

Story 1678 (1961 Tape erased after transcription) Narrator: Ayşe Güldemir, 16

Location: Ankara, but came from a village in the kaza of Almus in Tokat Province

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The Stepdaughter and the Black Serpent

Once there was and once there wasn't, when Allah's creatures were many and it was a sin to talk too much-- well, in those times there was a padishah who ruled over a great kingdom. But this ruler had no son

"Someday," he thought, "I am going to die, and my kingdom will be broken up. There will be no one to rule in my place." He made vows, offered sacrifices, and watched whole nights in prayer. But the heavens remained mute. Then one day the padishah could restrain himself no longer. "O Allah all-powerful, if indeed You exist, prove Your existence; give me a son, even if he is only a serpent.

Now, this was the hour when the gates of heaven were open, and the prayer reached the divine ear. In nine months, nine days, and nine hours,¹ the padishah's wife

¹Regardless of the actual length of time required for human gestation, the folktale formula for that period is nine months, nine days, nine hours (and often nine minutes.)

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bore a son, a black serpent. Nurses were called to care for him, but he bit everyone who approached him, and he thus killed one after another all the nurses who tried to rear him. Terror reigned in the country because the padishah's servants sought unceasingly the wives daughters of the peasants to serve as nurses of the monster.

But there was a poor young girl, beautiful and wise, who lived in a cottage with her stepmother. The stepmother hated her and had long wished to be rid of her. When the padishah's soldiers passed through her village, even though all the other women of the village had hidden in the forest, the stepmother opened her door and pointed out her stepdaughter. "Come, my girl," she said. "It is an honor to serve as nurse to the prince. Go, now, and follow the soldiers."

The poor girl left without a word, but she knew that the road she would walk led straight to death. As they went, they passed by a small graveyard. "Oh, soldiers, begged the girl, "we are passing by the cemetery where my mother is buried, at the foot of those tall cypress trees Please let me kneel at her grave."

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soldiers stopped, and the young girl threw herself down on her mother's grave. "Oh, Mother, I have come to you," she cried. "In whom else can I confide my grief? Do you hear me, Mother? My stepmother is sending me as nurse to the serpent prince!"

her mother answered her from the depths of the earth: "Oh, my daughter, do not fear the black serpent. As soon as you arrive at the palace, ask for a golden box, held by two handles, and having the cover pierced by seven holes. Through these seven holes pour the milk of seven cows and present it to the black serpent. He will come and plunge himself into the creamy milk. Immediately close the lid and put the box into a diamond cradle. If other dangers threaten you, come again to me."

The young girl took comfort from her mother's words. She kissed the grave, and then she returned to the soldiers. They hastened to the palace, where the stepdaughter, following her mother's directions, tempted the black serpent with the milk. He entered the golden box and she placed it, tightly sealed, in a diamond cradle. The serpent prince grew and grew. When he was hungry, he found a new golden box full of milk, and, satisfied, slept again. Soon peace

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returned to the country, and the girl was taken back to her stepmother's cottage.

But the prince had grown large. In seven months he was the size of a seven-year-old. One day he said to his mother, who sat by him daily, "Mother, Mother, ask the padishah my father to find me teachers and books so that I may learn to read and write."

The padishah's wife went to find her husband. "lord, our prince the black serpent wants to learn to read. He wishes teachers and books. What do you say?"

"My wife, there is no lack--Allah be praised!--scholars in this kingdom." And the very next day a hoca² with an ample turban and white beard was summoned to the palace. But scarcely had the black serpent left the box when he threw himself on the old man and killed him with a crushing bite. One after another, scholars came to teach the prince, and one after another they met the same fate. Soon there was not a scholar left in the court, and the palace soldiers were sent out in search of the most humble

²A hoca is a preacher and the religious leader of a community. In pre-Republican times the hoca was also the community teacher. Separation of church and state in the Republic required that teachers be people of secular rather than of religious training.

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village teachers. They came at last to the cottage where the young girl lived with her stepmother.

The stepmother opened the door at once. "Ah, don't you know you have found here what you have been seeking? She who nursed the serpent is surely able to teach him to read." And she thrust the young girl toward the soldiers.

"You are right," said an officer. "No one at the palace had thought of that. Come, my girl, and teach our prince to read."

Again, as they went, they passed by the small graveyard. "Oh, please, sirs," she begged. "May I stop for a moment to kneel at my mother's grave?"

The soldiers, pitying the young girl, stopped their march, and the girl ran and threw herself down on her mother's grave. "Oh, Mother," she cried, "I have come to you again. To whom else can I confide my grief? This time my stepmother has sent me to teach the serpent prince to read."

From beneath the earth came the mother's voice: "My dear daughter, the serpent prince will do you no harm. Cut from my tomb a branch of the rosebush and a branch of holly. If he will not obey, or if he does not read to

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suit you, strike him four times with the branch of the rosebush and once with the branch of holly. At the end of forty days, he will read. Go, my daughter, and if other dangers threaten you, come again to me."

The young girl did as her mother had said. When the black serpent came out of his box, he recognized his nurse. But as he was raising his head, hissing, the stepdaughter struck him four times with the branch from the rosebush and once with the branch of holly. Then the serpent stopped before the open book and read on the first page the first letter of the alphabet: "Aaaaaa."

The padishah was listening at the door. "Our prince is learning to read. Allah be praised!"

The black serpent took advantage of his lessons, and the young girl was again returned to her stepmother's cottage. "Are you back again, you worthless girl?" said the stepmother as the girl entered, and again the girl found nothing but abuse and misery

The serpent grew larger, and he sent a message to his father the padishah, "My father, I wish now to marry."

"My son," his father answered, "there are many girls in my kingdom. Choose any girl you wish

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day, a girl who pleased the young prince was brought to him. But in the morning they found her dead and without blood. Another girl met the same fate. In forty nights he caused forty brides to die.

Again the palace guards were sent out, knocking at all the doors, seeking brides for the serpent prince. It was necessary, you see, for the prince to have a bride each night. At last they arrived at the cottage where the young girl lived.

my good sirs!" said the stepmother as soon as the soldiers came. "You know very well that what you are seeking can be found here. Surely the one who nursed the prince and taught him to read is able to become his bride. Come, my girl; the soldiers are waiting." Now the woman was satisfied that finally she had seen the last of her stepdaughter

Again, as the soldiers hurried with the girl toward the padishah's palace, they came to the small graveyard. "Oh, please, sirs," the girl begged. "May I stop for a moment to kneel at my mother's grave?" And the soldiers, who knew very well the death that awaited the girl, stopped their march.

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young girl ran and threw herself down on her mother's grave. "My mother," she cried, "I am here again. This time they are taking me as a wife to the black serpent, the one I nursed and taught, and I will die, just as did all the other girls he has killed all the other nights."

But from the earth came her mother's voice: "My daughter, do not be afraid. This time you will become a queen. Before you enter the bedroom of the black serpent, put on, one after the other, forty hedgehog skins. When the serpent comes close to you, he will prick himself on the quills. 'Remove those skins,' he will say. You must answer, 'Oh, my prince, remove one of your own skins first.' When he has cast one of his skins, take off one of your own hedgehog skins. When he has removed his fortieth skin, tell him to throw all his skins into the fire. Take off your last hedgehog skin and throw all forty of your own hedgehog skins into the fire, too. Then you will become a queen."

young girl kissed her mother's grave and went with the soldiers to the palace. The palace servants wanted to dress her beautifully for her wedding with the serpent prince, but she said, "I want no jewels and no elegant

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dress. I want only forty hedgehog skins."

When they had brought the forty hedgehog skins, she put them on, one over the other. Then the servants her to the bridal chamber.

As soon as she had entered the room, the black serpent threw himself upon her, but suddenly he stopped.

"Bride, take off that dress full of quills," he said

"Prince, you take off one of your skins and then I shall take mine off."

Skin after skin the serpent prince shed, and for each skin that he shed, the girl removed one hedgehog skin. At last came the fortieth skin.

"Now gather up your skins and throw them into the fire," she said. As the snakeskins burned, a great glowed in the room. The black serpent had been transformed into a young prince as handsome as the fourteenth of the moon. Then the girl threw into the flames the forty hedgehog skins and she became more beautiful than the moon itself.³

³Throughout the Moslem Middle East the moon is greatly admired as a symbol of beauty. Both oral and written literature testify to this. To compare any woman's beauty to that of the moon is to flatter the female. Here the girl is not only being compared with the moon, but she is even said to excel the celestial orb in beauty. So great is

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Now, the padishah and his wife had been listening outside the door. When they heard the sound of the rejoicing of the young couple, the padishah knocked at the door. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the girl, "but you will need to bring clothes for each of us."

Immediately fine clothes were brought for a young man and a young woman, and the couple dressed. Then they opened the door.

When the two came out of the bridal chamber, the padishah was overcome by joy, and so was his wife. "My son," the padishah cried, "my prayers have been answered. There will be someone to rule my kingdom after me, after all. And your rule will begin now, for I am old and I want to spend my days in washing and praying to our most merciful Allah

The young prince became king that very day, and the young girl became his queen. From that time, the kingdom was in peace. And there my story ends

her beauty that it seems to be saying to the moon, "There is no point in your rising tonight, for I am more worthy of that role."