressed to your side, unbeknownst to the guards.

'Just old friends of mine,' you answer, rather weakly. 'That will be all today, gentlemen. You may go home to your families.'

The first guard still looks suspicious, but his companion beckons him to leave. 'How often does ol' Melchion give us time off,' he whispers, perhaps a bit louder than he realises. The first guard nods and follows him off down the road back to the city.

'So far so good,' mutters your lead captor. 'Now, lead on.'

You guide the ruffians through the castle corridors, passing servants, courtiers and guards bowing low and hurrying on from your undesirable company. At last, you reach the basements, following the narrow corridor that leads to the vaults. In these narrow confines a fog spell could prove quite effective. In his excitement, the gang leader has taken his dagger away. You could mutter the spell quickly and then run for it in the ensuing confusion. To attempt to do so, turn to **63**. If you would rather carry on leading them towards the treasure, turn to **51**.

20

The hair is fairly easy to climb and surprisingly there are no sounds of anguish from the unseen owner of the hair above you. About half-way up to the window however, the soft hair suddenly goes taut. Then you find yourself flipped into the air, the now prehensile hair catching you around the torso, squeezing you harder and harder, your chest caving in from the intense pressure. You tug and tug at the hair, but it is as strong as steel. You must cast a spell or die! Will you set the hair on fire, turn to **99**? Or will you cast a spell of levitation upon yourself by turning to **84**.

21

The priest hisses angrily at your refusal. 'You would do well not to refuse Zytherr anything in his own house.'

'In that case, I think I shall be leaving his house,' you say haughtily, turning to leave. A horribly hollow laugh begins amongst the acolytes as you stride away.

'Fool,' snaps the high priest. 'Do you think you can just walk out of here? No god watches over you.'

No sooner has he spoken these words than you find yourself enveloped in blue flame. You shriek as the icy fire consumes you leaving nothing but ash. But that is not the end. When you open your eyes you are in the most horrible place, surrounded by sharp instruments, indescribable tentacled monstrosities and people crying in anguish. And soon your voice will join theirs for you have been banished to the realms of torment for all eternity.

22

You conjure up an image of the baddest, greenest, drooliest orcs and set them bounding into the clearing, hollering at the top of their non-existent lungs. The elves turn in alarm, seemingly unsure whether to run or do battle. But then the one with the lyranthe says something in their lilting tongue and all of them burst into laughter. One moves an elegant hand in an intricate motion and the orc horde vanishes into nothingness. Cursing from your hiding place, you rack your brain for another spell. Then suddenly there is a knife to your ribs. You turn to see a smiling elf next to you. Several more appear from the foliage. Before you can even think to mutter a spell, you are seized and a rolled-up ball of leaves is stuffed into your mouth. They drag you towards the centre of the clearing, singing a cheerful song in their sweet voices. The elf with the lyranthe points to the fire and the fair folk devolve into giggles. You are tied to a post with strong vines and placed horizontally over the burning fire. The elves start to sing once more as you struggle against your bonds and try to spit out your leafy gag. But it is all to no avail. Sweat breaks all over you, your clothing scorches and your skin blackens as you start to roast. The smoke gets into your lungs, causing you to choke through your gag. Eventually you pass out from the heat, never to open your eyes again.

23

You blast him with a ball of crimson fire, causing a scream of anguish to escape his lips as he is engulfed by the flame. He struggles to rise, then tries to roll to put out the flame, but it is too much for him. In seconds he is nothing more than a burning husk. Well, you may have won the wizard's duel, but killed your opponent in the process, meaning his knowledge will be forever lost to you. Feeling slightly guilty as you gaze about the dead Portas' lovely flower beds and well-kept cottage, you take your leave with head hung low. You decide to return to the castle to research another way of freeing the king from his curse. Turn to 44.

24

You dispatch a squadron of soldiers to round up all the old women in town and bring them before you. After they leave, you retire to the library, looking through all the documentation on witches' curses. It's all very in-depth and well researched, but you feel your eyelids drooping slightly. Maybe if you just rest your eyes for a bit . . .

You are awakened by a maid vigorously shaking your shoulder.

'Five more minutes,' you mumble.

'But sir, there's a, something, marching towards the castle!'

Forcing yourself awake, you push past the straw-haired maid and make your way to the battlements. You notice with some alarm that there is a distant crashing sound and the walls of the stone corridors appear to be shaking. Climbing atop the battlements, you spot the cause of this disturbance. In the distance you spot a gigantic golem thundering towards the castle. As it draws closer, the soldiers on the battlements with you lower their crossbows and gape in alarm. As well they might as this is no ordinary golem made of stone or clay. Instead it seems to be composed of a living mass of screaming, terrified men, all tangled together. It is only as the monstrosity reaches the battlements and raises one mighty arm to crush the parapets that you recognize the men: they are the soldiers you sent out this morning! You dodge to one side as the howling arm crashes into the stonework, shattering the place you were just standing. Quickly, you prepare a fireball to send flying into this portmanteau being. Will you fire at its head (turn to 77) or its legs (turn to 87)?

25

Your ball of flame explodes into the creature's chest. The beast howls before its orange eyes swivel towards you. Before you can mutter the words of another spell, the monster leaps upon you, seizing your right arm with a taloned claw. With a horrific tear, your arm is pulled from your body in a torrent of blood. With what sounds like a laugh, the vile creature proceeds to beat you into unconsciousness with your own torn limb. At least you are not awake for when it satiates its fiendish hunger by tearing your torso open and helping itself to the contents.

26

Melchion laughs, a slightly feminine cackle that reverberates about the throne room. 'Such audacity. I think we all know that you are none other than Caspan, my evil one-eyed twin!'

The courtiers look uncertain about this proposition and murmur amongst themselves, while the guards anxiously rest their hands on the pommels of their swords.

'Come on, people!' Melchion continues. 'He was banished a month after we were born for being evil and his eye was plucked out so that we would forever know the difference between us.'

The murmuring continues. None can remember this incident (unsurprising, as it never happened), but they are beginning to look at you warily. If Melchion is the good twin, how evil must you be? One noble, whose vermilion robes barely contain his flabby stomach, strides forward. 'I recall this incident, Sire, though your father hid it so few here may have knowledge of it.'

At this, others all claim to remember the incident now they have had their memories jogged. Melchion shoots a grateful smile to the portly noble. 'Execute him,' he says, indicating you wish a dismissive hand gesture.

The guards set upon you. Cursing, you unleash your magic upon them, blasting one to ash and blowing the legs off another before a sword is thrust between your ribs, ending your play for power as well as your life.

27

'Oh you demand, do you?' she laughs. As her laughter booms she seems to take on a form strangely familiar. 'Have at thee!' she cries. A blast of air sends you flying into the air, leagues and leagues of trees, mountains, fields, deserts, and seas flashing past in seconds. Finally, you land fairly lightly in totally unfamiliar surroundings. A bearded shepherd watches you with some amusement from atop a pile of rocks.

'Where am I?' you mutter as you rise to your feet.

The shepherd replies in a strange dialect that you can make no sense of. You cast a spell and try once again.

'Where in Generica am I?'

'Generica?' he replies, your spell translating his words. 'You are in Burrooom, my friend.'

Burrooom! The witch has sent you to the other side of the planet! You sink to your knees in shock.

The shepherd comes over and puts a skinny arm around your shoulders. 'There, there. Burrooom isn't so bad. Sure, the jungles are dark, the sheep are 5 feet across and have a propensity for biting people's heads off, and the women are hairier than the men, but, um, what was I saying?'

You let your head sink into your hands.

The thunder of your footfalls on the flagstones reverberates around the narrow corridor before you burst into the kitchen, colliding with the head cook and the cauldron of steaming fish heads he was carrying. You give a shriek as the scalding contents are poured all over you.

'Ere, watch where yer goin,' scolds the rotund cook as he picks himself off the floor and dusts himself down as you writhe about in agony on the floor. 'Why are you in such a hurry anyways?'

Whimpering, you explain you were chasing after the maid. The cook shakes his head.

'She hasn't been this way, mate,' he offers before strolling off. Cursing, you pull yourself up on to your stinging legs and head back the way you came, emerging into the bright sunlight of the courtyard.

'Swears blind, she does, the King's a woman down there.'

You turn in alarm at the voice to see a crowd of servants chatting in the corner to one another, sharp gasps greeting the news. Fearing the worst, you head out of the courtyard and make your way to the great hall. Everyone you pass seems to be telling the same story. Of the maid you see nothing. You are just thinking you should make yourself scarce when you blunder round a corner to find the scowling form of Melchion and two of his guards before you.

'Arrest that man!' shrieks the King.

'Yes, my Kin-, um, I mean my Queen,' says one guard with a smile. The other guard chuckles.

If steam could come from Melchion's ears it would be doing it now. 'Enough of your tongue. Kill this fool wizard now! Now!'

You are far too exhausted to muster a spell before your head is severed from your shoulders. If it's any consolation, it is not long before the maid's story is verified and Melchion is deposed though, unlike you, he does at least manage to keep his head.

Rain has been sparse in the forest of late and the dry wood soon roars into flame from your spell. The billowing flames creep round the clearing, causing the elves to stop their singing and gawp in terror at the approaching inferno. Dropping everything, they flee from the fire into the trees, bounding away with a grace that shows nothing of their fear. Keeping your distance from the blaze, you race into the clearing and scoop up the abandoned lyranthe and dash back in the trees. By now the fire is all about you, and the sweat is pouring down your face as you reach the treehouse again. The red-haired girl is waiting at the foot of the tree. The flames are now all about, closing in on you fast.

'Toss me the lyranthe!' she commands.

Without thinking you comply and she catches the instrument easily, adjusting its position and giving it an experimental strum. The sound reverberates and all for a second all seems frozen - your heart stops beating, the flames cease to flicker and the panicking of the fleeing birds can no longer be heard. Then all is normal once more. 'Follow me,' she commands.

She leads you through the forest, playing the most melodiously sweet tune as she walks. You are amazed that the flames seem to cower from her, as if her music has sway over them. At last you emerge from the forest and turn to see little more than a blazing husk behind you where once was the beautiful forest.

'Well done indeed,' she mocks. 'You didn't have to destroy the entire forest!'

Panting from your escape, you shake your head. 'It seemed like a good idea at the time.' Looking anew at the girl, you see her eyes hold a wisdom you had not noticed before. 'You are the masterbard?'

She nods. 'And you want me to help King Melchion. I'm not sure why I should. He is far from a good man and you are a careless fool.'

'But you must!' you insist.

'Convince me. A suitable gift may sway my decision.' If you have a scroll and wish to give it to her,

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turn to **36**. If you would prefer to present her with a harmonica (if you have one), turn to **92**. If you have neither, there is nothing you can say to convince her to accompany you and she is too powerful to threaten. Dejected, you begin your long journey back to the castle. Turn to **47**.

30

You round a corner and spot the girl before you, her lithe form bursting into the sunlight ahead. You quicken your pace, emerging into the courtyard just as the girl stumbles and goes crashing to the earth. There are none around to be witnesses. The girl rises to her knees, her hands held out imploringly.

'Please sir, don't hurt me. I ain't gonna tell nobody 'bout what I saw. Promise I won't.' Tears are cascading down her blue eyes. Will you nod and dismiss her from the castle (turn to **88**)? Or will you use more arcane measures to ensure her silence (turn to **12**)?

31

You shake your head at his inquisitive look. He simply nods and returns to his discussion with the two lords standing by him. You head back to the library, hoping to find some other avenue to explore to remove the curse. After a few hours of study, you are disturbed by Melchion entering the room. He rests his hands upon your desk.

'You have worked hard to aid me and I thank you. But I am relieving you of your duty. You may return to your home.'

You start. 'But Sire, I may still be able to find a solution.'

He shakes his head. 'Tell the truth, I'm glad you have failed. The thought of becoming "him" again -' He shudders. 'Anyway, I am going to try explaining matters to the barons. Hopefully they will understand.'

You nod. 'Good luck. My Lady.'

He smiles as you depart, leaving the castle for the final time.

The next day, you are in your local tavern when you hear that a woman who had been posing as the king is to be executed. You sigh. There was goodness in Melchion, you saw it last night. And perhaps in his new body, others might have seen it too.

'To Melchion! The Not So Despicable!' you say, raising your glass. None join you in your toast.

32

You enter the darkest part of the city, where street lamps are practically non-existent and where eyes follow you from every shadowy alleyway. Just when you are wondering if you should come back tomorrow morning, you find Zytherr's temple, a basalt building bedecked with carving of people writhing in abject torment. Taking a deep breath, you cross the threshold - and are seized by a mailed fist.

'You don't bear the Lord's mark,' hisses a voice with breath like dead sardines. 'Only those with a mark may enter.'

'Um, I'm sorry,' you say, trying to get a glimpse of your assailant's face.

'Don't be sorry,' the voice chuckles. 'I can amend that.'

Another pair of hands seizes you, forcing you face down to the ground and tearing your shirt from your back. You feel the nib of a needle press into your skin. 'What mark do you desire?' hisses a voice even more reptilian than the first. 'Perhaps the jackal, the form our Lord uses to feast on the dead? Or the scorpion, the untrustworthy master of deceit? Or perhaps it is Zytherr's most powerful form, the bull, that appeals?'

Make your choice and record it on your Note Sheet. You are then subjected to a series of painful jabs, before the pain ceases and you are pulled to your feet.

'Now, by all means, enter,' says the unseen gatewarden. Wondering if you haven't just made the biggest mistake of your life, you cross the black threshold. Turn to 56.

33

You stumble over fallen logs and bat aside low-hanging branches and dangling creepers as you make your way almost trance-like towards the wonderful singing. You emerge into a clearing where a roaring campfire burns. The clearing's occupants stop their singing to stare at you. They are unbelievably beautiful, fair-haired, angular featured and garbed in forest colours: elves! They smile as you approach.

'Come, oh man! Join us in our songs!' And they burst into their marvellous song once more, the fairest of all of them strumming a lyranthe lazily in accompaniment. You can't help but sing along with them, your tuneless caterwauling thankfully drowned out by the chorus of elven voices. Soon the wine is passed around and the singing becomes more vigorous as you join the elves in dancing arm and arm around the fire. Never have you felt so happy, never have you felt more of a person than you are right now!

You awaken the next morning with a sore head and even sorer side. Of the elves there is no sign, not even a discarded wine flask or the ashes of their campfire. You start to rise - and the pain in your side suddenly becomes unbearable! Pulling aside your robe to inspect it, you are horrified to find a stitched scar at the left of your belly: the elves have stolen one of your kidneys! You mutter a healing spell upon the scar which makes the agony slightly less blinding, but you are still holding your side as you head back through the forest, vowing never to tangle with the fair folk again! Return to 8 to continue your search for the masterbard.

34

'Come in, come in,' the haggard old crone cackles as you climb into her strange hut. Inside is a cluttered mess of cutlery scattered over the cobwebbed tables and chair. A threadbare hammock hangs in the corner and the smell of strange herbs hangs in the air. 'Take a seat,' she insists. Rather reluctantly you plop yourself down on a stool with odd burn marks upon it.

'You said you had something to tell me?'

'All in good time, all in good time,' she laughs, taking a cup from a broken-hinged cupboard, cleaning the encrusted grime from it with a licked thumb. She puts it on the filthy oak table before you before filling it with the steaming contents of a brown teapot. You almost gag at the heady scent that floats upwards. 'Drink, drink,' she says with a toothless smile. 'Then all will become clear.'

You can't think of anything in the universe less appealing. Will you force yourself to down the tea by turning to 85? Or will you make your excuses and leave, searching elsewhere for the masterbard (return to 8)?

35

The beard goes up nicely. A little too nicely actually as soon Melchion's entire face is in flames and he is shrieking at the top of his lungs. Hurriedly, you speak a Create Water spell and douse the flames. Once the steam has cleared, you see the hideously scorched visage that was the King of Generica's face. Slender hands tremblingly feel the scarred mess.

'What have you done?' he sobs. 'Guards!' In a second, the guards outside have smashed the door open and you are seized roughly from behind. 'Have this idiot wizard hanged by his little toes until he dies!' declares the king. You have little say in the matter and within minutes you find yourself hanging over the castle battlements, your wrists bound with iron to stop any form of magical escape. On the plus side it does take a while to die from such a fate. Oh wait, that's a bad thing.

36

You pass her the scroll case. She snatches it off you irritably, sliding the scroll out and unfurling it. As she reads it her expression moves from annoyance to confusion to mirth. She bursts into a youthful chortle.

'Oh, that's hilarious,' she says, wiping a tear from her eye as she passes the scroll back to you. 'Who wrote that?'

'King Melchion's court minstrel.'

'Well, whatever Melchion's paying him is far too little. The man is a genius at being atrocious.'

'So, do you think you will help the king now?'

She cocks her head to one side and gives a lazy half smile. 'I guess so. It's been a while since I've been so amused. And I guess you did retrieve my lyanthe even if you destroyed a whole forest doing so. Come on then.'

Elated, you follow after her, a spring in your step as you head west. Turn to 47.

37

He breaks the kiss and looks up at your face - and balks at the sight of your disfigurement. He pushes you away in disgust. As he does so, the music stops abruptly and the occupants of the room cease their applause and stand about confused.

'What is going on here?' cries one. 'That is not our king! It is some imposter!'

'Grab her!' yells another noble at the guards.

'Bye, Sire!' you whisper and dash out of the room. Behind you, you hear Melchion's high-pitched protests as the guards seize him. He will most likely be executed for posing as himself. Perhaps a deserved end for a truly despicable monarch.

38

'Oh, so you would make demands of me?!' she yells. Her form seems to stabilise into a woman as terrible as she is beautiful, raven hair cascading down powerful shoulders, eyes burning with amber hate. You are just thinking you've seen her somewhere before when she nods her head and you find yourself shrinking, croaking in fear as you disappear into the folds of your clothing, emerging as a little, green, very warty toad. The witch picks you up gingerly and drops you in a pond at the back of the garden. A few other amphibians in the water nod at you empathetically. Which is about all the communication your kind can muster. Still, at least now you're safe from Melchion's ire. Always good to look at the silver lining.

39

With a wave of your hand, you bring your invisible elemental hammer crashing down on his ribs, causing a grunt of pain as all the wind is knocked out of him.

'Alright,' he gasps. 'You win.'

Smiling at your victory, you stoop over to haul the heavy diviner up. 'So where can I find this old witch then?'

Still wheezing, he points towards the city. 'She has a cottage at the edge of town. A cottage with green shutters. Now, leave me.'

You nod and turn towards the city.

'One word of warning,' he calls out as you depart. 'You stand little chance against her powers.' Paying him little heed, you carry onwards, eager to confront this hag. Turn to 2.

40

You are finally getting to sleep when there is a loud knocking on the door and you are informed that the king wishes to see you in his private chambers at once. You rub your eyes, depressed to see through your bedroom window that the sun is already high in the sky. Dressing quickly, you make your way to the king's room. Melchion dismisses his servants and looks at you with utter hatred.

'Well, I hope you've thought of a solution to my predicament,' he says in a high-pitched voice. 'Because not only have those bloody illusions of your worn off, but I am no longer with the royal member. I woke up this morning to find an ... an ... abomination in its place!'

'I am sorry to hear that, Your Wonderfulness,' you reply. 'Perhaps the solution is to find this old witch and have her undo the enchantment.'

The wrath in Melchion's eyes dissipates slightly. 'Of course. Take as many guards as you want. Round up all the old women in town until she is found!' You stroke your chin. You could go about it that way (turn to 24 to do so). But perhaps a bit of subtlety is in order. There is a diviner known as Portas the Portly who lives just outside town. Perhaps he could help you find the old woman. To seek him out, turn to 18.

41

Seizing the thick follicles with both hands, you begin to tug with all your might.

'GAAAAAAAAAH!' cries the King. 'You can't do this to me! AAAAAAAAAAAH!
AUUUUUUUUUUGH!'

Your brow beading with sweat you continue to tug as Melchion howls all the more.

'WAUUUUUGH! You can't! Stop! Off with your head!'

Unfortunately, the guards listening closely at the door do not take the last cry as an idle one. In seconds they smash down the door and, as you turn to them in dismay, a sword is brought down heavily on your neck, your head rolling across the King's rich scarlet rug. They say a head remains conscious for a few seconds after it is cut off. If that is true, the last words you heard would be Melchion saying rather sulkily: 'Now what did you go and do that for? I think he was making some progress there.'

42

'Hello?' you call up.

'Hello?' a lovely sing-song voice replies. 'Who is out there?'

'I am Davor, a magician. I seek the masterbard and have heard tell he lives in these parts.'

'Oh, I know Antonius well,' the voice calls back. 'He often visits. Why don't you climb up and I can show you where he lives on my charts.'

'But how would I climb up, my lady?'

'You can climb up my hair. Don't worry, it won't hurt me.'

A strange method of getting entry anywhere. Still, if she says it's alright, who are you to argue? If you wish to climb up, turn to 20. Otherwise, you bid farewell to the lady, searching elsewhere for the elusive masterbard. Return to 8.

43

With some arcane words and an elaborate waving of your hands you cause the king's breasts to vanish and a thick and lustrous jet-black beard to appear on his face.

'There you go, Your Impressiveness. You will however have to keep on putting on a voice until I learn how to dispel the enchantment.'

Melchion seems pleased. 'I have every confidence in your abilities. I'll have my servants prepare a

room for you and you shall have full access to the library and to the old court wizard's personal collection to aid in your research.' He turns to look at himself in the mirror that rests against the east wall and smiles. 'By Salibria, you've done a good job, boy. I almost feel like celebrating.'

And as it transpires, that "almost" does not last long. You are interrupted from your research into breaking enchantments to be told that Melchion is having a banquet and requests your presence. You arrive to find the party already in full swing, the guests laughing and gossiping, seated on a long table with Melchion at the head. As you take a seat, you see the king is laughing raucously at the joke his neighbour is telling him as he pulls a leg from the roast goose before him. Two courses and several bottles later, a red faced noble in green brocade stands up, glass swaying in his drunken grasp.

'My king!' he cries. 'You have delivered to us a most excellent feast. But to make the night complete would you not deign to share one of your merry songs about the rabbit and the parsnip?'

The guests applaud this suggestion and start banging their cutlery on the table chanting 'Sing! Sing! Sing!' But with Melchion's voice as it is, he will not be able to sing as normal. You need a distraction. Spying a large tapioca at the centre of the table, you mumble a quick cantrip. An overweight noblewoman gives a shriek of alarm as the tapioca begins to sprout arms and legs and pulls itself upright, wobblingly making its way towards the guests, arms outstretched to strangle. The guests flee from the chairs, crushing together to escape the banquet hall. As distractions go it's not a bad one, but you'll have to deal with it now. Reaching out with your magic you can feel the molecules that make up the blubbery monster as it heaves itself towards you. Will you expand the molecules apart (turn to 86) or contract them together (turn to 16)?

44

You spend several days, poring over dusty tomes in the dark confines of the castle library. Melchion visits often to check your progress. At first he is encouraging, arranging for the castle's cook to prepare sandwiches for you at regular intervals to "keep your strength up". Your lack of results soon got to him however and now his visits consist of him poking you in the ribs repeatedly with a stick for an hour or two while you read. However, you are completely alone when you stumble on two possible solutions in quick succession. Livillus' *Magic and Music* states that the song of a masterbard can undo even the most powerful enchantments. And Plintonicus' *Tales from the Dark Side* states that the disciples of the dark god Zytherr can remove curses though their toll is often high. There is a temple to Zytherr in one of the shadier areas of the city. However, the masterbard will not be so easily found. Though every kingdom has a masterbard, few know their true identities and finding Generica's will not be easy. If you are determined to try, turn to 8. Otherwise, you grab your cloak and make your way to the evil god's temple. Turn to 32.

45

You dash from the throne room, blundering past more guards advancing to do battle with the hideous beast. You race homewards, sobbing and yelling for all you pass to repent now. Finally reaching your house, you triple-bolt and magically seal the door before heading upstairs and crawling under the bed.

You awaken the next morning with an aching back, but otherwise intact. Venturing outside, you see all in the town seems normal: children still play hopscotch happily, old fishwives swap tall tales, and bearded men slap each other on the back in appreciation of lusty tales. Making your way to the market, you fall into conversation with a pale-faced courtier.

'The strangest thing,' he relates. 'King Melchion was apparently devoured by a vicious beast. It took fifty of his finest guards to bring it down.'

'Who will rule now?' you ask.

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'Who knows? There's no legitimate heir. I imagine whoever is the strongest of Melchion's relatives.'

The courtier is quite right on that score. Two days later, Melchion's second cousin once-removed Albercross declares himself King and embarks on a reign of mild terror which is thankfully short-lived as he is overthrown by the Good King Tanerbrau who rules for a whole fortnight before he dies from a complication involving his eye and a poisoned arrow. King Elthom succeeds him before he is beheaded at his own coronation by the High Priest Xyros who declares himself king. His unjust rule is brought to an end by the old exploding chamber pot trick. Sick to the back teeth of all these civil wars, coups d'état and power plays you decide to leave Generica. Perhaps the nearby kingdom of Blandia could do with a skilled magician?

46

Before you can say anything, Melchion embraces you once more, kissing you full on the mouth, his soft lips caressing your own. At last you break and look at him in confusion.

'Don't you see?' he exclaims. 'This is perfect. You can pose as me and take me as your wife and then we can rule together!'

'But, but you won't be you anymore,' you protest.

He turns away, his hands clutched to his breast. 'To be honest, I was never happy with the way I was. And I don't know, but over the past few days something about this has begun to feel right. Almost like this is who I was meant to be.' He turns to you once more, raven locks draped over his beautiful face. 'What say you?'

You stand speechless for a second. But then a smile spreads across your face. A beautiful wife and a kingdom to rule? You could do a lot worse.

'I accept . . . Melchia.'

She smiles, her pearly teeth and red lips nothing short of breathtaking, and you embrace once more. Turn to **100**.

47

After days of travel, at last you crest the final hillock and see Melchion's castle before you, its proud towers imprinted against the backdrop of the setting sun. Glad to be back at last, you stride towards it, whistling merrily. How many Xs are marked on your Note Sheet? If it is 0-2, turn to **59**. If it is 3 or 4 however, turn to **5**.

48

Keeping as low a profile as possible, you reach your room and hurriedly lock the door behind you. Once the sun has set, you open the door once more, take a quick glance each way and make your way into the corridor. You travel a circuitous route, having no wish to run into any prying inhabitants of the castle. At last you reach the king's chambers. A heavily moustached guard semi-dozing outside the door snaps to attention with a salute as you approach.

'Your Augustness! Um, I wasn't aware you were not in your chamber.'

'Well, I wasn't,' you snap. 'Now, stand aside, I'm very tired.'

The guard open the heavy oak door for you, closing it behind you as you enter the dimly lit antechamber awash with elegant silks. You carry on through an archway into the bedroom proper which is even more ostentatiously decorated. As you approach the magnificent four-poster bed, a figure sits up in alarm. The flickering candlelight illuminates a beautiful woman, with lustrous raven hair cascading down ivory shoulders and emerald eyes staring in fright.

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'What is the meaning of this?' she hisses and you silently rebuke yourself for not realising it is none other than Melchion immediately.

'It is only I, Davor, your Brilliance.'

'Davor? But how can that be? You look like me!' He climbs out of bed, a white silk negligee concealing his slight form as he comes right up to you, pretty brow furrowed in confusion.

'You have changed your night-time attire, My Lord?'

'Never mind that! How is it you look like me?'

Before you can answer, the antechamber's door is thrown open.

'My Lord? I heard voices!' calls out the guard as he approaches the archway.

'He can't see me like this!' hisses Melchion. Will you tell the king to dive under the bed before the suspicious guard enters (turn to 96)? Or will you hurriedly kiss him, hoping the guard will think you are just the king indulging in a concubine's affections (turn to 82)?

49

He breaks the kiss and looks up adoringly at your face. 'I love you,' he says.'

The music reaches its crescendo and you smile at the beautiful woman before you. 'I love you too, Melchia.'

The crowd cheers as you kiss once more and the masterbard silently departs from the room. Turn to 100.

50

You speak the final word of your spell and the ground begins to shake uncontrollably. All present try to stay upright, but it is an impossible task and, one by one, they fall crashing to the floor. The vagabond leader tumbles backwards, releasing his grip on Melchion, who falls forward, before scuttling back up the corridor on his hands and knees. At last the quake subsides, and the guards groggily rise to their feet, hurriedly arresting the now cowed bandits. Then all turn to you, collective foreheads furrowed in confusion. Everyone knows King Melchion can't perform magic. Can he? If you are missing your left eye, turn to 79. If both your eyes are intact however, turn to 71.

51

A few feet later along the corridor, the vagabond leader hauls you back by the arm.

'You were about to step on a pressure pad, your Kingliness,' he says, pointing to a raised section of the floor. 'No doubt doing so would have unleashed some sort of deadly deathtrap. Funny that you don't know the protections of your own vault.'

'Well, um, generally I have the servants bring me my treasure when I need it. It's been many years since I was last down here.'

'Hmm. Very well. Carry on then. Don't worry, I'll keep an eye out.'

Luckily you reach the mighty ebony door of the vault without further mishap.

'Well, open up,' commands the boss.

'I need to, eh, speak the words of unlocking!' you declare. You speak the arcane words of opening and cast your spell on the door. Unfortunately the only effect is a loud alarm bell sounding throughout the castle.

'What are you doing?!' snaps the leader. 'Turn it off!'

'I'm trying!' you cry and indeed you are. Your silence spell merely causes the noise to increase in volume, your dispel magic spell bounces back and hits one of the ruffians, turning his hair green, and

your attempts to smash the door down with a Hammer of Wind spell merely result in a mini tornado forming in the corridor, lifting the lot of you like ragdolls before depositing you all in a heap on the stone floor.

'Ahem,' says a voice. You look up to see the real King Melchion before you, backed by a squad of snarling guards with swords drawn. The angry expressions on their faces turn to shock as they look upon your countenance.

'It cannot be,' whispers the king.

Will you seize the initiative and declare that Melchion is an imposter (turn to 75)? Or will you quickly cast a fog spell in the hopes of escaping in the ensuing confusion by turning to 4?

52

'Then I can't help you. Begone.' He turn to his garden once more, whistling softly, your presence of no further interest to him. There is another way you could get him to spill the beans however. You may challenge him to a wizard's duel. It would mean incredible bad luck if he were to refuse and, if you won, he would have to tell you whatever you wanted to know. Of course, if you lost, you would have to do whatever he wanted. Will you dare challenge him (turn to 62)? Or will you return to the castle to do further research on how to break the enchantment by turning to 44? Alternatively, you could have Melchion's soldiers round up all the old women in town as the king suggested by turning to 24.

53

Your plan works perfectly as the glue freezes, it begins to crack and the beard tumbles from the chin. 'Let me now prepare a poultice for you, Sire, to fight the allegic reaction. Melchion allows to do so and he is soon looking more his old self (albeit a feminised version).

'You may go now, Davor,' he says after crawling into bed. You bow and leave, dismissing the anxious servants still gathered outside the door. Returning to your quarters you climb into bed, hoping for some sleep. But sleep does not find you easily. Turn to 40.

54

Before the dwarf woman appears a horrible blubbery mess of a beast, all writing tentacles and gaping orifices. It doesn't have quite the deSired effect however; instead of running, the dwarf simply head butts the beast! As she makes contact it disappears in a cloud of smoke. A look of confusion crosses her face, but then she looks once more at you and a cruel smile crosses her lips.

'I think we have a mage here,' she says to her simpering companion. 'Get the iron choker.'

'Yes, mistress,' says the fake bard, kissing her booted feet before scampering off to another room. Quickly, you begin to speak another spell, but a crack of the dwarf woman's whip against your face makes you lose your concentration.

'There's plenty more where that came from,' she says as the minstrel returns, bearing a rusted iron circlet. The dwarf woman takes it from him and steps up to you, snapping the horrible device around your neck. Immediately you feel your magic leave you and a look of terror crosses your face as the horrible woman stands on tiptoe to nibble your ear lobe. Then she digs her sharp teeth in, pulling the lobe clean off! You howl with pain, but that only causes her to slap you hard across the face.

'Oh, we're going to have some fun,' she whispers while the minstrel chuckles madly behind her. This is the beginning of several years of torture so depraved it would make the Marquis De Sade say 'steady on.' And it is also the end of your adventure.

The masterbard appears behind you and unslings her lyranthe. 'I may be of help yet.' She plays an odd, discordant tune. Immediately the cheers of the crowd stop as all freeze in place, the hangman on the platform halted just as he is about to pull the lever that will open the trapdoor. Melchion looks about in wonderment at the frozen guards around him.

'Run Sire!' you cry. He hurriedly obeys, shuffling after you through the perfectly still commoners. Once you are free of the castle gates, you cut the bonds upon his wrists and the two of you bound away over the hills.

'You arrived in the nick of time,' he gasps once you are at a safe distance.

'I'll say. I'm sorry I wasn't able to lift your curse though.'

He shakes his head. 'Don't be. In a way I found it almost a relief when I was discovered. The costume was proving a pain and I was growing fearful of becoming "him" again.'

'You were unhappy as a man?'

He smiles and you can't help but notice he has gorgeous pearly white teeth. 'Let's just say I've felt a lot better the past few days than I ever have before.'

You smile. 'Well, then perhaps everything has worked out. How about hitting the road with me? It might not compare to ruling a country, but the people of Howar are always looking for a couple of adventurers.'

He smiles. 'Sounds like fun.'

And the two of you walk off into the sunset.

A marble throne, sculpted into the shape of a skull, sits atop a dais illuminated only by the flames of the few candles scattered about the shadowy interior of the high-domed hall of the church of Zytherr. Upon the throne sits a bent figure, swathed in midnight robes, a heavy cowl covering his face. Similar bent and mishapen acolytes hunch in the dark enclaves, watching intently.

'Approach,' hisses the hooded figure, the high priest of Zytherr.

Every instinct tells you to flee from this foul place, yet you continue down the black carpeted aisle.

'You seek help for your king,' the high priest continues.

'Your king too,' you reply.

The priest gives a low, hollow chuckle. 'I have no king, but Zytherr. Melchion is no worshipper of our Lord. His own goddess, that foul whore Salibria, watches over him. In order for Zytherr to free your king from his curse, I must have a holy relic of Salibria in order to perform a ritual to bypass her protections.'

If you do not possess a holy symbol of Salibria, there is no more you can do here. Rather gratefully, you take your leave of this foul place, deciding to seek out the masterbard instead. Turn to **8**. If you do however, you pull the silver amulet from your robes. The high priest extends a claw-like hand.

'Good,' he rasps. 'Give it to me.' The skulking figures in the shadows begin to give a horrible hissing laugh that makes a cold shiver run the length of your body. Can you trust this evil priest? If you give him the holy symbol, turn to **98**. If you refuse, turn to **21**.

Mark an X on your Note Sheet. You clamber through the sun-bleached mountain, pausing frequently to wipe the sweat from your brow. Looking upwards, you see the peaks are covered with snow. Hopefully it is not there that the masterbard has made his home. As you scan the horizon, you spot a tower made of some unknown white stone standing amongst the footholes. Delighted to see some habitation in this desolate region, you make your way to the tower. As you get closer, you are surprised to see there is no

door. However, there is an open window near the tower's top with what appears to be a rope leading down from it to the ground. You take hold of the rope, only to find it is no rope at all, but flowing blonde locks! If you wish to climb this unconventional rope, turn to 20. To yell up to the window, turn to 42. If you would prefer to leave well alone and search elsewhere in the region, return to 8.

58

You speak the mystic words of illusion and before your eyes a thick, lustrous beard spreads over the king's formerly smooth chin. He strokes it in admiration, surprise appearing in his eyes when he fails to feel the thick hair himself.

'It is not a powerful illusion, my liege, but it should fool any who do not touch it.'

Pouting he gazes down at his chest, ample bosom still very much in evidence. 'And what of these?' he rumbles. Then a smile spreads across his face at the sound of his voice. 'Well at least that's more like it,' he laughs. 'But you better have a more permanent solution in mind, mage.'

You nod. 'With your Almightyness' permission, I would avail of your library and the documentation of your former court wizard in order to attain knowledge to break the curse.

'A capital idea. Go, study! But see you don't take too long. I cannot abide to be in this circus freak form a second longer than I have to!'

Bowing as low as your back will allow, you take your leave of the throne room and make your way to the library.

Several hours later, you are deeply studying a tome entitled "The Sorcerous Eunch" when you hear loud chanting coming from somewhere. Rousing yourself, you make your way to the battlements where a huge mob is chanting and waving placards. By their grim attire you guess they are locals from town. At the head of the crowd are some shaven-headed men wearing white robes and humourless expressions: priests.

'What do they want?' you say to yourself.

'Oh, they want High Priest Celerus. I had him imprisoned.'

You turn to see King Melchion standing behind you. 'Imprisoned the High Priest of Salibria, Sire? But why?'

'He dared to grope the royal breasts,' says the king folding his arms.

'Groped, Sire? Surely you must be mistaken. Everyone knows the High Priest is pure as the driven snow.'

'Everyone might know that, but those of us who know better know he'd give any sailor a run for his money when it comes to the sowing of wild oats. He brushed past me in the corridor without looking and helped himself to a squeeze as he slipped past. You should have seen the look on his face when he saw whose teat he'd just helped himself to. Obviously I couldn't have him spreading word of my temporary condition so I had him clapped in irons.'

'But if you don't release him there'll be a riot, Sire!' you exclaim, indicating the baying crowd below.

The king smirks. 'Oh, I'm sure throwing his charred corpse amongst that unruly rabble would soon leave them running with their tails between their legs.' He notices your unconvinced expression. 'Oh, you decide how best to handle him. I cannot be bothered.'

The king gives you permission to enter the dungeons to interrogate Celerus. A scar-riddled guard admits you into a dank cell where you see Celerus huddled in chains. He looks up at you pleadingly. Will you try to convince him that you'll release him if he keeps quiet about Melchion's predicament (turn to 76) or will you fry him with a spell (turn to 14)?

59

You brush past the guards at the gate and enter the now familiar throne room. The nobles and servants gathered there pay you no heed, but Melchion upon his throne looks up in interest. If the Masterbard is with you, turn to 80. If not, turn to 31.

60

You bring the potion to the king. He grabs it hurriedly, dismissing his guards and courtiers from the throne room. As the last of them leaves, he tears off his false beard and gulps down the entire potion with one swig.

'It's working!' he cries. And sure enough thick dark hair begins sprouting from his chin. Soon he has a handsome beard once more. His ample breasts shrivel up to leave nothing but the muscular chest of a man and his hips shrink inwards. He gives a hearty laugh in the bellowing voice you are most accustomed to.

'Well done, lad!' he says, slapping you on the back with near enough force to knock your teeth out. 'No old witch's curse would have you stumped for long, eh? And as a reward I appoint you my new court wizard!'

This is no idle boast. In the next few hours, a room in the west wing is given to you as your new private quarters and Droomsbury's study is cleaned for your sole use. Feeling pleased with your handling of the situation, you retire to your new quarters, warning Melchion not to do anything too strenuous for the foreseeable future.

'Of course, of course,' he laughs. 'Far be it from me to go against doctor's orders!'

Turn to 3.

61

'That man is a fraud who has taken my throne! Guards! Arrest him!' you call out, an accusing finger pointed at the shocked king. The assembled men and women of the royal court stare in alarm, unsure what to believe. If you are missing your left eye, turn to 26. Otherwise, turn to 83.

62

'A wizard's duel?' he responds, rubbing his nose. 'Hmm, I suppose it's been a while. Right you are then.'

He rises to his feet, backing away from you, muttering words loaded with arcane power. He completes his spell with a theatrical flourish and all of a sudden a swarm of insects fly all over him, surrounding him in a living shield. He smiles smugly through the buzzing barrier. Will you use a wind spell to blow the insects away (turn to 13)? Or do you instead prefer to blast them with a fire spell (turn to 90)?

63

You quickly yell out the words of the spell and hurtle down the corridor as the dense yellow fog erupts in your wake, your captors' curses, but not their footsteps, coming after you. You are just congratulating yourself on a job well done when, in your hurry, you step on a flagstone that sinks ominously into the floor. Suddenly the ground gives way beneath your feet and you plunge downwards to be impaled on a bloodied spike. In the few seconds it takes you to die you curse yourself for thinking that King Melchion's treasures would be so lightly guarded.

64

'Excellent,' says Portas. 'Now hold still. This won't take a moment.' He seizes your left eye in a pincer like grip and pulls! There is a moment of agonizing pain, then all you see is a blurs. Then you feel a cool pressure on your torn eye socket, and the throbbing diminishes. Gazing through your remaining eye in a mosaic of agony, you see Portas holding your left eye in his hand and wearing a broad smile on his face. 'Thanks for that. I've healed your wound. Doesn't look too pretty though.'

'The . . . witch?' you gasp.

'Yes, her. A powerful enchantress that one. I'm not sure you have what it takes to face her.'

'Just . . . tell me where . . .she is.'

Portas sniffs. 'You'll find her in the cottage with green shutters and the overgrown rose garden just outside of town. But you may lose far more than an eye tangling with her.'

Without bothering to thank the diviner, you take your leave of his home. How much should you heed his warning though? If you wish to go to the witch's cottage, turn to **2**. Otherwise, your only option is to return to the castle library and continue your research to find a solution to the king's predicament. Turn to **44**.

65

Mark an X on your Note Sheet. After the past couple of days of travelling, you are heartened to see a small village before you, the smoke of cooking fires and the scent of roasting beef making you increase your pace. As you enter the village, people wave cheerily at you, seemingly delighted to have a stranger in their midst. Following the sound of music on the wind, you find yourself pushing open the door of a thatched-roofed inn. The patrons pay no heed to you, in thrall to the man sitting on a stool in the centre of the inn, dressed in gaudy purple silk and dreamily strumming a lute. He looks up as you stride towards him, a warm smile spreading across his ruggedly handsome visage.

'You seek me?' he asks in a rich, baritone voice.

'I seek the masterbard. Is that you?'

'He is the greatest bard we have ever known,' states a mesmerised young woman, reclining by the minstrel's stool.

'Some have said so,' says the bard with a slight smirk. 'What is it you require of me?'

'You must come with me to King Melchion's castle and play a song to free the king of a dire curse.'

'Nothing would be simpler,' the bard replies. 'But first a song of farewell, perhaps?'

The crowd applaud and cheer at this suggestion. Will you permit the bard to play his song (turn to **73**)? Or will you tell him to hurry up and follow you (turn to **10**)?

66

Did you have the king's soldiers round up all the old women earlier? If so, turn to **81** immediately. Otherwise, read on.

Your guard leads you through the city, the locals stopping to stare in surprise as their apparent liege treads the muddy streets with only one bodyguard. None try anything however and your escort leads you in silence back to the castle, the guards at the gate saluting as you enter.

'Would you like me to escort you to the throne room, Your Mightiness?' asks the soldier. Will you accept (turn to **95**)? If you would prefer to dismiss the guard and sneak back to your quarters, turn to **48**.

67

Without a millisecond to spare, you conjure a shield of magical energy. Portas' magical bolt blasts into your shield and rebounds off it, hurtling into the shocked diviner and knocking him straight to the ground. You must end this quickly! Will you blast him with a fireball by turning to 23? Or will you conjure a hammer of wind to smash down upon his supine form (turn to 39)?

68

He gives you a slap across the face, so hard that it makes your eyes water. 'How dare you!' he snaps. 'Get out of my kingdom! You cannot be seen wearing my face, even if you have managed to disfigure it horribly.'

'But, Sire!' you protest. 'I can still help.'

'Your help has proved as useful as a chocolate fireguard. Now, get out!'

Disgusted, you spit at the king's feet and stride down the corridor. You are sick to the back teeth of Melchion's ingratitude and are only too glad to be banished from his kingdom. Perhaps you will find a more profitable (and hopefully less stressful) life abroad?

69

From the shadows steps yours illusion, a mighty warrior clad in plate mail, fair hair spilling over armoured shoulders, steely blue gaze upon the dwarf woman as he draws his huge broadsword.

'Oh, where have you come from?' says the dwarf, near salivating at the sight of this fine figure of a man. 'Come here, you!' Arms widespread, she bounds towards him. Knowing that physically touching the illusory knight will dispel him, you send him running about the room, keeping him no more than a hair's breadth away from the lusty dwarf.

'Oo, I love it when they play hard to get!' she cries before finally pouncing upon him, a look of dismay crossing her face as he disappears in a cloud of smoke before she crashes head first into the brick wall, laying her out flat. The false bard gives a howl of anguish, but you pay him no heed, working a subtle enchantment on your manacles. With a squeak, they pop open and you leap forward, freeing the other captives while the false bard just sobs over his fallen mistress. You are all for leaving this depraved pair to their own devices, but the red-bearded man grabs the howling minstrel by the head and snaps his neck with a sickening crunch before taking an axe from the corner and hacking his former "mistress" to pieces while the young man with the sunken eyes jumps up and down with glee and the barbarian and old man nod approvingly.

'Now this village will be safe to travellers once more,' grunts Red Beard. 'Though I've half a mind to dish out the same treatment to the villagers.'

You learn that your four new friends were also hunting the masterbard and fell into the same trap orchestrated by the minstrel and his mistress. All are eager to return home and none wish to continue their search for the elusive masterbard. Before he leaves, the barbarian stops to offer you some advice.

'There is supposedly a wise woman who lives to the east,' he says. 'She may be able to help you in your search. I would avoid the village however. The fools who live there will probably be heartbroken once they discover the fate of their beloved bard.'

You thank him and follow the rest of them out of the building, which turn out to be an old farmhouse on a hill overlooking the village. Bidding farewell to the four, you continue your search. Turn to 8.

You cast your spell and the King's breasts seem to vanish. Melchion looks down at his chest in surprise. 'But I can still feel them,' he says in a more masculine voice than before.

'That's because they are still there, Your Greatness, but no-one should be able to see them. It should help you hide your plight until I can find a more permanent solution. You'll have to keep wearing your false beard however.'

'Oh, very well,' he snaps. 'In the meantime I shall have the chamberlain prepare rooms for you. I want you close 'til this business is over.'

You spend the rest of the day looking through the books in the library and in the former court wizard, Tylenax Droomsbury's personal collection. When the sun has set, you are no closer to finding a way to break the enchantment. With a sigh, you retire to your new chambers.

You are awoken from dreams of being hanged, drawn and quartered by a hermaphrodite monarch by a loud knocking on your door. Stretching, you climb out of bed and open the door to see a concerned looking manservant.

'It's his Highness,' he explains. 'He has locked himself in his chambers and is screaming in pain, but he says none but you can help him. Please come.'

Surprised that Melchion can inspire such concern in his servants, you nod and follow the man to the king's room. The most horrific screams are coming from behind the closed door although your professional pride is warmed to hear they are masculine screams. Several worried looking servants and guards are gathered outside the door, unsure of what to do. You push past them and knock on the door. The screeching stops.

'Who is it?' demands Melchion.

'It is Davor the wizard, Sire. Please let me in.'

The door is hurriedly unbolted and edged open, a hand seizing you by the collar and pulling you through the portal before slamming and locking the door behind you.

'Now how can I assist you, my li- gah!'

The cause of your outcry is Melchion's face which is covered in a swathe of red itchy blisters behind his beard.

'I wanted to make my disguise better so I glued this beard on,' the king explains. 'Only I'm having a reaction to the glue. It's agony! Help me get the blasted thing off!' He then proceeds to scream once more, making deliberating how best to tackle the situation that much harder. You could try to pull the beard off with your bare hands (turn to 41), or use your magic to burn the hair off (turn to 35) or to freeze the glue (turn to 53).

'When did you learn magic?' questions a gaunt-faced guard.

'I have been learning magic form the wizard Davor,' you say thinking fast.

'Davor? Ha!' laughs another guard. 'Shouldn't take him too long to teach you all he knows.'

You glower. 'Well, be that as it may -' You are interrupted by someone grabbing your arm and pulling in close to you. You turn in surprise to see Melchion, still openly female, squeezing up next to you.

'Oh, noble king,' he says. 'You saved me from those foul bandits!'

'What are you doing?' you whisper down his ear.

'Just play along,' he hisses. 'I've worked out you're Davor. And without me it won't be long before they work it out either.'

'Um, indeed I did!' you pronounce grandly. 'Now guards take these cretins to my dankest, darkest cell and let them never again see the light of day!'

The vagabonds spit at your feet as the guards drag them off. You stoop over to rub the slabber off your

shoe. 'You'll get used to that,' sighs Melchion as the last of the guards disappears down the corridor. 'Trust me.'

You stare at him, trying to read the mood behind those beautiful emerald eyes. 'What is it you are planning, Sire?'

He waves his hand irritably. 'Enough of this "Sire" business. Tell the truth, the more I've thought about becoming "him" again, the more disgusted I feel. I don't know if this is part of the curse, but somehow I feel ... better like this.'

'But the people will never let you rule,' you protest.

He smiles, red lips curving saucily. 'No. But they might accept King Melchion's queen ruling jointly with him.'

Your brow furrows in confusion. Then realization rushes breathlessly through you. 'You mean -?'

'Why not?' he asks, embracing you. 'Think of the power you'll achieve. Much more than being a court sorcerer would ever have afforded you.'

You start to protest but then your eyes catch the twinkle in her own. 'Why not? Melchia.'

Turn to 100.

72

Mark an X on your Note Sheet. The way is arduous, a hike through the snow covered mountains where passes are few and goats are many. Several times you nearly slip from icy pathways to your doom amongst the pointed crags. At night you hear the cries of vicious creatures and you shiver with fear as much as from cold. These inhospitable lands are the home of many of the kingdom's foulest beasts. Fortunately for you, you encounter none as you at last begin your descent from the mountains, reaching the foothills to find yourself confronted by a vast swathe of green forest, more dense than any wood you have ever seen before. The second you enter, the sunlight disappears behind the thick canopy of trees and a deafening cacophony of insect-buzzing and bird-chirping is all about you. Following the root covered path-way before you, you stumblingly make your way forward.

After several hours of journeying, you emerge into a small clearing. A treehouse in a poor-state of repair sits nestled in the bows of a mighty oak in the centre of the clearing, a tattered rope ladder hanging down from the doorway. It looks long-since abandoned. Just as you are contemplating whether or not it's worth investigating, you hear the unmistakable sound of singing in the distance. And not just any signing, but the happiest, most melodious you have ever heard. You feel almost entranced by the voices, whose singing ceases every now and again to be replaced with tittering laughter. Will you go onwards to investigate these voices (turn to 33)? Or will you first decide to visit the treehouse by turning to 7?

73

He begins to sing in a liltingly sonorous voice, the crowd swaying at the beautiful melody he plucks on his lute. You find yourself putting an arm round the man next to you, your heart filling with feelings of fraternity for these strangers as the glorious song washes over you like a warm stream. You feel so content and relaxed, that your eyelids begin to droop and you slowly fall to the floor, fast asleep. Turn to 17.

74

As the foul jackal demon closes, you feel a horrible burning at your back. Suddenly your shirt bursts into flames and a massive bull-headed beast emerges from between your shoulder blades, bellowing in the face of the jackal loud enough to make the very walls shake. The jackal screeches and disappears in a

puff of smoke. The bull bellows one more time and then turns to flame once more, the fires being drawn into the tattoo of your back and then extinguished, leaving you remarkably unharmed. The terrified nobles, servants and soldiers cautiously come back into the room, surveying the debris of Salibria's statue in tear-stained shock.

'What have you done?' mutters one woman before she faints, caught by her husband who turns to Melchion accusingly.

'You have sold your soul to Zytherr!' he cries. 'I always knew you were despicable, Melchion, but to throw your lot in with the Dark Lord is a step too far.'

'How dare you speak to me in this way?' the king snaps. 'Guards! Arrest him!'

But the guards make no move to do so. In fact, they are glowering at their king, one or two of them even reaching for their swords. You put a warning hand on Melchion's shoulder. 'Come, Sire. I think we should make ourselves scarce.'

He turns to reprimand you, but seeing the seriousness in your eyes and the abject hatred in those of his subjects, his face turns ashen. 'Yes. Maybe you're right.'

The two of you turn and flee, Melchion's subjects showering abuse and missiles upon you as you dash through the castle corridors and out into the wilderness.

'This is all your fault!' cries Melchion when the castle is finally out of sight. 'What foul bargain did you strike?'

'Would you rather have remained a woman?' you snap.

'Yes actually. It was starting to have an appeal,' he replies, almost wistfully.

The two of you bicker like this for many years, forced into exile from your homelands by the evil taint that hangs over you forever more. Yet with only each other for company, you dare not go your separate ways. In time, you both find solace in a fishing village in the Kingdom of Unoria. Your magical skills make your new profession of mending nets a doddle and even the former king admits that there could be worse lives. But, on the other hand, there could be much better lives.

75

'Seize the imposter!' you declare, pointing up at the startled king from under the heap of bandits. The guards look confused, dithering over what to do. In the end, one puts a hand upon Melchion's shoulder, only to have his head lopped off by the guard behind him! What follows next is nothing short of pandemonium as the guards begin fighting one another, unsure of which king to trust. The bandits leap into the fray, hacking and slashing all about them.

'Grab the king!' bellows the vagabond leader.

'Which one?' cries one of his cronies before a sword is driven through his chest.

You try to make good your escape, buffeting back all who come near you with a wind spell. At last you slip past the fracas and race down the corridor, only to find the real Melchion waiting for you, his false beard hanging half-off and a sword clutched in his hands.

'Catch!' he yells, throwing the sword at you. It's a weak throw however and falls well short of you . . . straight on top of the pressure pad you nearly stepped on earlier! The floor gives way beneath you, leaving you barely time for a strangled 'Aieeeee!' before you land upon the sharp spikes that await. The last thing you hear is Melchion's feminine laughter as Death comes for you.

76

'So what do you think you saw?' you demand.

He eyes you warily. 'I know what it is I saw. That is no king wearing the royal robes. When my flock hear of this, they shall tear him from his throne!'

A Strange Week For King Melchion The Despicable

'And how will they hear of it?'

'I shall tell them! The goddess Salibria would expect nothing less of her most humble servant.'

'And I believe the goddess also expects her "most humble servant" to keep his hands to himself. I wonder what your flock would make of the circumstances which led to you discovering the king's secret? A high priest with friendly hands would not maintain his position long, I think. Especially not when there are so many younger servants of the goddess eager to climb the ranks.'

He looks defiant at you, but a wobbling of his Adam's apple betrays that he knows the veracity of your words. You notice a silver amulet in the shape of a half-sun hanging from his neck. You tear it from him, the cord ripping against the back of his neck.

'That's my holy symbol!' he starts. 'You can't take that!'

'I think I can,' you smile. 'Don't be afeared. You can have it back soon. But if you tell even a single soul about his Majesty's predicament, I'll have it melted down and distributed amongst the poor. After I have told your flock about your true nature, of course. Now, will you behave yourself?'

He shoots you a glare of bitter hatred. 'Very well.'

'Excellent.' You turn to leave with a spring in your step, telling the guards outside to release the priest. Happy with how you handled the situation, you head for your chambers; you could do with an early night. Record the holy symbol on your Note Sheet before turning to **40**.

77

The blast sends the soldiers who make up the creature's head flying. Unfortunately, such a magical construct need no brain for thought and it is therefore quite capable of functioning without a head. The squirming mass of men that is its arm is brought down heavily upon you. Your adventure ends as a red stain on the castle battlements.

78

She smiles, her grin varying in brilliance as her form changes. 'You clearly care for Melchion. But ask no more of me. You have the power to make everything right for your liege. Return to the castle.' So saying, she closes the door behind her, leaving you to shake your head and walk back to the castle.

Your journey through the city is an odd one. Everywhere you go people stare and gasp, some urchins pointing at you in disbelief while a scarred, bald-headed man spits at your feet before ducking into a shadowy pub. A passing soldier from the castle rushes over to you, throwing himself prostrate to the ground.

'My liege,' he grovels. 'Are you alright? What brings you the city without an escort?'

Confused you turn to stare at yourself in a saucepan hanging from the rack of a nearby shop. By the gods; you look identical to King Melchion! (If you have lost your left eye it is still missing however). The soldier looks up at you expectantly. Will you order him to escort you back to "your" castle (turn to **66**)? Or do you prefer to dismiss him and make your own way back (turn to **19**)?

79

'Wait a minute,' says one of the guards, a burly fellow with a thick blond beard. 'Our king didn't have an eye missing. But the one who was with those bandits did!'

'Yeah. And our king is no magician neither,' spits another.

'My friends, I can explain everything, you say with hands raised protectively.

'Don't let him, he'll cast a spell on us!' shouts a third guard.

'No, I won't. Just listen!'

'We ain't listening to you!' pronounces the first guard, raising his sword. The others follow suit.

'Curse you all!' you cry and unleash a barrage of icicles upon them with a wave of your hands. Two of them go down, but before you can cast another spell they are upon you, pushing you to the floor before thrusting their swords into your chest. Your life ends here.

80

Without a word, the masterbard begins playing her lyranthe. A tune unlike any you have ever heard fills the cavernous throne room. The courtiers cease their conspiratorial chattering, wanting no sound to disturb the beautiful melody. And beautiful it is. Your heart soars with every note, your mouth wishing to hum along, though you know not the tune. Misty-eyed, Melchion rises from his throne, a smile upon his face. Then he drops his robe, his feminine figure displayed in his underclothes. Seemingly oblivious, he strides down the room towards you, tearing off his beard and dropping it to the floor, and removing his pony tail, letting his sultry raven locks fall about his shoulders. Rather than gasp in alarm, all present cheer as Melchion comes up to you. You gaze into his emerald eyes, blown away by their beauty, the masterbard's music setting all your nerves racing. Knowing that you wish to do no other thing more right now, you grab Melchion by the waist and passionately kiss his full lips, his slender hands sliding up your back as you embrace. If you are missing your left eye or your face is hideously scarred, turn to 37. If not, turn to 49.

81

'There he is!' croaks a voice as you are just about to take your leave of the city. You turn to face a gaggle of geriatric women, holding rolling pins, rakes and other impromptu weapons menacingly as they converge upon you.

'Think it's alright to round up helpless old women, do ya?' snarls a woman whose beefy arms give no indication of helplessness.

'Yeah. You don't seem so tough without them soldiers of yours about!' yells an even larger woman behind her, white curls shaking with fury.

'My dear women, I think you have mistaken me for someo-'

'Get 'im!'

It's a novel experience being beaten to death by an angry mob of octogenarians. For people who are not known for their alacrity, they certainly fall upon you with great speed, the one fireball you manage to get off doing little to push them back. A knitting needle through your ribs is quickly followed by the crack of a rolling pin against your skull. After that you lose consciousness. And after that you lose your head.

82

You grab Melchion roughly by the shoulders. His eyes go wide in surprise as you plant a passionate kiss full on his lips just as the guard enters.

'Oh, I'm sorry, My Lord,' he stammers. 'I'll leave you be.'

It is only when he closes the door behind him that you realise that Melchion is kissing you back, slim fingers digging into your back. You push him back in alarm, the two of you staring at each other in mutual confusion. If you are missing your left eye, turn to 68. Otherwise, turn to 46.

'What madness is this?' yells Melchion. 'If anyone is an imposter here, it is you! Guards, execute him!' The guards look uncertainly from one Melchion to another.

'Stay your hands, my soldiers,' you cry. 'If you inspect this fraud on the throne, you will find his beard is false and that it is none other than a woman!'

'Preposterous!' shrieks Melchion effeminately. All turn to him in shock. One thick-set guard climbs the steps and tugs at the beard, his eyebrows shooting up in shock as a smooth chin is revealed beneath. 'It is a woman!' he gasps. All the courtiers begin to speak in one great hubbub as the guards march on the throne and seize the pleading Melchion.

'Throw her from the castle walls!' you command, taking your seat on the throne. Mmm, comfy. You could get used to this. And you do, ruling for the next forty years and enjoying as many kingly pleasures as possible. You prove to be no less despicable than the real Melchion, but the peasants are too downtrodden to revolt so you don't let it worry you overmuch.

You rise up into the air, pulling the still-rigid hair with you as you climb towards the clouds. There is a shriek from the tower as its occupant is dragged out of the open window by her hair. By her lithe figure, pointed ears and foul language you guess her to be one of the vicious fey folk who prey on the unwary and foolish.

'Put me down!' she yells.

'Certainly,' you say with a smile, the hair no longer crushing you. 'If you tell me where to find the masterbard.'

She howls in a mixture of anger and agony. 'Alright! Alright! The masterbard lives in the forest to the east of here. Now, put me down!'

'Very well.' You descend slowly, letting her release her grip and drop lightly to the ground. She hisses up at you before striding away with her skinny arms folded, leaving you safe to lower yourself to the ground once more. Pleased with your handling of the situation, you set off in search of the masterbard once more. Return to 8.

You sip the tea slowly - and the second you do, a whirl of colours surround you and you feel almost like you are leaving your body, leaving yourself . . .

'C'mon, Dave,' calls your partner, Borawski, as he pulls on his hat and overcoat. 'Boss says we got a homicide on our hands.'

'Whereabouts?' you ask, rising from your desk to grab your own hat and coat.

'Where else these days?' laughs Borawski. 'But get this: it's only a goddamn shemale!'

The two of you barge out the precinct doors, climbing into Borawski's car. Your partner takes the wheel, joining the sluggish city traffic.

'So what do we know about the victim?' you ask, as the car trundles onwards.

'Not much. Performer at the Kitty Kat Kastle. Called herself Queenie. Or called himself Queenie. Whatever.'

'You should really be a bit more enlightened, Borawski,' you sigh as the vehicle glides past a yellow taxi.

'Hey, there's a lotta things I should be. Or so my therapist's always telling me. And if I don't listen to her, what makes ya think I'd listen to you?'

The car pulls up at the crime scene, an alleyway behind the Kitty Kat Kastle. A uniformed cop waves at you as you climb out of the car.

'Victim's here,' he says pointing towards a black-haired woman in a white dress leaning against the red-brick

wall. Red welts on her neck make it fairly clear that her death was due to strangulation.

'Hey, this one's pretty damn convincing,' laughs Borawski. 'Never would've figured she was packing heat if I didn't know.'

'Any witnesses?' you ask the cop.

'Just one,' he says, pointing to a red-haired teenage girl standing in the shadows playing a harmonica nervously.

'I'll go talk to her,' you say, leaving Borawski to make his inspection of the body.

'And you are?' you say to the girl, taking out your notebook and pencil.

'Hailey. Hailey Ronson,' she answers, pocketing her harmonica.

'Well, Miss. Ronson, would you mind telling me what you saw?'

'I saw her die. And she could have saved herself.'

'And how could she have done that?'

'She couldn't on her own. She needed help. Your help.'

'My help? How could I have helped?'

She smiles. 'You were her lifeline. You are her lifeline.'

'What do you mean?'

She smiles and passes you her harmonica, which you pocket unthinkingly. Her smile becomes bright, impossibly bright. The colour swirl before your eyes and you scrunch your eyes shut. You open them to a very different place entirely.

You lower the cup and blink a couple of times. The old crone is standing over you, rubbing her hands eagerly. 'You saw? You saw?' she asks.

'Um, yes, I saw,' you stammer. 'If you'll excuse me, I must be going.'

Shaking your befuddled head, you clamber out of the strange house and take your leave of the place. Just as you are dismissing your vision as nonsense, your hand brushes something hard in the pocket of your robe. Reaching inside, you pull out the harmonica the girl gave you. Record it on your Note Sheet. Feeling more than a little disconcerted, you continue your hunt for the masterbard. Return to 8.

86

If a tapioca can look confused, this one does for the briefest second before it explodes, covering all in the chamber in a gooeey mess. The guests look down at their ruined garments in utter silence - and then burst into applause!

'Bravo, old boy,' says a bearded lord, giving you a hearty slap on the back with enough force that you see stars. The other guests are similarly impressed and shower you with praise. Even King Melchion seems pleased. The royal bard even composes a song in your honour:

'Hark to the tale of Davor!

Of wizards, there's none braver!

He slew a beast of tapioca!

A feat that's hardly mediocre!'

It goes on like this. The bard then takes quill to parchment and offers you a scroll of the lyrics. You graciously accept and then retire to your chambers, the guests still chattering about your mighty deed. After all that excitement, you could do with a good night's sleep! Note the scroll on your Note Sheet, then turn to 40.

87

The soldiers that make up the creature's leg go flying into different directions as your fireball blasts them, causing the gigantic golem to fall forward into the castle battlements, shattering into its constituent members as it smashes into the castle wall. Groggily, the soldiers crawl to their feet. None seem hurt, even

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the ones who you hit with the fireball. You race down the stone steps to the gate to ask one of them what strange fate befell them to turn them into such a bizarre creature.

'I'm not sure exactly,' says the guard, rubbing the back of his neck. 'We were rounding up the women as you told us, and we came to this cottage with green shutters, just outside of town. This old woman came out the door and . . . said something. Next thing I knew, we were all lying about here.'

The guard gives you directions to the cottage. As you turn to go, he puts a restraining hand upon your shoulder. 'I warn you, wizard. I think this woman may have powers well above your own.'

Perhaps he has a point. Perhaps you should retire to the castle library and research alternative methods to break the enchantment. To do so, turn to **44**. If you are determined to seek out the old enchantress, turn to **2**.

88

A merciful move, but a foolish one. Within hours of you letting the terrified maid skedaddle off, everyone in the castle is talking about Melchion's situation. The king is soon exposed and dethroned. But before that he has a chance to have you boiled alive in oil. That'll teach you to be merciful.

89

Mark an X on your Note Sheet. The sun is high in the sky when you come across a strange sight indeed. Perched in the foothills of the reddish mountains that dominate these lands is a wooden hut perched atop what appears to be a giant chicken leg! As you approach, an old hag with greasy clumps of grey hair hanging down her jaundiced face peeks out at you from the open doorway.

'Come up! Come up!' she cackles. 'I have much to tell you.' With that, she lowers a rope ladder from her doorway, beckoning you to climb up with a long talon of a finger. Will you climb the ladder by turning to **34**? Otherwise, you take your leave of the horrible crone. Return to **8**.

90

Your fireball blasts into the swarm, incinerating dozens of them, their charred bodies dropping to the ground. Unfortunately, the surviving insects flock towards you, stinging you on every bit of flesh you have. There's no way you can cast a spell with the vicious swarm all about you. In agony from the hundreds of stings you scream for mercy, yielding the duel. With a wave of his hand, Portas sends the insects away.

'Well, that was easy,' he says simply. 'That'll be one eye please.'

You gulp, but there's no way you can refuse him his request now he has defeated you fair and square. 'Alright. But let me do it myself.' Seizing your left eye with your left hand you cast a healing spell upon your socket with your right hand as you tug the eye from your socket. It is pulled free in a blinding moment of agony and then your vision clears once more. Your socket healing already, you pass the bloodied eye to the grateful diviner. Muttering, you return to the castle, hoping to discover some other means of solving Melchion's predicament. Note down that you are missing your left eye before turning to **44**.

91

The lightning bolt passes through you harmlessly and you return to normal tangibility with a grin of infinite smugness on your face. A grin that soon fades when the lightning bolt bounces off a tree and comes back to smash into your back, knocking you face first to the ground! You raise your head to see Portas standing over you, a massive fireball growing in his chubby hands.

'Do you yield?' he demands.

'Yes. Yes I yield,' you pant.

With a nod he quells the brewing ball of fire before extending a hand to help you up. 'You were unlucky there,' he admits. 'Still the rules are the rules and I ask for my payment. One eye, if you please.'

'Alright,' you say. 'But let me do it.'

He nods again. Seizing your left eye with your left hand you cast a healing spell upon your socket with your right hand as you tug the eye from your socket. It is pulled free in a blinding moment of agony and then your vision clears once more. Your socket healing already, you pass the bloodied eye to the grateful diviner. Muttering, you return to the castle, hoping to discover some other means of solving Melchion's predicament. Note down that you are missing your left eye before turning to 44.

92

You pull out the harmonica and pass it to her. Her youthful forehead creases as she scrutinizes it. She then brings it to her lips and plays a little tune. As she does so, you feel an uncontrollable urge to dance. You place your hands on your hips and kick your legs up and down repeatedly, punctuating each kick with a 'Hah!' She stops playing and starts to chuckle.

'A fine gift indeed,' she says. 'Come on then, we'd best get moving.'

Smiling, you lead her westwards, eager to return to Melchion and finally free him of his curse. Turn to 47.

93

The bolt of lightning comes shrieking from your hand, hitting the shocked bandit full on the face before bouncing off the wall behind him and blazing a hole through two guards. It hits wall after wall, taking out guards and vagabonds indiscriminately. Finally it screams through the terrified Melchion before blasting you in the back as you try to flee up the corridor. You are killed instantly by several hundred volts of electricity.

94

He shrugs. 'As you insist.' The villagers moan and scowl, but the bard holds up a restraining hand. 'Now, my friends. This man has travelled many leagues in search of me and is most likely in a hurry to get back. I shall return here soon enough, never fear.' Amidst the sighs of resignation, the bard stands, wraps his scarlet cloak about him and swings his lute upon his back. 'Lead on,' he says.

You lead him out of the village, the inhabitants weeping to see their beloved masterbard leaving them. A couple of miles later, you are crossing a stone bridge over the River Foyan when the bard stops to point at something in the water. 'Would you look at that?' he says in amazement.

You turn, eyebrows knotting in confusion before you feel a great force crashing into the back of your head as the bard bring his lute smashing down upon you with an almost musical note. You tumble into the water, the world turning dark. Turn to 17.

95

The soldier leads you through the torchlit stone corridors of the castle to the throne room. Courtiers and servants that you pass look bewildered for a second before shaking their heads and hurrying on.

'All hail the King!' announces your escort before joining everyone else in attendance in the throne room to stand agape as you enter to face your likeness already atop his ivory throne, his mouth open wide

behind his false beard. Will you seize the initiative and demand your guards arrest the imposter who dares to sit on your throne (turn to 61)? Or will you keep quiet and see what unfolds by turning to 9?

96

'Well, what do you want?!' you demand as the guard enters, Melchion having already scurried under the bed.

He looks around uncertainly. 'I am sorry, Sire. I thought I heard voi- Stand aside, My Lord!' He pushes past you and leaps upon the bed, plunging his sword downwards through the mattress to impale the unfortunate Melchion beneath.

'What are you doing?!' you cry in alarm.

'An assassin was skulking beneath your bed, Sire,' he insists, his proud grin fading.

'That was no assassin, you blithering idiot! Look what you've done!'

He goes pale, removing his sword and dragging Melchion's body out from under the bed. Sweat pouring from his brow, he feels for the king's pulse. 'She's dead . . .'

'Well, of course she's bloody dead. You spitted her like a pig!'

'I am so sorry, Highness!' he whimpers. 'It's just I'm new here and my mother always told me to make a good impression as soon as possible.'

'Just find someone to clean that up,' you snap, pointing down at Melchion's bleeding corpse.

The over-eager guard departs, leaving you to sit fuming in a gilded chair, your arms folded. But as the minutes pass, you begin to think he may have done you a favour. The king is dead, no-one knows this apart from you, and you look exactly like him. The guard returns, leading a couple of servants with a stretcher. You smile at him, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. 'I never caught your name?'

'Um, it's Humphrey, Your Majesty.'

'Well, Humphrey, I do believe it may be time to discuss your promotion.'

97

'I believe it is an enchantment that plagues Your Magnificence. If you permit me I shall attempt to dispel it.'

Melchion nods and you begin muttering the words of undoing and waving your arms in a mystical manner. There is a flash of blue light, then a squeaky pop sound and a smell of sulphur. The king grabs his chest, alarmed to feel his breasts still there. 'You have failed!' he snarls.

You shake your head. 'It is powerful sorcery indeed that has been worked on you, Sire. I am confident I can find a way to dispel it with some research however. In the meantime, I could cast an illusion over you to cover up the symptoms. However I only have power enough to cover up only a couple of aspects for the time being.'

'Very well then,' the King snaps. 'But you had best find a way to rid me of this enchantment sooner rather than later. For your sake!'

You nod and begin casting your illusion spell. Which aspects of the enchantments will you disguise?

Melchion's voice and lack of facial hair?

Turn to 58.

His voice and breasts?

Turn to 70.

His breasts and lack of beard?

Turn to 43.

The high priest takes the amulet from you with a faint hiss of satisfaction. 'Begin the rite!' he cries out.

The lesser priests come out of the shadows, beginning a bizarre dance that seems to require contortions of the spine that no human being should be able to achieve. A terrible drumming begins from out of the darkness, reverberating in the high ceilinged cathedral, and the tempo of the dance increases, the acolytes letting out a shrieking undulating cry as they leap amongst each other, waving arms and legs about in seeming ecstasy.

'Ula excar Zytterr! Nodos protas Salibria! Escio Melchior Tes!' chants the high priest holding the amulet aloft. A chillingly blue fire erupts from the relic and it dissolves in the priest's hand. All at once, the dancing and the drumming cease and the priest lets his arms fall by his sides. 'It is done. Now leave this place.'

You need no encouragement. Without a backward glance, you hurry from this dark place. An hour later, you stand before the castle, the guards letting you in without comment. When you enter the throne room, Melchion walks over to you, lowering his voice as he pulls you near. 'You've done it. I don't know what you did, but you did it,' he whispers.

But before you can reply, there is an awful hissing noise from behind the throne. All turn in alarm to see the statue of Salibria, glowing red and seemingly melting from the inside. The hissing grows louder and then the statue bursts in a pillar of flame. The flame expands, forming a portal in the air. And from that portal steps forth a horrifying being, a monstrous bipedal jackal, with razor sharp fangs dripping with saliva, claw-like hands flexing as it focuses its red-eyed gaze upon you. With a bound, it races towards you as everyone else runs screaming. If you have a bull tattoo, turn to 74. Otherwise, no spell affects the horrible monster. It tears your heart clean out of your chest, biting into it with its cruel teeth. And you are but the first of many.

The hair ignites easily. Unfortunately so does your clothing. As the hair's owner screams from above and releases her grip on you, you tumble to the ground aflame. You roll round the grass, hoping to put out the flame which has spread to your hands, hair and face. At last, the fire is smothered and you smokily rise to the ground. Feeling your face, you fight back tears as you find the crevasses of scars and blistered skin that it now is. No healing spell will allow you to fully recover. Record that your face is hideously scarred on your Note Sheet. Cursing the unseen occupant of the tower, you head off for pastures new. Return to 8 to continue your hunt for the masterbard.

You and Melchia are married in the Spring and declared joint monarchs to the jubilant congratulations of your subjects. Where before Melchion was cruel and depraved, Melchia is a much more kindly and virtuous ruler, spending taxes on grand schemes to help the people and solving petty disputes with keen judgement and irreproachable wisdom. You find yourself completely in love with this brilliant, beautiful woman and your happiness spreads throughout the kingdom, ushering in a golden age the likes of which had never been seen before and never will be again.

One day, years later, you are strolling through your royal gardens, sampling the fragrant bouquet that wafts from the myriad of multi-coloured flowers, when an old woman appears from behind a rose bush.

'Can I help you, madam?' you ask.

She chuckles. 'You have done that already. You have made Melchia accept herself.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Melchia. It was I who restored her, many years ago.'

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Your eyes widen in realization. 'You were the witch who cursed her?'

She smiles. 'Not cursed. As I said, I restored her.'

As she speaks, her form changes, her stature growing, her wrinkles fading, and her grey hair turning a brilliant gold. She looks oddly familiar to you. And then you realise that she is the image of the statue of the goddess Salibria in the throne room. You drop to your knees in abjection.

'Enough of that,' she smiles. 'Arise. You are worthy to stand in my presence.'

You do so, reluctantly, in total awe of being in company with the divine. 'But, My Lady, what did you mean by restoring Melchia?'

'Exactly what I said. Melchia was born a girl, but her father, King Balthan, could not bear not to have a son. He suppressed all news of Melchia's birth and then prayed to me, requested that I change his daughter to a boy. In my folly I acquiesced. Melchia became Melchion.'

You stand gaping before her.

'But things did not prove as simple as I, in my divine foolishness, had expected. Melchia was never meant to be male. Her unhappiness made her cruel, depraved and in trying to suppress her natural femininity, she engaged in wanton sexual acts. When I visited her as Melchion all those years ago, I saw nothing redeemable about her. I needed to restore her to her true form. And she needed something else.'

'And that was?'

'Love. Your love.' The goddess smiles and a warm feeling runs down your body from head to toe. She then fades into golden fireflies, which scatter away on the winds, leaving you alone once more. You stand there smiling for what seems like hours. And then, whistling merrily, you return to your throne room and your beautiful wife.