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Snow

DEBORAH M. BROWN

When her prince comes, her dream could turn into a nightmare.

An Enchanted Story

It's not that Anais hates her new stepdaughter. She simply has bigger things on her mind, like birthing a son for the aging king. Temptation beckons in the mirror eyes of the king's huntsman, leading her down a path of dark desires until, by the time she realizes Rui's true nature, it is too late. Her heart is ensnared, and she will do anything to keep him in her arms. Especially when his roving eyes land on the princess...and Anais's indifference turns to hate.

Upon her father's death, the painfully shy Snow White quickly learns she can rely on no one—least of all the stepmother she once hoped would become a friend. Surrounded by undercurrents of treachery she cannot hope to understand, she turns to her seven dwarven guards for guidance. Freed of their magical bindings, these small yet perfectly formed, handsome men vow to open her innocent eyes to the dangers of court politics...and the ways of men.

Yet lust is a cruel master, and Snow White's girlish longing for purest love could blind her to the destruction that waits to take a bite out of her dreams...

Warning: Contains explicit sex scenes between a queen and her lover, the lover and *his* male lover, and—yes—proof that size doesn't matter when it comes to true lust, er, love.

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577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
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Deborah M. Brown

Dedication

To Bronwen. You know why.

The Queen

Queen Anais knew the exact moment when she had begun to hate her stepdaughter. It was not when she first arrived at court to marry the king. Then she had barely noticed the pale, silent child. The king was old, far older than Anais, and the child had been born late into his first marriage. He doted on her, but Anais knew that as soon as she could provide him with a son, this first child would lose her significance in his eyes. Such a pallid, silent child, she was easy to ignore, especially early in the marriage when the king was so enamoured of his beautiful, young wife and so eager to prove himself upon her. Anais endured his old man's fumbblings, consoling herself with the thought of the sons she would bear and the riches and power that were hers as queen.

As time passed, the king became increasingly desperate to plant a son in Anais's belly. It became harder to endure the hot weight of his body atop hers, his hands pawing at her breasts or between her thighs. The taste of sour old man as he made her take his semi-erect phallus in her mouth and suckle him, trying to make him reach that state of hardness that came to him less and less. Trying to make him hard enough to ram himself inside her like a weapon and stab and stab against her dry flesh. Fortunately those times were few and blessedly short, the king spending himself after only a handful of savage thrusts, crying out as though it was he who was in pain and not the woman who lay so still beneath him.

Anais never made a sound.

Time passed. There were no sons, and the king came no more to her bed. As the possibility of a male heir diminished, his attention was refocused on his daughter.

"My Snow White," he would call her, and indeed she was. In a land of fair-haired, pale-skinned people, she was the fairest of them all. Her hair was silver blonde, her skin white as alabaster. Her eyes were grey, light and clear as water; her lashes covered them like clouds, keeping her thoughts hidden. Even so, Anais didn't hate her then, not when her own golden beauty was still evident in the lustful looks of the court nobles and the jealous glances of their ladies.

Although she could have had any of them as her lover, Anais refused. She was content to be worshipped from afar, enjoying the machinations of those nobles who still thought that one day she would succumb to the temptations they offered. She had only to catch her husband's eye and see the bitterness there to bring to mind how a man lay with a woman and what they offered was dust in her mouth. Occasionally she would see her stepdaughter at feast days or formal occasions, but her existence barely

registered with her. The girl would sit on her throne beside her father, watching everything but never speaking. Anais and her ladies would whisper about her behind their fans.

“So thin. So pale.”

“An ugly child.”

But men’s eyes told another story that Anais refused to acknowledge.

For her sixteenth birthday, the king gave his daughter seven new attendants. They were dwarves from the eastern mountains, grim, golden men with eyes like black glass.

“Seven of them to protect you from all harm,” the king said. From then on, wherever Snow White went, her silent attendants went too. Some women of the court found them fascinating, for although not as tall as most of the southern ladies, they were perfectly formed and comely enough, but they made Anais uneasy. They were as silent and inscrutable as the mistress they served.

Anais’s contentment with her life changed late one winter’s afternoon. She had been sitting in her bedroom, gazing into her silver mirror and admiring the golden waterfall of hair as it fell over her bare shoulders. Outside in the courtyard there was a sudden commotion, dogs barking, the clatter of hooves and the shouts of men. Frowning, she went to her window and looked out. A hunting party, she thought, eyeing the carcass of a deer which was flung over the back of one horse. Disinterested, she turned away when the sudden screech of a large bird of prey and a man’s voice cursing drew her gaze back to the window.

Below her, a man wrestled with the falcon that bated madly upon his wrist and with the horse that plunged wildly beneath his thighs. The bird screeched again, and the horse sidled and snorted. The man clamped his thighs tightly around the horse, bringing it under control. Crooning under his breath, he drew his hand down the bird’s sleek breast, soothing and stroking it to quiescence. Then he glanced up, and Anais felt her breath stop in her throat.

He was dark. Dark like midnight.

Dark like death.

Hair as black as coal, worn long and loose, framing a face of wicked beauty. A mouth, lush and sensual, made for kissing, and his eyes... Deepest, darkest blue and so clear that Anais could see herself reflected in their surface as though she looked into a mirror. He smiled up at her, and Anais had never desired anything or anyone as much as she desired the dark stranger below her. Her gaze locked with his, and in the mirror of his eyes she could see that he found her beautiful too. The bird screeched again, and he turned back to it, breaking the link between them. Anais gasped and pulled back from the window. She felt hot and cold at the same time, her limbs twitching, her heart racing. A strange dark fluttering low in her stomach and between her legs.

Pulling her scattered thoughts together, she left her room and sent one of her ladies to discover who he was.

The king's new huntsman, the bastard son of some northern lord, but high in his father's favour, it was said. A close friend to her husband in his youth, the father had petitioned a position for his son in the king's household.

"Rui Alvarez," said Anais's lady in waiting, and his name slid down Anais's throat like honeyed wine.

That night, at the banquet thrown in honour of some visiting ambassador whose name she could not recall, Anais could feel Rui's gaze on her like a hot knife pressed to her throat, but she ignored him, choosing instead to flirt with some beardless nobleman's son who blushed and stammered under her attention. Only once did she sense his scrutiny waver, when Snow White and her seven silent shadows made their way to the king's throne to wish him a goodnight. Then Anais felt the absence of his regard like a dash of cold water to her face and turned to see his dark blue eyes following the girl as she left the room. Anais chose that moment to cease her games with the bumbling youth and to let Rui Alvarez know she wanted him. It required little effort on her part to turn his thoughts back to her and away from her stepdaughter, the Snow Bitch, as she liked to call her.

His eyes locked on hers, and for the first time in her life she felt her power as a woman. The pulse that beat in his throat was echoed in the throbbing beat in Anais's core. The costly silk of her bronze gown rubbed against nipples that had tightened and become exquisitely sensitive. Was this desire? She wanted him.

How she wanted him.

Rui came to her room after midnight. She had sent her women away and answered the door herself. He had barely entered the room before he pulled her to him and drew his mouth across hers in a kiss that should have set the room on fire, so hot and hungry was it. His lips were soft. His mouth tasted of wine and wet dark heat. Anais could feel his erection, thick and hard, pressing against her belly. She shoved away thoughts of her husband's cold hands and wilting phallus, imagining instead Rui's lean, muscled body and handsome face hovering over her, and grew wet with hunger.

"I could take you here, now, on the floor," Rui breathed against her mouth. "But maybe we should use the bed? This time."

Anais blushed, swallowing nervously. She wanted him, but she had never done this with any man other than her husband. Would he find her lacking? He followed her to the bed, eying the golden silk hangings, the finely woven sheets of Semian cotton with a grin. "I've never fucked a queen before," he said, then kissed her hard again before she could consider his words any further.

Anais stood and watched him as he undressed, her mouth dry. His eyes never left hers, and she could see that he knew she found him desirable and that it pleased him. When he was naked, he stood with his

head up, his hands hanging loose at his sides, allowing Anais to appreciate the way his heavy muscles moved under his skin, the broad shoulders and narrow waist. The long legs.

He was beautiful.

Sitting on the bed, he let his gaze roam over Anais's face, then lower. "Take off your dress," he rasped.

She turned her back to him. "I'll need you to undo the buttons."

She heard him draw in a deep breath. He patted the bed beside him. "Sit here."

Anais sat beside him. His fingers tugged at her buttons. As he freed them, the cool night air brushed against the bared skin of her back. His hand caressed her neck, the fingers warm and sure. He pressed a kiss to her shoulder blade, and she shivered.

"There," he said thickly. She pushed the dress down over her arms, then stood to let it fall about her feet. "Turn around," he commanded.

Anais faced him, letting her gaze roam boldly over his body. Moisture pooled between her legs. By all the gods, but he was beautiful. Long and lean, sharply delineated muscles sliding beneath his smooth pale skin. Between his thighs in a patch of thick dark hair, his erection rose like a column of marble. She traced one throbbing vein with her fingertip, and he gasped. His hand shot out and grasped her wrist in a grip tight enough to bruise. He took her other wrist and drew her down towards him.

His lips touched hers. For the barest second they were soft, gentle. Then his tongue swept into her mouth and it was no longer a kiss. It was a war.

Sometime later, between battles, when Rui lay dozing beside her, Anais took the time to study his sleeping face and to catch her breath. He was insatiable. Even as he spent himself, his flesh remained semi-erect, hardening again in a satisfyingly short time, sometimes even as he still lay sheathed within her. All memory of her husband's rutting had been erased. To her delight, Anais found herself as insatiable and as fierce in her desires as Rui. She stretched cautiously, feeling the muscles in her thighs pull. There were scratches there, between her legs, a bite mark high on her right thigh, another on her breast. Still, she had left her own marks on the man beside her. She ran her finger across a bite on Rui's shoulder, and his skin twitched beneath her hand.

He reminded her of a great cat, lying there sleepily next to her. His face with its high cheekbones and pointed chin. The sleek, lithe body that had plundered hers so ruthlessly. There was a faint scar on his chin running from the left corner of his mouth in a diagonal line to disappear beneath his jaw. She traced it softly, and his eyes opened. He studied her with an intent stare that made her both uneasy and hungry for him at the same time.

"How did you get this?" she asked.

He gave a lazy smile. “You don’t really want to know.” He moved closer to Anais, throwing one long leg over her hips, and took her mouth in another bruising kiss. Tumescant once more, his phallus prodded at her belly. Anais bit at his lip, hard enough to draw blood, while his hand plucked at her nipple, squeezing it between his fingers. All night it had been thus, neither one of them willing to cede dominance to the other. Their couplings had been fierce and explosive.

Anais pulled her mouth from his and slid down his body, running her tongue down his smooth chest and ridged belly before closing her lips around the swollen head of his shaft, letting her teeth graze his flesh lightly. His breath hissed between his teeth.

“No biting now,” he warned her, his fingers tangling in her hair. She ran her tongue around the rim of his cock, letting it dip into the opening and tasting him, salty sweet. One hand stroked him firmly whilst the other cupped his balls and gently kneaded them. He flexed against her mouth, and she suckled him harder, feeling him swell even more. She gripped his hips, holding him still as she worked him with her mouth, listening to the harsh exhalation of his breathing. He pulled her head away and pushed Anais onto her back, then covered her with his body, his erection nestled between her thighs.

With his mouth, he suckled fiercely at one breast, his teeth pulling almost painfully at her nipple. He slid his hand between her legs, stroking the damp folds of her sex before plunging two fingers inside her. Anais gasped and arched beneath him as he thrust those clever fingers in and out, his thumb rubbing against the swollen nub of aching flesh. She strained against him, wanting more, and he inserted a third finger, stretching her as his mouth moved to her other breast. Wrapping her legs around his hips, she pushed against him fiercely and rolled so that now he lay beneath her and she straddled him.

“My turn to ride,” Anais breathed as she leaned down to claim another savage kiss. She took him in her hand and rose onto her knees, holding him steady whilst she sank onto his shaft. He gave a soft grunt of pleasure when she took his length into her. Capturing his hands in hers, she pushed them back over his head, holding him there while she moved over him, lifting herself then slowly sliding back down him. He drew a shuddering breath and lifted his hips, trying to force the pace, but she wouldn’t let him. Closing her eyes, she savoured the feel of that hot slick flesh as she inched up and down it. Rui moaned, and she opened her eyes. Sweat beaded along his forehead, trailing down his jaw which was clenched tightly.

“Yes,” he rasped as Anais ground her pelvis against him, her own breath coming faster. He lunged up and took hold of her, flipping her onto her back once more. He reared over her, his hands pinning her wrists. A drop of sweat trembled on his chin before falling. Now it was his turn. He withdrew then pushed forward again, as slowly as she had ridden him before. One thing she had learned about Rui Alvarez this night—the man had incredible control. It was endless, the slow slide of his cock in and out of her. She threw her legs around him, digging her heels into his firm buttocks, trying to draw him deeper inside. He gave a huff of strained laughter and withdrew completely, sitting back on his heels.

“Turn around,” he ordered her harshly. “On your hands and knees.”

She bridled at his tone, even as her belly clenched with excitement. A slow smile lit his face.

“Please,” he whispered, laughing at her. Anais obeyed him, turning to crouch before him. He trailed a finger down her spine, and she shivered. “Good girl,” he murmured. That same finger slid between the crease of her buttocks before slipping into her wet sex. “Good girl,” he said again, harsher this time.

He bowed his body over hers, sweat-slick and hot. She felt his breath against her neck when he pushed her hair over her shoulder and bit gently at her nape. His cock nudged at her opening as he wrapped his arms around her and she pushed back against him, wanting him inside her. His arms tightened, and he entered her on one powerful thrust that sheathed all of him. His groin slapped against her buttocks, and she stifled a scream of pleasure. He was so deep inside her.

He kept one arm around her whilst the other hand moved between her legs rubbing her sex. His breath gusting against her neck, he began to move, not slowly this time, but hard and fierce, slamming into her over and over. Anais’s mouth was open, dragging in breath after breath. She felt her pleasure rising as she ground against his hand. Each penetration brought her closer. Rui was grunting, his movements becoming more frenzied, less controlled.

“Oh gods,” Anais heard him moan. At the same time, her climax rose and slammed into her. She screamed, feeling the muscles of her passage clench around his cock. “Gods,” he moaned again. She was still riding her own release, feeling it shiver outwards from her sex, deep in her belly. “Fuck,” he cried out, thrusting once, twice, a third time, harder and deeper than before. His teeth sank into her shoulder. The hot rush of his seed flooded her. He ground his pelvis against her buttocks furiously, lifting his head and uttering a guttural moan. He thrust again, less fiercely now. Anais could feel his cock pulsing deep within her. “Oh yes,” he murmured softly on one last thrust. His head dropped against her shoulder, the weight of his body collapsing over her back, heavy and slick with sweat.

One more battle fought, and Anais had no idea which of them was the winner.

Towards dawn, as pale grey fingers of light crept across the room and fell upon the ruin of the bed, Anais clutched the torn sheet to her breasts and watched Rui as he dressed. She could see that he was well pleased with himself, the smile he turned upon her full of lazy self-satisfaction. She swallowed, her mouth dry. She needed to think clearly, to formulate some excuse not to see him again. It was too dangerous, the risks too great. Adultery for a queen meant death.

As if sensing the tenor of her thoughts, Rui leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. “I must have you again,” he murmured, his soft breath stirring the loose hair on her face. “And soon.” The kiss deepened. Anais let the sheet fall and clutched at Rui’s shoulders.

Recalling something he had said earlier that night, Anais released him and pulled back, gazing into his dark blue eyes. “Did you find fucking a queen to your liking, Master Alvarez?” she asked, her voice a trifle unsteady. “Do you find me fair?”

For an instant, thick black lashes veiled his eyes, hiding his expression. Incongruously, it reminded Anais of her stepdaughter, the Snow Bitch, and she shivered. Then he lifted his head, and she gazed into his eyes and was lost.

His hands cupped her face, the fingers digging into her jaw, forcing her to keep her eyes on his. She could see her face reflected in them. Mirror eyes.

“The fairest of them all.”

And thus Anais committed adultery. She was ever fearful of discovery, but Rui seemed to delight in taking the chance that they might be seen. He took her in the stables, in corridors, in the falconry under the disapproving eyes of his great bird. He swallowed her cries with his mouth so that she wouldn’t frighten the other birds. One night they even made love upon the plump purple cushion that sat upon the king’s throne. Anais stifled her fear by looking into his eyes and seeing her reflection there. As long as she remained the fairest of them all in Rui’s eyes, she didn’t care. Gradually, she came to learn things about him. He was venal and amoral. He liked to hurt her. Not too much. Just enough to let her know who was master. Just enough to make her fearful when sometimes he would ride her as though he wanted to break her beneath him. Just enough to make her crave the fear as well as the pleasure.

Sometimes the fear was the pleasure.

After that first night, when they had been equals in passion, it was Rui who must win every battle and Anais who must concede. Oh, he was ever mindful of her and never forced her to do anything that might degrade her, but there must be no doubt who was master and who servant. When she finally realised his true nature, it was too late. She could no more do without him than she could breathing.

One day he had pushed her up against a wall in a rarely used servant’s corridor, tearing at her clothes in his haste. Anais watched herself in his eyes, a fair, golden queen, and tried to convince herself that this was love. Suddenly, she became aware that they were not alone. Snow White, the Snow Bitch, stood at the end of the corridor, watching them. She had only one of her attendants with her, the youngest one. For a moment Anais could only stare at her in confusion. Had Snow White and the dwarf been holding hands? Then the reality of her situation flooded her, and she gasped and pushed at Rui’s shoulders.

“Stop,” she cried frantically.

He raised his head and followed the direction of her gaze. He stared at Snow White, and Anais saw her stepdaughter’s image in his eyes before he turned back to her and resumed what he had been doing.

“Let her watch,” he grunted as he pushed against her.

“No.” Anais struggled in his grip. “She’ll tell the king. Stop.”

“She won’t say a word,” said Rui. He continued without pause, but all the while Anais could see that he watched Snow White and that his pleasure came from the fact that she watched him. The girl and her companion stood unmoving until Rui had finished, then, without ever uttering a word, they turned and left. Anais straightened her clothing, then looked up into Rui’s eyes but she couldn’t see her reflection there anymore.

That was when she first hated her stepdaughter.

Sick with fear, Anais spent the rest of the day in her rooms. She was left alone until deep in the night when Rui finally came to her. For once, he wanted nothing more than to talk to her, but as she listened to what he had to say, she felt her blood turn cold.

He spoke of the death of the king and how Anais would rule as regent for the child Snow White who, although almost eighteen, still had three years before she could act in her own stead unless she should marry. In three years anything could happen to a young girl. Who could say if she would ever reach her majority? As regent, Anais would have power enough to ensure that her seat upon the throne was inviolable, and Rui would rule beside her. No more fear of discovery.

“I could have you in front of the whole court and no one could say us nay,” Rui breathed against her ear.

Anais looked up at him. “Do you love me?” she asked.

“You are the fairest of them all,” he said, and once more she could see herself in the mirror of his eyes.

“Make love to me,” she whispered and, for once, he did. Rui’s body covered hers, his dark eyes never leaving her face as he moved within her. Anais wanted to look away. She didn’t want this. Knowing what he was and what he was capable of, the languid tenderness with which he pushed into her was unbearable. He made her forget her doubts and her fears. He made her want him until that want was a fire within her that she feared could never be quenched. When he kissed her now, it was slow and sweet, his tongue caressing her mouth like wet velvet. This time her climax rolled over her like a warm blanket, soft and comfortable. At the last, Rui closed his eyes and a shudder ran through him as he spent himself inside her. He lowered his head to rest it against her shoulder.

They lay like that for a time, neither talking nor moving, and then with a sigh he pushed himself off her. His cock, finally sated, lay soft and vulnerable against his thigh.

“So,” he murmured. “Will we do it?”

“It?” Anais said, although she knew well enough of what he spoke.

His lips curled in an ironic smile. “It,” he said as his hand traced a lazy circle on Anais’s bare hip.

Desire uncoiled deep within her again, lust and fear forming an uneasy alliance in her stomach. “It won’t be easy.”

“Easier than you think. An old man and a girl?” He moved down the bed to kneel between Anais’s thighs. His warm breath stirred the damp curls of her sex. She trembled. “Let me take care of the king. The rest will follow.” His mouth settled against her aching flesh, his tongue flicking out to caress her, rough and warm. Anais gasped, arching against him, her fingers tangling in the long black silk of his hair. He licked and suckled her into a boneless, screaming mass of pleasure before rearing up and thrusting himself deep inside her. There was no tenderness this time. Anais stared up into his beautiful face as he pounded into her. He had shown he was capable of tenderness. She loved him, for all that she sometimes feared him too.

“Open your eyes,” she whispered.

His mirror eyes flew open, and Anais stared into their blue depths. His breath came shorter, his lips drawing back from his teeth.

“Yes?” he gasped as he shuddered his release into her.

“Yes,” Anais replied, answering his question. They would do *It*...

Yes.

She was the fairest of them all, and for now that would have to be enough.

The king died the next night. An apoplexy, they said. Anais never asked Rui how he had accomplished the deed. Snow White and Anais stood side by side as his gold-embellished casket was sealed into his tomb. They did not speak to each other. Only the High Priest would enter the king’s tomb to perform the blood rites that would send his spirit onto the Pillars. The rest of them must wait outside until the ceremony was completed. It was a bleak, cold day. A bitter rain was falling. Over the wind and the sharp hiss of the rain rang the bells of Gessedian Cathedral. Snow White’s fair hair hung to her waist and her pale grey eyes were colder than the rain. To Anais’s eyes she looked as brittle as glass. She could almost imagine that if she leaned forward and touched her that Snow White would shatter into a myriad of icy shards. Rui stood behind them. Anais couldn’t see his face. He kept his head lowered so that his long black hair hung down around his eyes. But the faintest of smiles curved the sculpted lines of his mouth.

When the ceremony was completed, Snow White and her seven dwarves all bowed to Anais before they left. One by one the courtiers drifted away with murmured words of respect and condolence. As queen, it was Anais’s duty to spend the night in prayer before her husband’s tomb. The bells finally stopped tolling at midnight. Anais drew in a deep breath. In the sudden, all-pervading silence, it sounded ragged and far too loud. She suppressed a shiver, huddling deeper into her woolen cloak. The candles ringing the catafalque cast grotesque shadows over the carved stone walls.

“I thought those damn things would never cease.”

Anais whirled about. Rui lounged against the entrance to the tomb, his colour high and his eyes glittering feverishly in the fitful candle light. He straightened up, executing a bow. "My Queen," he murmured, moving towards her.

Anais took a step back, then another until the catafalque pressed against her back. Rui leaned over her, one arm on either side of her body. She could smell wine on his breath as he lowered his mouth to hers.

"Are you cold?" he whispered. "I've come to make you warm." One hand dropped to the placket of his breeches whilst the other pulled at her skirts. He took her against her dead husband's tomb before he led her back to the palace.

And so Anais was, to all intents and purposes, queen. At least until the Snow Bitch came of age. It was a far merrier court than when the king had been alive. A glittering casket of a court with the brightest jewel, the fairest of them all, Anais, with her dark huntsman by her side. If any of the courtiers looked askance at the baseborn upstart who ruled the queen's heart as well as her body, they were too well bred to express their displeasure. Especially when the queen's stepdaughter expressed nothing but respect and obedience towards her stepmother. Or her lover.

On the night of her eighteenth birthday, the Snow Bitch even let the queen's huntsman lead her into a dance. Anais sat upon her throne watching them, swallowing jealousy along with the wine in her goblet. Along the far wall, Snow White's seven dwarves watched too, their eyes as black and cold as a winter's night.

Snow White danced with fluid grace, as supple as silk in Rui's arms. Yet her face wore its customary mien of glacial indifference. Anais's fingers tightened around the stem of her silver goblet as she saw the expression in Rui's eyes. As if sensing her regard, he lifted his eyes to hers, but whatever she thought she had seen was gone. He smiled at her, and she shivered at the dark promises that smile held.

A promise of pain that made her stomach clench with fear.

A promise of pleasure that made the sex between her legs throb with anticipation.

The dance ended, and Rui led Snow White back to her seat, bowing over her hand with insolent grace before sauntering back to lean over Anais's throne and kiss her throat.

"She dances well," said Anais tightly.

Rui lifted one straight black brow. "Well enough," he said lazily, kissing his way down her throat until his teeth grazed the sensitive place where her shoulder curved into her neck. He brushed his knuckles across her satin-clad breast. "Not as well as you, my Queen." His hand opened and he squeezed her breast roughly. "Now come to bed or I swear I will have you there on your throne with all the court to watch on." His voice was hoarse. She could smell the excitement on him, a dark feral scent. Her wild huntsman.

Her terror.

And her love.

The court rose as she did, heads dipping and knees bending as Anais walked past. Snow White and her dwarves, as they always did, bowed with impeccable courtesy. Anais felt Rui's fingers tighten on her arm. He practically dragged her to her room, kicking the door shut behind her ladies as they bowed their way out. Taking hold of her gown, he ripped it open and pulled it from her body. He tore off his own clothes, pushed her down and took her there on the floor and twice more before they reached the bed.

The last time, as he hung above her, shuddering and sweat-soaked, Anais looked up into his mirror eyes. "Am I still the fairest of them all?"

"Yes. Oh gods, yes," he moaned as he surged into her. He trembled a moment before dropping his face against her neck.

Anais recalled the way he had looked at the Snow Bitch that night and wondered if he lied.

From then on, jealousy and hatred of the Snow Bitch consumed Anais. In everything she did, Anais could feel Snow White's winter gaze upon her. She spent hours thinking of ways to rid herself of the girl. Poison wouldn't work because the dwarves tasted everything that was put before their mistress. An accident of some sort seemed the most logical choice. She discussed it with Rui one day as they stood in the mews. He was feeding his falcon with bloody titbits. The bird took the morsels from his bare hands daintily, despite the fierce power of its beak.

"I could cut her heart out for you." He grinned and squeezed the bloody scraps between his fingers.

"Would you?" She looked up at him. "Could you?" she asked more softly.

He ran his fingers across her lips, smearing blood over them before he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed it off again.

"Yes," he answered.

She sought reassurance in his eyes before she nodded agreement.

"A-hunting we will go," murmured Rui as he lifted her skirts, his fingers skimming over her damp, eager flesh. "A-hunting we will go," as his other hand loosened the ties on his breeches. "We'll catch a fox and put it in a box," as his phallus nudged at her opening, thick and hard and burning hot. "A-hunting we will go," as he sheathed himself to the hilt.

He held himself still, his breath coming fast, his hands closing tightly upon Anais's shoulders. He began to thrust fiercely against her, so hard that she was driven against the wall. She dug her nails into his arms, wrapped one leg around his lean hip and matched his rhythm. Rui bared his teeth at her, tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her head back. He dropped his mouth to her throat. She felt his teeth graze her flesh, gently at first then more fiercely. His hips pumped wildly. Anais strained to reach that place where thought tumbled into mindless delight, but she felt Rui's release deep inside her, his breath gusting hot against her neck, and he slid out of her before she could fall over the precipice.

Breathing hard he straightened his clothing. He planted a swift hard kiss against Anais's lips. "A-hunting we will go," he said again. With a flash of white teeth, he turned away from her.

“Rui,” Anais said, frustrated desire lacing her voice. He turned back to her.

“What?” he said distractedly.

“What are you going to do? How are you going to do it?”

Another flash of white teeth. “Leave the details to me.”

“It will need to be done soon. Her betrothed comes to court at month’s end. She will be eighteen. And wed.”

An expression flashed across his face, gone before she had a chance to recognise just what it was. “Indeed,” he said thoughtfully. “That may be something we can work with.”

“What do you mean?”

He kissed her hard, stealing both breath and reason. “I told you. Leave it to me,” he murmured against her mouth.

Anais watched him walk away, dark, beautiful. Wicked. Something trailed cold fingers down her spine, raising gooseflesh on her arms. He was like a drug to her. A drug she knew would kill her in the end, but one she could not live without. More times than not there was no love in their coupling, just a savage desire to possess and to be possessed. But for the few times when there had been tenderness, and for the knowledge that she would always be the fairest of them all in his mirror eyes, she would do anything and everything to hold him.

The Princess

Snow White didn't hate her stepmother. When Anais first came to court and Snow White saw how she brought the smile back to her father's eyes she would have loved her if Anais had allowed it. The golden queen had seemed to be everything that a thin, pale child of nine could wish for in a mother. But Anais's indifference and Snow White's inherent shyness had precluded any bond forming between them. Then, as her father's first flush of new love dissolved into something colder and more desperate and Anais's indifference turned to something sharper and less benign, Snow White mantled her feelings in a cloak of ice and presented to both court and her stepmother a persona of glacial disinterest. That persona would suit her well as her father abandoned his ambition of a male heir and turned all his hopes upon Snow White once more.

It was then that the way men looked at her began to change. There was calculation in their gaze as well as lust. Snow White gave nothing away. Her expression could have been carved from snow, so blank and cold was it. In truth, although she well knew her worth as a future queen, she had no understanding of the games that men and women played. The hot looks and sweet words of the lords of her father's court meant little to her.

Besides, her father had grander plans for his Snow White. A betrothal with a prince from the north. The papers were signed on her sixteenth birthday. They would wed when she was eighteen. There had also been an exchange of portraits. Like all northern men, he was dark, with a wide smiling mouth and laughing black eyes.

"He looks charming," Anais had said in a bored voice.

Snow White had tucked the miniature away in a chest.

On the night of her birthday, her father had given her a gift. Seven dwarves from the mountains of the east. They had black hair and even blacker eyes. Their skin was the warm gold of sun-ripened barley. The tallest of them was almost of a height with her. He met her eyes and looked away, but not before she had seen the resentment burning there. The top of the youngest one's head came up to her chin. His eyes were sad and gentle.

"They will protect you from all harm," her father said. "They are bound to you and you alone."

Another burning look from the tallest dwarf.

Snow White thanked her father and led her new attendants back to her apartments.

The eldest was called Ander. The tall one with the burning eyes was Gault. Kaffion and Meris were twin brothers, impossible to tell apart. The quiet, scholarly one was Shyla. Hiram liked to joke. The youngest was Kaliko. They became her shadows, her protectors. But try as she might, she could not overcome the fact that they were her possessions. Nor could she make them her friends, much as she longed to. For friends were something she sadly lacked. Something she needed.

Snow White had no doubt that her stepmother had lain with the king's huntsman. There was hunger in Anais's eyes whenever she looked at Rui Alvarez that even Snow White could recognise despite her lack of knowledge of the concourse between a man and a woman. She wondered that her father did not recognise it too, but it seemed that his indifference to his wife blinded him to any indiscretions. What made Snow White uncertain and sent her restless to her bed was the knowledge that Rui Alvarez directed that same hungry look at her sometimes when he thought Anais wasn't watching.

But her stepmother had noticed. And Anais was afraid. Especially after Snow White and Kaliko had come across the queen and the huntsman in the servants' passageway. Anais's skirts were hiked about her hips. Rui thrust against her, his breathing ragged. Anais caught sight of her stepdaughter, and all colour fled from her face.

"Stop," she had cried.

Rui turned his head and stared at them. His eyes were so blue. Snow White could see her image frozen in their lambent depths. Kaliko's hand had tightened around hers. A slow wicked smile curled Rui's full lips.

"Let her watch."

And so, she had. Watched the hard powerful thrust of his body into Anais's. At the end, just before he threw back his head and gasped out a strangled cry, he looked at her again.

Kaliko tugged on her hand, and she let him lead her away.

From then on she felt her stepmother's dislike coalesce into something deeper and colder. Something implacable.

Then her father died.

Snow White grieved in private. She would reveal no hint of weakness to the court or to her stepmother. She knew Anais wished her harm. In a short while she would be eighteen. Old enough to wed and thus to rule in her own right. If she could survive until then. She needed to learn. Of power. Of men and women. To use her power as a woman over men.

She needed to learn from someone she could trust. Over the years since her father first gave Snow White her seven dwarves, she had grown close to the youngest one, Kaliko. She looked upon him as her dearest friend and there was ease in her dealings with the brothers Meris and Kaffion. With Shyla and

Hiram. Even Ander, the eldest, had become less restrained in her company. Only Gault, with his dark, angry eyes and the resentment he wore like a cloak, a cloak he never discarded in her presence, could not be won over.

She decided to broach the subject at supper that night. As usual, one of the dwarves had tasted every dish set before her. Tonight it was Hiram's turn. When the dessert of iced plums was placed before him, he took a spoonful and pulled a face. Then he took another spoonful. And another, shaking his head.

"There is something wrong with this dish."

"Poison?" asked Snow White with a smile. They had played this game before. Hiram loved iced plums.

"Hmmm. I can't quite put my finger on it." He took another mouthful.

"If you can't be certain that it is safe..." She let her voice trail off suggestively.

Hiram nodded. "I should taste a little more, Your Highness. Just to be sure." By now, half the dish was gone.

"Indeed. I should wish to be entirely sure before I ate any of it."

"Exactly so," said Hiram with a grave nod as he scooped up another plum.

"In fact, I believe I have lost my taste for iced plums tonight."

"Mmmm," mumbled Hiram around a mouthful. He swallowed, chased the last plum around the plate and popped it into his mouth. He licked his lips.

Snow White laughed, and he grinned back at her.

"If it had been poisoned, you'd be dead now," said Gault coldly.

Fear scraped its way down Snow White's spine. Would her enemies resort to poison? Would Anais?

Hiram raised an eyebrow. "I'm more likely to die of shock if I ever see you smile, Gault, than I am from a dish of iced plums. Does he ever smile?" This was directed at Ander.

"Oh yes," Ander replied softly. A muscle jerked in Gault's jaw. Snow White had learned that the taciturn Gault and the grave self-restrained Ander were lovers when she accidentally caught them kissing one day. Embarrassed, she had tried to back away without them noticing, but Gault had raised his head and caught sight of her, angry colour flooding his face as he pushed Ander away. Without a word, Gault had strode from the room, leaving Ander to face her, his expression one of uncertainty.

Under Snow White's gentle questioning, he had revealed that Gault had been his lover of many years, since they were little more than boys.

"We had no wish to anger you, Your Highness. If it displeases you..."

Snow White shook her head. "You love him," she said, hearing the wistful note in her voice. Ander had closed his eyes, swallowing hard.

"More than my life," he said fiercely.

Tears prickled at the back of her throat at the intensity of his words. Had anyone ever loved her except her father? Would anyone ever speak of her as Ander spoke of Gault, with the sun and the stars in his voice?

From that day, she and Ander had grown closer. If anything, she and Gault grew further apart, try as she might to make him see that she was not an enemy.

Now, after the servants had cleared away the supper dishes, she gathered her courage and spoke to her dwarves.

"From now on," she said, "I have no wish for any of you to sample my dishes before I do. If anyone is to be poisoned, let it be me."

"Is this because I ate all the iced plums?"

Snow White smiled at Hiram, shaking her head. "No. It's because I want...I want you to do things for me because you want to, not because you have to. Whatever my father intended that you should be to me, well, I want more than that."

"Your father bought us from the slave market at Veshy, Your Highness," said Kaffion carefully. "I think it is clear what his intentions were."

"We do not keep slaves here in the south," Snow White said, her voice shaking slightly. Gault gave a hiss of derision as he wrenched his sleeve up to reveal an intricate tattoo woven about his wrist.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked harshly. "It's a slave braid, *Your Highness*. It's not just ink, but blood and pain that mark us as yours. We have no choice. We never had a choice."

"But I don't want...there must be a way to free you?" She looked hopefully at Ander.

Ander rolled back his sleeve and fingered the slave braid tattooed around his wrist. "The spells woven into this cannot, to my knowledge, be broken, Princess. We are yours to do with as you will. And we will lay down our lives for you."

"But I don't want that! I don't want *slaves*."

Gault jerked as though she had slapped him. "What do you want?" he asked, his husky voice laced with bitterness.

"Friends," whispered Snow White.

Gault surged to his feet and, ignoring Ander's outstretched arm, strode from the room. "We are not your *friends*, Princess," he hissed over his shoulder as he flung the door open hard enough to rattle the windows.

In the sudden silence, Snow White looked around at the other six dwarves. Kaffion and Meris met her eyes briefly before glancing away. Shyla wouldn't lift his head, and Hiram stared resolutely at a spot on the wall. Kaliko's eyes swam with tears, but when he sensed Snow White's gaze upon him, he lifted a hand and swiped them away.

In Ander's eyes she thought she saw grief. And pain. But the dwarf's eyes were so dark, darker than a midwinter sky, she wasn't certain of anything she saw there. He bowed his head.

"Forgive him, Princess. If there is to be punishment for his transgression in speaking to you thus, then let it fall upon me." *He has been punished enough.* The words were unspoken, but Snow White could hear them beneath Ander's strained whisper.

"There will be no punishment. Not for speaking what is in your hearts."

Kaliko's eyes widened, and he glanced at Ander.

Snow White reached forward and gently rolled Ander's sleeve back down, concealing the slave braid from view once more. "I know you don't trust me and I'm not sure how to make you believe what I say." She let her gaze travel around the circle of dwarves once more, and this time all of them met her eyes. "Perhaps it is too soon for you to feel that we could be friends, but here, with me, you will not be slaves. You will be men." She rose to her feet, and the dwarves scrambled to theirs. With Gault gone, only Kaffion could look her in the eye without tilting his head. For the most part they looked wary, but Kaliko's face wore a burgeoning joy that made Snow White want to smile back in return.

She was not used to smiling.

There were shadows in Ander's eyes. She could see them clearly now. He vibrated with tension like a bowstring too tightly drawn. "Go after him."

Ander bowed his head. "Princess," he whispered. Snow White watched as he hurried from the room. He moved like all of the dwarves, with a lithe, graceful stride.

"You won't change Gault's mind," said Hiram. There was a hint of challenge in his voice as though he tested the limits of her declaration.

"Then I shall have to settle for changing yours, Master Hiram," said Snow White serenely. "Come. Tell me more of your homeland. Tell me about yourselves. Tell me everything. Teach me."

Kaffion and Meris exchanged a look and a grin. Shyla groaned.

"You don't know what you are getting into, Princess. Once you get those two started, there's no stopping them."

Meris draped an arm around Shyla's neck. "Knowledge is power, my friend."

"Give me knowledge," said Snow White. *Give me power...*

Kaffion bowed deeply. "It will be our privilege, my Princess."

Snow White learned, drinking every drop of knowledge that the dwarves shared with her. While Anais and her lover ruled the court, she kept her knowledge to herself and continued to show the world her blank face of ice. Her eighteenth birthday approached, and with it came several letters from her betrothed, the northern prince. *Prince Charming*. She tasted his name on her tongue. His letters were everything that a

young woman could desire, full of ardour and passion. But she knew him not. Would he be an ally? Or another enemy?

She sent to the witches of the east, seeking an answer to another question. When finally an answer came, she called her seven dwarves to her, her heart beating fast with nervous excitement.

Snow White studied their faces as Ander read the letter aloud.

“There is a way to break the spell,” she said. “To free you all from the slave braids you bear. Will you let me try?”

Gault’s mouth curled with derision. “Hedge witches,” he said dismissively. “They know nothing.”

“This letter comes from the head of the guild in Pompano,” Snow White replied. “If anyone would have knowledge of how to break this spell, then surely it is she? At least give me a chance.”

It was Kaliko who stepped forward, his face resolute. “I will give you the chance, my Princess. Let it be me who goes first.”

He pushed back his sleeve, baring his wrist. Snow White swallowed as she picked up the small dagger that was lying on the table before her and scored it across her palm. Blood welled in the cut, dark and red. Taking a deep breath, she held her hand above Kaliko’s slave braid and let a single drop of blood fall upon his arm. Where the blood touched the braid, smoke rose, along with a faint hiss. Kaliko gasped, his arm shaking. The smoke thickened a moment before dissipating completely. The braid about Kaliko’s wrist was broken. Where the blood had touched it, the ink was completely obliterated. He stared at it blankly before lifting his head to stare at Snow White with dazed eyes.

“It’s gone,” he whispered. A sudden joyous smile crossed his face. Rising to his tiptoes, he placed his lips against hers and kissed her. Soft and slow. The sweetness of that kiss took her breath away for a moment, and when he drew back they stared at each other uncertainly. “I did that because I want to,” he said. “Not because I have to.”

He stood aside as the others came forward, each baring their braids so that Snow White could let a drop of her blood fall upon them. Gault was the last, trembling like a leaf in a winter wind. His arm shook so much that Ander had to hold it still. At the end, to Snow White’s shocked dismay, it was Gault who wept. He fell to his knees, cradling his arm against his chest, his head bent whilst sobs tore through his body.

Ander knelt beside him, taking him in his arms and rocking him like a small child, murmuring soft words against his hair.

“You are free now,” Snow White said, fighting back her own tears. “You may leave, if that is what you wish.”

Kaliko shook his head, taking her hand in his and bowing over it. “Never,” he said fervently. “You are our princess, and we will stay with you. Because we want to.” One by one the others murmured their assent, faces shining. Even stubborn, bitter Gault, his face pale and stained with tears.

The lessons continued. Art and poetry with Shyla. Music with Hiram. The twins Kaffion and Meris shared their love of geography and language with her. From Ander she learned of court intrigue and the treachery of men and women. As the youngest, Kaliko shared her lessons as he also shared his shy smile and gentle heart.

Gault taught her how to kill a man, a lesson she hoped she would never have to put to use. Gault's sneer told her that he thought her hope to be a vain one.

Time raced towards her eighteenth birthday. The latest letter from her betrothed informed her that he would arrive at court the following month and expressed his regrets at not being able to attend her natal ball.

Kaliko had scowled when she read the letter out loud to them all and refused all attempts by Snow White to coax him from his black humour.

The night of her ball, Snow White sat upon her throne and watched as the nobles of the court vacillated between the queen and herself, wondering which way the wind would blow. Wondering if she would be strong enough to oust her stepmother from her seat of power and rule for herself. Wavering betwixt the known and the unknown. Snow White, as usual, showed Anais only the deepest respect. Her stepmother masked her feelings well, except for when the huntsman Rui Alvarez led Snow White into a dance. Snow White saw her stepmother's mouth draw thin, her hand tighten around the silver goblet in her hand.

Snow White and the huntsman did not speak. He watched her, his clear blue eyes never leaving her face, a little half smile curling his lush, sensual mouth. He was beautiful, yet something about him made her skin crawl, even as her body shivered with awareness beneath the light touch of his fingers at her waist. Only at the very end of the dance did he pull her close against his body. Just the briefest touch, but enough for her to feel the hard length of his erection pressed against her stomach before he released her. She saw him lift his eyes to the dais where Anais sat watching, and his expression made Snow White shiver, but whether from fear or wanting, she could not tell.

He led her back to her seat and bowed over her hand. Snow White thanked him with a cool nod, hiding the uncertain thudding of her heart. She could feel Kaliko's eyes burning into the back of her neck. She could feel the huntsman's gaze caressing her through her heavy silken gown. She could smell the wildness in him, and the danger. He had power over her because he knew things that she did not. Things her stepmother and most other women in the court knew. She followed Anais's eyes as they feasted on Rui. Saw the hunger in them. A hunger laced with fear. If she was to have a hope of controlling him, then she needed knowledge, and thus she turned to the only ones she could ask. The only ones she trusted in this cesspit.

“Teach me how a woman pleasures a man.”

She and her dwarves were sitting at the table in her private apartment eating supper. Kaffion spat out the mouthful of wine he had swallowed, coughing. Eyes watering, he turned to Ander, who put down his own goblet.

“Princess?” he asked carefully.

“I need to know,” she said. “I am going weaponless into this battle.”

“You are scarcely without weapons, my princess,” said Shyla wryly. “You have only to look to see how they watch you.”

“With the eye in their cock, not the eyes in their heads,” sniggered Hiram.

Gault fixed a dark glare upon Hiram, who flushed, ducking his head.

“Your pardon, Princess,” he mumbled.

“Will you teach me?” she demanded again.

“Why?” said Kaliko roughly. “So you can fuck him? The queen’s huntsman?” His eyes looked very dark in his pale face.

“I have no intention of...” She made herself meet his eyes. “No. But if I am to play the game, then I must know enough of the rules to survive.”

Ander gazed at her thoughtfully before running his hand over the dark stubble on his head. “Will you let us think upon this a while, Princess? Decide how best we might accomplish it?”

“Don’t look to Kaliko to show you, Princess.” Hiram sniggered again. He wagged his fingers in front of Kaliko. “This is the only way *he* knows to pleasure a man, that man being himself.”

“Whereas all Hiram knows is how to pleasure a bitch in heat,” Kaliko hissed. “*Dog fucker.*”

“Enough,” barked Ander. “You forget yourselves.”

Kaliko stared at the table, his mouth set in a stubborn line.

Snow White rose to her feet. She met Ander’s eye, and he nodded. She tried to catch Kaliko’s eyes, but he wouldn’t lift his head. With a sigh and a nervous flutter in her stomach, she left them to their discussion and returned to her sleeping quarters.

It was several hours later when a rap came at her door. She opened it to find Ander standing there, an oval mirror clasped in his hands. He entered on her invitation and stood before her a moment, a frown creasing the smooth, golden skin of his brow. Then with a sigh he handed her the mirror. The frame was chased silver. Heavily embellished, it felt warm against her fingertips.

“Look into the mirror, Princess. In one hour’s time. I trust you will learn something...” His voice dropped. “But remember, this is not a sideshow. Everything that is done is done with love. And you must not speak of it, to any of them, especially not to Gault. We will do this for you because you are our princess

and, as you say, you need every weapon you can possess. But do not demean what he offers you by questions. Look. Learn. And keep silent. Can you do that? Will you do that?"

"Yes," Snow White whispered, her fingers tightening about the mirror.

She placed it on a chair before her bed after Ander had left, curling up against the pillows to stare into its cloudy surface. She could feel her heart beating rapidly, and her palms were damp.

Despite her nervous anticipation, she had begun to doze off when a soft, sweet chime sounded, startling her awake. The mirror's surface began to clear, and she found herself gazing into a room. Ander's room. She recognised the painting, one of Shyla's, hanging over the bed. The room was lit by candlelight, enough for her to see clearly. And she could hear too. Heard the bedroom door open and saw Ander enter, followed by Gault. Ander turned and she saw one quick warm smile light his face as he looked towards her. Gault's mouth was set in a grim line. The look he sent her way was full of resentment.

"What do you imagine she will learn from watching us?" Gault asked. "Watching two men rut like she'd watch some goddamned animal?" His voice shook.

"Sshh," murmured Ander. "How a man pleasures a man is not much different to how a woman does." He lifted the heavy black braid that hung over Gault's shoulder and softly kissed his nape.

"As if you'd know," Gault said.

Snow White saw the shiver that ran through him. He lifted his head, arching his neck, and Ander kissed the pulse that pounded in the hollow of his throat. With gentle fingers, Ander untied the thong that bound Gault's braid, threading his fingers through Gault's hair until it hung in curls around his shoulders.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Ander drew Gault to stand between his legs and, reaching up, began to unbutton the loose white shirt he wore. When Gault's shirt hung open, Ander stood and slowly pushed it from his shoulders, exposing Gault's lithe, muscled torso and smooth, golden skin. Ander ran his hands down Gault's arms, kneeling before him to remove his boots. Placing his fingers on the placket of Gault's breeches, Ander undid those buttons too, peeling the breeches over Gault's lean hips and down his legs so that he stood naked before him.

Snow White realised she had been holding her breath and let it out on a gasp. The tallest of the dwarves, almost of a height with her, Gault's body was chiseled perfection. Taut with muscle, golden skin shining in the candlelight. The hair between his thighs was dark bronze, and his phallus curved upwards towards his navel, moisture gleaming at its tip.

Ander closed his hand around its length, and Snow White's own fingers tightened in reflex. And she could feel it too. Velvet-clad iron. Furnace hot.

Gault hissed, throwing back his head as Ander's fingers opened and closed about his shaft. Taking Ander's head between his hands Gault lowered his mouth and kissed him. There was nothing of the rough hunger she had seen her stepmother and the huntsman exchange. It was achingly tender. A lover's kiss, it was also the kiss of someone who loved.

Gault divested Ander of his clothing, all the while exchanging slow, gentle kisses. Shorter than Gault and stockier, Ander's body was no less beautiful. Their kisses became deeper, more urgent. Ander pushed Gault towards the bed, and Snow White caught sight of his back. Dozens of ropey white scars marred his golden skin, the legacy of a lashing that must have come close to killing him. Snow White made a sound of distress, and Gault stiffened as if he had heard her.

"Sshh," murmured Ander as he climbed onto the bed to kneel behind Gault. He ran his hand over the other man's back, and Snow White saw Gault's flesh shiver under his gentle touch. Putting his mouth on one of the scars, Ander laid a trail of kisses along it, following its length where it curved over Gault's shoulder and down to the base of his spine. He drew Gault down so that he lay on his back looking up at Ander who kneeled beside him.

Bending down, Ander placed his mouth against Gault's throat and then proceeded to make his way down his body with his mouth and his tongue. With his fingers. Gault's eyes closed, his hands fisted by his sides. Snow White watched as Ander's tongue circled one flat brown nipple, feeling her own nipples tighten as Gault's did. Feeling her own belly quiver as the flesh of Gault's belly quivered under Ander's mouth and hands. She could hear the rasp of Gault's breath as Ander paused where his phallus jutted against his belly.

Her gaze fixed to the mirror, Snow White watched as Ander stroked and suckled, seeing from the way Gault's hips flexed restlessly against the bed and his hands tightened convulsively upon the sheets how it pleased him. Learning that if you touched a man just there or if you ran the tip of your tongue across the flesh there, or there, it was enough to make him arch from the bed with a hoarse cry.

"Ander!" Gault's hands grasped Ander's head, holding him still from the exquisite torture he had been inflicting. Ander smiled. He knelt between Gault's legs, running a hand over his firm muscled thighs. Snow White's abdomen drew tight with anticipation as he lowered his head and gently licked the base of Gault's shaft. Gault's flesh pulsed beneath his questing tongue. He drew it upwards slowly, and Snow White felt satisfaction flood her at Gault's sharp hiss of pleasure. One hand wrapped itself around Gault's shaft; the other cupped the smooth flesh of his balls. Ander's mouth opened wide as he took in Gault's thick length. He suckled the satin skin, his tongue swirling around the tip. Gault's hands tightened around his head once more.

"Harder," he ground out. Ander bobbed his head as his mouth slid up and down Gault's burning length. Gault pushed against his mouth, his hips flexing. "Harder," he groaned. Ander's teeth grazed Gault's taut flesh. With a stifled moan, Gault's hips rose as he surged into Ander's mouth. He thrust madly against him before uttering a ragged cry, his hands falling to his sides, sweat gleaming on his heaving chest. As Gault climaxed, Snow White felt his pleasure surge from his belly and balls into his shaft. She cried out, gasping for breath as the most intense feelings she had ever experienced swept through her.

Gault drew Ander up to lay beside him. Wrapping his arms around him, he buried his head against Ander's neck. He ran his hands over Ander's body as his breathing slowed.

"I love you," Snow White heard him murmur as the mirror before her grew dark once more.

The Prince

Charming by name, if not by nature, Prince Charming surveyed his intended with a practiced eye whilst offering her a practiced smile. Like most of these southern women, she was pale as moon-fall, silver hair and silver eyes that offered him no hint as to what she was thinking. Still, her fingers leapt in his when he took her hand and kissed it, so perhaps there was more than ice water flowing in her veins. He released her hand and turned to offer his respects to the stepmother, feeling a little spark of interest in his groin as he ran his gaze over her darker golden bounty. Hmmm. Perhaps he could ride both the mare and the filly? He offered her a smile too and was pleased to see her eyes widen before they sought out the dark huntsman who lounged so insolently against the far wall.

Against the other wall stood seven dwarves, their black eyes expressionless as they looked on. Except for the youngest, who kept casting scowling looks in Charming's direction. Charming gave him a cold look in return and was pleased to note that the insolent creature had the grace to drop his head and stare at his feet. Charming loathed dwarves. They would be amongst the first things to go once he and Snow White were wed. After his wife's virginity of course. He stifled a private chuckle.

His intended took his arm as he led her outside to present his bride gift, exclaiming with delight when she saw the sleek grey palfrey waiting there. She stroked its neck with one pale hand.

"Does it please you?" Charming murmured. "He is not an easy beast, but I assumed you would be a wonderful rider. You do like to ride, don't you, my lady?"

Faint colour washed across her cheeks.

Charming allowed himself another smile. She knew what he meant. Virgins were well enough, but ignorant virgins were tedious. A theoretical knowledge, at least, of what went on in the marriage bed would ensure she didn't run screaming the minute he dropped his drawers.

After an interminable time spent exchanging platitudes with his betrothed and her stepmother, Charming was shown to his suite, where a steaming hot hip bath waited before the fire. Dismissing his valet, he stripped and clambered into the bath, emitting a sigh of pleasure as he sank into the water and closed his eyes. Yes, he thought contentedly as his hand idly sought between his legs and stroked his cock. This was all going to turn out very well indeed. He had been led to believe that his intended was all ice, but he had reason to believe that there were hidden fires there just waiting to be stoked. And the stepmother was an added bonus. He would have the use of both of them. For as long as he found them useful.

He released himself, his fingers scrabbling along the bottom of the tub.

“Are you looking for the soap?” came a voice at his ear, and he jumped, sloshing water over the side of the bath.

“Rui,” said Charming, his voice gone suddenly husky and his cock instantly hard. “I’ve missed you.” He took hold of the other man’s shirt and drew him close. Rui’s mouth opened under his, and he thrust his tongue inside ruthlessly. Rui groaned against his mouth, his hands gripping Charming’s shoulders. They broke apart, panting. “Join me,” said Charming. “You know I hate to be naked alone.”

Rui smiled, that slow hungry smile that made Charming even more impossibly hard. “The bath’s not big enough. Get out and let me...dry you.”

Charming let Rui draw him up and out of the bath. “There are towels over there,” he said hoarsely.

Rui smiled again. “I thought I’d use my tongue.”

The muscles in Charming’s belly clenched. He wrapped his fingers in Rui’s long hair and pulled him hard against his wet body. “That would be delightful. But first, tell me a little of my lovely fiancée. And her oh-so-delightful stepmother. I hear the two of you are very, very close?” His fingers tightened in Rui’s hair until the other man winced.

“Close enough that she will do anything I ask of her,” he said, letting his fingers trail down Charming’s damp back to rest on his buttock. “Isn’t that what you wanted? Her eating out of my hand? I could have had the girl too...”

Charming gave his head a sharp tug, smiling at Rui’s hiss of pain. “That’s my field to plough, and don’t you forget it.”

Rui’s fingers dug into Charming’s buttocks, pulling him even closer. His breath was warm against his cheek. “Will you think of me when you fuck her?” he whispered. “Because I thought of you. Every time.”

“Liar,” said Charming, but there was no heat in his voice. He let go of Rui’s hair, dropping his hands to his shoulders, pushing the other man to his knees. “Now put that whore’s mouth of yours to good use for once.”

Later in bed, with his body and his cock both throbbing in a pleasurable counterpoint, Charming studied Rui as he sprawled asleep beside him. He bent down, tracing the shape of the scar on Rui’s chin with gentle fingers. Remembering the time two years ago when Charming’s father had found him and Rui together in the stables. His father had yanked Rui to his feet whilst Charming had lain there gaping up at him with his breeches about his ankles. He had backhanded Rui in the face, the ring he wore splitting open his chin. Rui had been sent packing, and Charming was betrothed to the southern princess Snow White before he even had time to comprehend what had happened.

His father had watched him like a hawk from that time on. “Marry and get yourself an heir,” he had sneered. “Then you can fuck the pig boy for all I care.”

Charming had no desire to fuck the pig boy. It had always been Rui. No matter that neither of them was faithful to the other. The rest were nothing more than a means to relieve an itch. An itch that even now Charming wanted to scratch again. He let his fingers trail lower on Rui's body.

Two years since Rui's father arranged for him to come here to the court of his old friend as huntsman. Two years when they had had no contact except through the letters smuggled to Charming and out again by an infatuated chambermaid who fancied herself in a fairy tale with Charming the prince who would rescue her from a life of drudgery and make her his queen.

Charming's lip curled in a sneer. The fat cow had had her uses, but she had been disabused of any notion she had that Charming loved her. Charming loved no one but himself. And the man beside him.

Two years whilst they had laid their plans. Charming would marry the little snow queen and get her with child. He had no doubt as to the potency of his seed. There were bastards enough at home to attest to it. Then, if she unfortunately survived child birth, which so many noble ladies didn't, she would meet with an accident some other way. It was Rui's idea that they make it appear as though Snow White had died at her stepmother's hand. With the old queen put to death and the new one dead, Charming would be left as regent for the child. It mattered not whether the brat was male or female. He would be king here with Rui beside him. Then, when his father died, he would return to claim his own kingdom. The brat could stay here.

He would have everything he desired, this man most of all.

His hands had drifted lower again, closing over warm firm flesh that quivered against his questing fingers. Rui's blue eyes drifted open, hazy with sleep.

Everything he desired...

The Queen

Anais studied her stepdaughter's betrothed as he sat beside Snow White, feeding her titbits from his plate. A perfect opportunity to poison the girl and lay blame at Charming's door... Her hands fisted with frustration, and she sought out Rui where he sat at one of the lower tables.

His eyes met hers. *Patience.*

They were to bide their time. Let the wedding take place. Let Charming plant a child in Snow White's belly first, before they made their move. With her new husband accused of her murder and naught but a puling babe left to sit the throne, who else to take control as regent but Snow White's grieving stepmother?

"It's a far better plan," Rui had murmured to her as they lay entwined in her bed. "Twenty-one years before the child is old enough to rule, assuming it even lives that long. A babe is easier to get rid of than a woman grown. There will be far fewer questions asked."

"But to have to wait another year? Or longer?"

"No more than a year, I promise you. Charming has bastards scattered from one end of his father's kingdom to the other. He'll have her with child before the spring thaw."

"Not so Charming, then?" said Anais.

Rui laughed as he moved to cover her body. She stared up into his mirror eyes. He entered her slowly. "You don't find him charming?" he asked as he began to move inside her.

She gasped, arching up to meet his thrusts. "There is something about him. He smiles a lot, but the smile never seems to find his eyes."

Rui's long hair fell across his face, hiding it. Hiding *his* eyes. "Obviously his charm lies elsewhere than in his eyes." His hands gripped her arms, hard enough to bruise as he began to thrust with a fiercer rhythm. "He wants to fuck you. You should encourage him."

"What?" Anais wrapped her legs about his hips, trying to slow him down. "I would never... There is only you." She whimpered as he pushed deeper inside her. "Would you want me to...to lie with another? Do you...do you fuck other women?" The obscenity felt strange upon her tongue. Her heart stuttered in an uneven beat. Sweat slicked Rui's chest and belly. He tossed back his damp hair, baring his teeth as he ground his pelvis against hers.

"No. I don't fuck other women. Only you. Only you." His head dropped against her neck as a shudder ran through him. Then another.

Only you.

Anais let her hands play across the smooth, wet skin of his back whilst his breath sawed in her ear.

"Encourage him," Rui whispered to her. "We need him to trust you, and if that means you must lie with him... Sometimes sacrifices need to be made for the greater good." He withdrew from her body, rolling onto his back to look up at the crimson canopy above them.

Sacrifices.

Anais couldn't shake the feeling that the only one making a sacrifice would be she.

She glanced again at Charming, blushing as she realised he was looking at her. *Encourage him.* "I trust you find our hospitality to your liking, my lord?" she said stiffly.

"I find everything infinitely delightful," he said, letting his black eyes roam boldly over Anais's body. "However..." and here he turned to glance at Snow White, "...I find myself eager to claim my bride. I trust the settlement discussions draw to a rapid conclusion?"

"Indeed," replied Anais. "Everything proceeds as it should."

A small, secret smile curled one corner of his wide mouth. "Excellent. Then the wedding can take place on the first day of spring as planned."

It wasn't a question.

Anais nodded. "One more month, my lord."

Charming raised Snow White's hand to his lips. "The longest month of my life," he murmured.

Was that a blush on the Snow Bitch's cheeks? Anais sneered into her goblet.

One of her stepdaughter's ever-present dwarves approached the table and bowed. The tallest one, the one whose dark eyes always seemed to look upon the world with suppressed fury. Anais had heard some of her women sigh over this one and begrudgingly she could acknowledge that he was indeed comely with his high, sculpted cheekbones and chiseled jaw. However, unlike some of his companions, this one had never given any of the ladies a second glance, thus they were destined to sigh in vain.

"Are you ready to retire, my princess?" he asked now. He had a low, husky voice. Charming had turned with a scowl at his approach as if to berate him for his presumption at interrupting. Another expression ran across his face, too swiftly for Anais to recognise it, and then with a smile he released Snow White's hand.

"Indeed the hour grows late. Don't let me keep you from your bed." His voice dropped to a whisper. "At least not yet. But in a month's time... I doubt I shall let you out of your bed."

This time there was no mistaking the colour that flooded Snow White's face or the anger in the dwarf's eyes. She rose to her feet, offering Charming and Anais a deep curtsy before taking the dwarf's offered arm and allowing him to lead her from the dais.

Charming watched them leave, his eyes narrowed. Then, with a faint laugh, he shook his head and took a thoughtful sip from his goblet. "They go everywhere with her? Her dwarven companions?"

Anais nodded. "Inseparable."

“I’ve never had much truck with dwarves, but that one seems a handsome enough fellow.”

Anais shrugged. “There are many who would agree with you. I know that several of his companions are great favourites with the ladies of the court. But not that one. I’ve not heard of a lady who has had success in bringing him to her bed.”

Charming smiled, taking another sip of wine. “No. I shouldn’t imagine they would.” His fingers drummed idly against the tabletop as he stared into his goblet. Lifting his head he looked out across the room towards the table where Rui sat. Was it Anais’s imagination or did something spark between them, some awareness that she wasn’t privy to? Charming rose abruptly to his feet. “I shall retire too, Your Majesty,” he said. “With your gracious permission?”

Anais nodded.

As Charming departed, Rui made his way to her side, leaning over her chair, his fingers playing with the loose curls of hair at her neck.

“What did you talk of?” he murmured. “Did you let him know you were interested...?”

“He had more interest in his blushing betrothed,” replied Anais waspishly. “Or in that dwarf of hers, for that matter.”

“The dwarf?” Rui’s fingers stilled for a moment. “Charming hates dwarves.”

Anais turned her head to look up at him.

He shrugged. “Or so I have been told. Are you ready for bed?”

Anais nodded.

“Then make yourself ready. I will be along later.” He turned away before Anais could say anything further and strode from the room.

The Prince

Charming stood gazing out of his bedchamber window. He was naked, and the room was chill despite the fire that burned in the grate. When the door opened, he did not turn around, although his skin prickled now with more than gooseflesh. A pair of warm hands slid down his shoulders and stroked his chest and belly. He leaned back against Rui's body with a sigh of pleasure as Rui's fingers encircled his swollen cock, lightly squeezing.

"I hear you've developed a taste for dwarves," Rui breathed against his ear as his hand tightened around Charming's erection.

Charming grunted with pained pleasure. "What?" he groaned. Rui squeezed harder. "Gods," Charming croaked. "What are you talking about?"

Rui continued his exquisite torture. "I saw the way you looked at him. And Anais confirmed it."

Charming's breath ratcheted in his throat as he flexed against Rui's grip. "I'll admit I looked...ah!" Another squeeze made his balls clench. His fingers gripped the windowsill. "Don't you think it might be amusing?"

"To fuck a dwarf? You're supposed to be making a move on the queen, making her want to fuck you."

"Oh gods." A shudder ran through Charming. "I can do that with my hands tied behind my back. Would you deny me a little challenge on the side?" The muscles in his thighs were shaking. He tipped his head back, letting Rui kiss his neck. Rui's fingers squeezed him rhythmically. Climax roared through him, and he trembled as he spent himself, gasping Rui's name. He heard Rui fumble one-handed with his clothing, then gasped again as the other man thrust into him from behind.

"I deny you nothing," Rui rasped, his breath hot against Charming's neck. "Just don't amuse yourself at my expense and don't lose sight of what we have planned." Each thrust of his body rammed Charming's belly against the windowsill. Rui's head dropped, and Charming felt his teeth close around the tender skin where his neck met his shoulder. He bit hard, even as his body bucked against Charming's. With a final shudder, the weight of Rui's body collapsed over Charming's before he slid free and turned to sprawl against the windowsill.

Charming stood between Rui's legs, leaning down to kiss him. "Jealous, my love?" he murmured. "It's hardly fair that I should go without while you spend your spare time servicing the fair Anais."

"That's different," Rui said roughly. "It's necessary, but I derive no pleasure from it."

Charming arched one brow. “Oh come now. No pleasure? None whatsoever?”

The corner of Rui’s mouth turned up in a wry smile. He shrugged. “Well, maybe a little but it’s merely work...”

“Nice work if you can get it,” murmured Charming, interrupting him.

“Work,” said Rui firmly. “I have a task to do, and so do you. Would you see all that we have planned come to naught?”

“No. I’ll do my part. Have I got this aright? Marry the Snow Princess, fuck her, get her with child, have her stepmother kill her or kill her myself if it comes to that? Make the queen think I desire her, fuck her and encourage her to kill her stepdaughter, then have her put to death for murder? Goodness. I am going to be extremely busy. Have I forgotten anything?”

Rui’s lush mouth lifted in a smile, and Charming felt desire uncoil in his belly. “Gods, I love your mouth,” he murmured. “How can something so beautiful say and do such wicked things?” He dropped to his knees, placing his hands on the other man’s thighs. They quivered under his touch. “Say something wicked,” Charming whispered.

“Fuck me.”

Charming laughed. “Ah, but that my darling, goes *without* saying...”

He lowered his head.

The Princess

Snow White was in the stables grooming her new palfrey when Kaliko found her. The sheer beauty of her bride gift was enough to make her think kindly of her betrothed, despite her uncertainty as to his true nature. There were times when he made her feel uncomfortable, yet at other times a look or a word from him could cause a flutter deep in her belly. In a few short weeks he would be her husband...

Wedded and bedded, she would be queen indeed. Her stepmother would be encouraged to join a nunnery, and the dark huntsman Rui Alvarez would be sent far, far away from court.

"What are you thinking of, my princess?" came Kaliko's voice from behind her. "Your Prince *Charming*?"

Snow White jumped. "And if I was?" she said defensively, bridleing at both Kaliko's tone and the sneer on his face.

"He writes you pretty letters and makes cow's eyes at you. But he doesn't love you."

"Indeed? And when did you become such an expert on love?"

"I know what it is to love," Kaliko said fiercely. "And I know that whoreson doesn't love you."

"You forget yourself," Snow White said coldly.

"I wish I could."

He sounded so sad that Snow White's temper cooled. She took his hand. "You will always be my friend, Kaliko, but he will be my husband. You must show him respect."

"Respect?"

The bitterness in his voice made her recoil. His fingers tightened around hers.

"There is something you must see, my Princess. You may not believe what I say, but once you see him as he really is... Will you come with me?" He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm. Her heart jumped and she snatched her fingers away. The pained look in his dark eyes made her want to offer them back to him.

"Come with me, Snow," he said softly, and her heart jumped again.

On the far side of the palace, beyond the pleasure gardens, lay an ornamental wood with a carefully designed rustic lake at its centre. Kaliko led Snow White down a path overhung with evergreen balinya trees. The lake was surrounded by a clearing dotted with pale yellow crocuses and bluebells, but the wood grew thick at its edge and it was possible to remain unseen whilst observing the lake. No one was allowed to venture there but royalty itself. The queen, Snow White and now Prince Charming...

Moving quietly, Kaliko crouched behind a clump of fairy bush, gesturing to Snow White to join him. He pushed the leaves apart so she could look through. The lake was at the far end of the clearing from where they sat. At the other end, her betrothed sat with his back against a tree, hands behind his head, his legs crossed at the ankles. He was wearing nothing but his linen shirt.

There was someone swimming in the lake. Snow White recognised the huntsman's sleek, dark head as he stroked across the water. As he reached the shallower end of the lake, he stood, the water lapping at his hips.

"Is it cold?" Charming asked lazily.

"What do you think?" replied Rui as he moved forward. He was naked, and Snow White made a small sound, a gasp. Kaliko gripped her forearm.

"Sshh," he said softly.

Charming cocked his head to one side. "I think...it is very cold indeed," he said with a laugh.

Rui smiled, glancing down between his legs. His hand fisted around his phallus. Charming licked his lips, and Rui's smile widened. "I'll just warm myself up a little, shall I?" His fist slid down his length then back up again, infinitely slowly. Snow White saw Charming swallow hard as he nodded.

Rui continued to stroke himself, slowly at first, then with increasing urgency. Snow White could hear Charming's uneven breath. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. Her stomach churned with sick fascination. Her mind...she didn't know what to think. What to believe.

Rui's head was tipped back, the tendons in his neck standing out in stark relief. He bared his teeth as his hand took up an even faster rhythm. Charming's hands were fisted at his sides as he leaned forward watching with heavy lidded eyes. Rui dropped to his knees. With a cry, his body bowed backwards as he spent himself. A shudder ripped through him. He bent forward again, head hanging. His long, wet hair hid his face. Charming surged to his feet, his hands working at the buttons of his shirt. With a muffled oath, he pulled it off over his head and let it drop, revealing a lean, muscled torso with a pelt of thick black hair across his chest.

He took hold of Rui's hair and yanked his head up, leaning down to kiss him fiercely. "You are so beautiful," Snow White heard him murmur. Dropping to his knees, he grasped Rui's shoulders and pressed him down against the grass, covering him with his body. They continued to kiss hungrily, arms and legs entwined. Rui rolled over so that Charming lay beneath him and pinned his arms above his head.

"More beautiful than your Snow Princess?"

Charming gave a ragged laugh, his body moving restlessly beneath Rui's. "You *are* jealous, aren't you, my love? If you are a good boy, I'll let you share."

"Oh, I can be a very good boy." Rui pressed kisses down Charming's neck and across his chest.

At some time, Snow White must have taken hold of Kaliko's hand. She was squeezing his fingers now. He met her eyes and without a word they backed away as quietly as they had come.

By the time they reached the palace, still without a word being exchanged, Snow White was trembling. Kaliko followed her into her sitting room where she came to an abrupt halt.

"I am such a fool," she said bitterly. "Allowing myself to believe that a few pretty words meant so much. Allowing myself to dream... Why should I believe that anyone could ever love me?" Her voice broke.

"How could anyone not love you?" Kaliko said, and his voice shook too. He spun her about so that she faced the silver mirror that hung upon the wall. "You are beautiful, Snow. The fairest of them all. How could *I* not love you?" His voice dropped to a whisper. "My Snow."

She stared at him in amazement. He lifted one hand and tenderly wiped away a tear that was trickling down her cheek.

"My Snow," he said again, standing on tiptoes to press his lips against hers. His kiss was so gentle, but she could sense the passion and the hunger that lay beneath it. She opened her mouth, and Kaliko made a sound and kissed her harder. They broke apart, panting, and Kaliko paled.

"My princess," he said hoarsely. "Forgive me."

Snow White looked at him there before her with his golden skin and his head of black, tousled curls. His soft, black eyes. Her heart jumped, and this time it was as if it had moved to the place where it was always supposed to be. How had she been so blind, never seeing what was there in front of her? She touched his face and felt him tremble beneath her fingers.

"Kaliko," she said wonderingly.

"My Snow," he said as his mouth sought hers once more.

They kissed until Snow White felt as if her bones were melting with pleasure. Then Kaliko took her hand and led her to the bedroom. Slowly, between kisses, they undressed each other. She felt no embarrassment when she finally stood naked before him. They studied each other's bodies with unconcealed delight. Snow White let her hand trace the shape of his mouth, trail over his shoulder and chest. His taut, flat belly. Her fingers brushed against his erection, and he hissed, his body shivering in response. Lowering his head, he took one of her nipples in his mouth and suckled, gently at first, then more firmly. She emitted a sharp cry of pleasure, her fingers working through his curls.

"My Snow," he said when he lifted his head, his eyes wide and dark with passion. They lay upon the bed, and he covered her with his body, rising on his hands to gaze down at her. A look of uncertainty crossed his face. "I have never done this before," he said. "I want to please you."

"I have never done this before either," Snow White said with a shaky laugh. "And you do please me."

He smiled and it was as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud. "Then we shall learn together," he said softly.

With his hands and his mouth, he worshipped her body, learning from her sighs and gasps of pleasure what pleased her best. She let her own hands roam over the smooth, warm skin of his back, his muscled

buttocks. The hot, hard flesh between his legs. Finally, he positioned himself atop her once more and pressed himself gently against her entrance, shuddering with strain as he held himself still. There was a brief moment of pain. Snow White lifted her hips beneath him, taking him deeper, and he groaned, his head dropping to her neck. He flexed his hips and thrust, and then came the exquisite realisation that his flesh was inside her. He began to move, and she moved with him, their breath rasping as sweat-slicked skin moved against skin.

Snow White's pleasure rolled over her in waves, and she shuddered beneath him, crying out his name. At the same time, Kaliko threw back his head, uttering a deep moan. He collapsed on top of her, his chest heaving.

"My Snow," he murmured against her neck.

She brushed his damp curls away from his forehead. He raised his head to gaze into her eyes, smiling. Snow White smiled back.

"I love you," he said softly, his fingers tracing the shape of her mouth.

"I love you," she replied, and there was still wonder in her voice at that truth.

Someone pounded at the door.

"My princess? Are you in there?"

Ander's voice, taut with strain.

Snow White cast a wild look at Kaliko as he rolled off her.

"Ander?"

"My princess. You must come outside at once. There is trouble. Gault..." Ander's voice broke.

She scrambled from the bed. "One moment," she called breathlessly, taking her dress from Kaliko and pulling it over her head. He did up her buttons before pulling on his own clothes. They looked at each other uncertainly before Snow White smiled and leaned down to kiss him. She took his hand in hers and opened the door. Ander stared at them blankly for a moment. Hiram and Kaffion stood behind him, and Hiram uttered a crow of delight which he quickly stifled behind his hand. Kaliko blushed.

"What's wrong?" Snow White asked, her stomach dropping as she took in Ander's grey face.

"Gault needs you," he said. There were tears in his eyes. "Your... There is trouble with the prince, my lady."

There certainly was, thought Snow White bitterly. She followed Ander outside to the garden. Her other dwarves stood near the door, their faces grim.

Charming stood in her garden, his colour high, a livid bruise mottling one cheekbone. To one side of him stood the huntsman Rui Alvarez. Before him, with his hands bound behind his back, was Gault. His hair had come free of its customary braid and hung about his face in disheveled curls. He lifted his head, and Snow White gave a shocked cry. The left side of his face was swollen and discoloured, his eye closed

tight. His mouth too was swollen and bloody, but it was the look in his other eye that made her shiver. He looked a hairsbreadth away from madness.

“What is the meaning of this?” She was pleased to note that her voice did not shake.

“I thought you might tell me,” said Charming silkily. “Have you set your minions to spy upon me now, my lady?”

She had once wondered if he would be friend or enemy. As Snow White looked into Charming’s eyes, she knew the answer to that question.

“What are you talking about? Release Gault immediately!”

“Your little friend has been sticking his nose into matters that do not concern him. He has been following me and, frankly, my lady, I resent the intrusion.”

“There has clearly been a misunderstanding,” Snow White began. Rui Alvarez sniggered, and she glared at him before continuing. “Whatever you may have imagined has occurred it cannot have been necessary to beat him so brutally!”

“He attacked me,” Charming spat. “I was simply defending myself.”

“Gault?” she asked gently.

“It’s as he says,” he replied tonelessly. Beside her, Ander made a sound of protest and stepped forward. Meris took hold of his arm, shaking his head.

Charming’s eyes narrowed as he looked at Gault. “You see. The creature admits it. To attack a prince of the blood... I could have had him killed out of hand. It was only out of respect for you that I stayed my hand.”

Snow White wanted to claw his eyes out. Instead she forced herself to say, “I thank you for your forbearance, my lord. You may trust that I will deal with this transgression appropriately.”

“You misunderstand me, my dear,” said Charming softly. “It was out of respect that I didn’t kill him at once. That doesn’t mean I’m not going to kill him now.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that,” said Snow White icily and was pleased to see Charming’s eyes widen with surprise. “Gault belongs to me, and any punishment that is due him will be decided by me.”

“The cat has claws,” murmured Rui. He looked delighted.

“I am to be your husband in a few weeks. All your little men will belong to me, then.”

“Indeed? But you are not my husband yet, sir. And thus I must insist that you hand Gault to me and let me come to the truth of this matter.”

“The truth?” sneered Charming. “When has a dwarf ever had truck with the truth?” He looked towards Rui and something he saw in the huntsman’s face made him school his own expression into one of rueful dismay. He ran his hands through his hair. “Forgive me. I don’t know what came over me. To speak to you thus... I am not usually so churlish.” He offered her a charming smile, but no one had ever looked

less charming to Snow White's eyes. He gave a deprecating shrug. "You can understand why? To be attacked thus, and by a servant, no less."

"I understand," said Snow White stiffly.

Charming took her hand, and she forced herself not to shudder at his touch. He pressed a kiss against her fingers. "Say you forgive me," he whispered.

"Of course, my lord. And you will allow me to punish Gault as I see fit?"

His mouth thinned. "Of course, my dear. I trust that you will deal with him as he deserves."

"You have my word on it."

He gave her another tight smile and nodded at Rui who took a knife from the belt at his waist and cut the bonds about Gault's wrists. Gault's hands fell to his sides. Both Charming and the huntsman offered her a bow as they left the garden.

Ander ran to Gault's side, taking him in his arms, but Gault shrugged him off wildly. "Leave me alone. Don't touch me!"

"Gault?" said Ander, his voice breaking.

"Leave me alone," Gault repeated in a low furious voice. Weaving from side to side, he made his way past Snow White and the other dwarves into the palace.

Ander dropped his face into his hands, his shoulders shaking.

"Ander?" Snow White said gently.

He lifted his head, his expression ravaged.

"Go to him," she urged softly.

He set his shoulders, ducking his head in a taut nod.

Kaliko placed his warm fingers in Snow White's cold hand. "Come inside, Snow," he said.

"How can I marry that?"

Kaliko squeezed her hand. "You can't. You won't."

"There is a contract...another three years until I can rule in my own right. If I repudiate Charming, I only set myself in Anais's hands until then. And her hands are guided by Rui Alvarez. None of them wish me well."

"You have us. You have me. They will not touch you!" Kaliko drew her closer and kissed her.

Hiram cleared his throat, and they broke apart. "Happy as I am to see that you two have finally realised what has been obvious to the rest of us for some time..."

Kaliko scowled, and Snow White blushed.

Kaffion cuffed Hiram about the ear. "Show some respect, little man."

"I am the very picture of respect," said Hiram pertly. His expression sobered. "We have much to discuss. Charming has showed his hand. He might think he has papered over the cracks, but once he

realises just what he has revealed here today, who knows what action he may take? And Alvarez...that one is pure poison, for all his sweet looks.”

Snow White shivered. She let Kaliko lead her inside, her other dwarves trailing behind, their faces grim.

It was hours later, as they sat about the remains of a barely touched supper, that Ander finally reappeared. They had been quiet for some time. Even Hiram’s natural ebullience had been quelled by the events of the day. His face drawn and pale, Ander sank into a chair by the fire with a weary sigh, meeting Snow White’s anxious query with dark haunted eyes.

“He’s asleep. I slipped something into the wine...”

“Did he tell you what happened?” asked Shyla.

Ander’s lips drew into a tight thin line, his hands clenching on the arms of the chair until his knuckles turned white. He gave a terse nod.

Snow White knelt beside him, prising one hand free to clasp it between her own. “Will you share it with us? I need...we all need to know.”

Another nod. Ander swallowed hard, running his other hand across his face. “Yes. You do.” In a soft voice he began...

Ander found Gault crouching against the far wall of his room, knees drawn up and head buried in his arms. Closing the door behind him, he stood quietly for a moment. Gault lifted his head, and Ander felt pain and grief slice through him along with a burgeoning fury at those who had done this to him. For all his apparent indifference and coldness, there was a fragility to Gault that only Ander ever saw, and the look on his lover’s face now made it apparent that Gault was very close to breaking...if not broken already.

He made himself put his fears and his grief aside and crossed the room to kneel beside Gault. When he extended a hand towards him, Gault flinched.

“Don’t,” he said hoarsely.

Ander let his hand fall to his side.

“What happened?” he asked gently.

There was only silence. Ander didn’t press, although his hands ached with longing to take Gault in his arms and hold him. His heart ached with another kind of pain.

Finally, Gault spoke. “I was watching them.”

As he had been for weeks. It was Gault who first discovered the truth about Charming and Rui Alvarez. What they were to each other. They had grown careless or perhaps they were simply too arrogant to believe that anyone could catch them at their game.

Armed with that knowledge, the dwarves had argued over the best way to inform their princess. In the end it was Kaliko who had said, "She must see for herself."

"I was on the other side of the wood," Gault continued. "Kaliko brought Snow and they watched for a time..." Ander took note of Gault's use of the nickname the dwarves used for their princess, and his heart ached anew. It showed an affection for Snow White that even he hadn't realised Gault felt. Gault gave his heart to so few.

"After they left...the things those two said, Ander. What they plan to do. They were so arrogantly certain that no one could gainsay them. I just wanted them to know that someone knew what game they were playing. That they weren't going to get away with it." He uttered a harsh, despairing laugh. "I proved myself as arrogant as they. Still, the shock on Charming's face when he caught sight of me... It made it almost worthwhile."

He swallowed. "I simply stood there and stared at them. Charming's face went from white to red and back to white again, but Alvarez...his expression never changed. You know I don't fear much, but I was afraid then, Ander. Afraid of him. I took a step backwards, and he sprang to his feet. I've never seen a man move so fast. I took another step back and turned to run and I tripped over a tree root. Then Alvarez was on me. He took me by the shoulders and dragged me out into the clearing.

"Charming hit me. Knocked me senseless for a moment. When I came to, I was on the ground and he was kneeling over me. He hit me again.

"Isn't this a pleasant surprise? I was only thinking of having you beneath me the other night and now here you are. Such a pretty little spy.'

"He kissed me, and that's when I hit him. It was more luck than anything else, because my head was ringing and I could scarce see out of this eye." Gault touched his swollen face with one fingertip. Ander wanted to kiss the bruised flesh around his eye. His swollen mouth. He clasped his hands together firmly. "He didn't like that." A laugh shivered through him. "He had my arms pinned above my head and he leaned forward and said, 'When I'm finished with you, you will take my cock in your mouth and thank me for the privilege.'

"He tried...he, he touched me. Tried to make me...but he couldn't. He didn't like that either. Alvarez laughed.

"What price all your vaunted *charm* now?"

"Do you think you can do better?"

"With my hands tied behind my back.'"

Gault fell silent.

“He hurt you?” Ander prodded gently.

Gault gave a despairing laugh and dropped his head to his knees once more. When he spoke, his voice was muffled, but Ander could still hear the self-loathing that laced his words.

“Gods no. When he...there was nothing but gentleness in his touch. And pleasure. He made me want him... And I can never forgive him for that.”

Even though Gault sat beside him, Ander could feel him withdrawing until the gap between their bodies might well have been a chasm rather than a hand’s span. He stared down at his clasped hands.

And tried not to weep.

He was weeping now. With a quick look towards the others, Snow White indicated that they should leave. Only Kaliko remained, his hand resting on her shoulder. She kissed the back of Ander’s hand. He gave her a bleak smile.

“It will be all right. Gault *will* be all right,” she said softly. “You love him.”

“Sometimes love isn’t enough, Snow. And there are some hurts that even love can never heal.”

The Queen

Anais had noticed a cooling in the Snow Bitch's attitude towards her betrothed. It was nothing blatant. Perhaps a tightening of the skin around her eyes or a thinning of her lips. A smile that never reached her eyes. There was wariness in Charming's eyes too. A calculating expression on his face. They were nothing but polite in their dealings with each other, but Anais could sense a change.

When she mentioned it to Rui, he had laughed it off as pre-wedding nerves. "Nothing has changed," he said, kissing her roughly. "We need to keep moving. Entice him to your bed. We are so close to attaining everything that we desire." He sounded angry, and there was anger in the way he made love to her that night too. Still, at the end, she clasped him to her, his hair soft as silk beneath her hands.

"Must we do this?" she murmured. "I have no wish to lie with another."

Rui gave a furious exclamation and rolled off her to sit on the edge of the bed. "Are we to go over this again and again?"

He was angry. Anais touched his shoulder, and he jerked upright and strode to the window, gazing out with a brooding expression on his face. Anais slid from the bed and wrapped her arms around him, pressing herself against his firm, warm body.

"She will be queen this time next week. What makes you so certain the first thing she does won't be to banish you and me from the court? What makes you so certain that we will even have a year in which to act?"

He turned in her arms, and she stared into his face. "Charming will keep her so busy she won't have time to think on you and me. She'll be flat on her back."

"She doesn't like him. In fact, I begin to think she hates him."

His hands dug painfully into her shoulders. "Don't think," he said and kissed her. "Trust me," he said against her mouth.

"We could go away. Just you and I together," said Anais. Rui became still in her arms, his mouth resting against her cheek. "I love you." She had never said it out loud before.

"Go away together? And do what? Give up all this? Would you have me exchange a kingdom for a pigpen? If you love me, then you will do this for me."

He had pushed her to the floor and made love to her again, more gently this time. It was only later, after he had left her, that Anais thought upon what he had said.

And what he hadn't said.

He hadn't said that he loved her.

Charming came across Anais in the rose garden where she sat upon an ornamental stone bench staring pensively at the soft green covering of new leaves with their promise of spring. Two of her women sat nearby idly chatting, their heads bent close together. All the talk was of the wedding in five days' time. Anais's head ached. She was weary of the tedium of the court and its fascination with the Snow Bitch and her Prince Charming. Weary of Rui's demands. His words hammered her heart as relentlessly as his body hammered hers.

If you loved me, you would do this...

Yet love him she did. Despite her fears.

She pasted a smile on her face as Charming approached, allowing him to take her hand and bow over it. His fingers lingered on hers perhaps an instant too long. He gestured to the seat beside her.

"May I join you, Majesty?"

Majesty. In five days' time, she would no longer have the right to that title.

Anais gave him a gracious nod in acquiescence, and he sank onto the stone seat beside her. He was very graceful, Anais noted. He had a loose-limbed lightheartedness to him that reminded her of Rui.

But his eyes were black, not blue, and she could read nothing from them.

"So, Your Highness. The contracts are signed and all is in readiness for your wedding day?"

"Indeed," he murmured. "But please, call me Charming."

"Then you must call me Anais. After all, we will be relatives of a sort in a few days." Anais smiled brightly.

"Hmm," he said absently, leaning back and gazing up at the sky.

"You seem distracted, Charming. Thinking of your wedding night, perhaps?" This last was said a touch more sharply than Anais had intended.

He laughed. "Perhaps. Although not in the way you might imagine, Anais."

She lifted an eyebrow in polite enquiry. Charming turned his head to look at her, taking her hand in his and absently stroking it. She suppressed a shiver. He leaned a little closer to her, and she forced herself not to move away. "In truth I don't anticipate much pleasure from my wedding night," he said conversationally. "A well-broken mare is a much sweeter ride than an unbroken filly."

This startled a laugh from her. "That is hardly a flattering analogy, my lord! For the mare or the filly."

He grinned, and for once Anais could see the charm in him. Just for one brief moment, as though he had let his guard down for an instant. "Perhaps not. Would you prefer it if I compared a princess to a queen?"

Anais felt her face colour. "I will be your stepmother."

This time it was Charming who laughed. He lifted her hand to his lips. "Let me assure you that what I feel for you is nothing remotely resembling filial devotion." His tongue stroked her palm, rough and wet, before he released her.

Her heart was beating a tattoo. She felt as though Rui stood at her shoulder watching her.

She smiled at Charming. "How intriguing. Perhaps we could discuss exactly what it is you feel for me after supper this evening?"

His wide mouth curled in an answering smile. "Nothing would please me more. In the meantime, perhaps you would like a taste of exactly what it is I feel for you? Just so you are in no doubt?" He placed Anais's hand between his legs. She could feel his erection straining against his breeches. He gave a little grunt of pleasure as she pressed her palm against him there.

"Gracious, my lord. It appears that you feel a great deal for me." She patted him again, letting her voice drop to a purr. "A very great deal indeed."

"You have no idea," Charming said huskily.

Rising to her feet, Anais shook out her skirts. "Until tonight then, Charming."

"I am counting the hours."

He remained sprawled on the seat, watching her with heavy eyes. Anais could feel his gaze locked on her back as she walked away.

If you love me, you will do this for me...

She didn't realise she was weeping until she reached her apartments and met the startled eyes of one of her ladies-in-waiting.

Anais dismissed her women and lay upon her bed with a cold compress upon her aching forehead. Something startled her awake some time later. She sat up, gasping, her eyes widening with fear as she took note of the man sitting in a chair by her bed. He held a dagger in his hands which he was turning over and over in his hands. At Anais's gasp, he lifted his head.

The tallest dwarf, the angry one. He studied her with expressionless black eyes. Where Snow White's other dwarves clung to her side like leeches, this one had not been seen about the court for many days. One side of his face was a patchwork of fading yellow and green bruises. There was a half-healed scab on his bottom lip.

He could mean her nothing but ill.

"What do you want? What are you doing here?" Anais forced the words through a throat gone tight with terror.

"I won't hurt you." His low, husky voice, although soft, did nothing to reassure her.

Anais's hands fisted in the bedclothes as she scuttled across the bed. "Leave. Immediately. Or I shall scream."

"Scream if you want to," he said tonelessly. "It won't do you any good."

For no reason that she could fathom, Anais believed him. She didn't scream. "You are her creature. Do you mean to kill me?"

Anger flared deep in his eyes. "I am no one's creature. And I told you. I won't hurt you."

"Then what do you want?"

Rising from the chair, he sheathed the dagger at his hip and held out his hand. "I want you to come with me."

Anais shook her head.

A brief, humourless smile touched his mouth. "Don't you wish to see how your lover besports himself when he isn't in your bed? Don't you wish to know where his heart truly lies? If he says he loves you, then he is a liar."

His words struck Anais like blows. "You are the liar," she said, her voice trembling.

"Mayhap. But have you courage enough to put that to the test?"

"You are mad! Return to your mistress and be assured that she will hear of your audacity."

Again that unsmiling smile. "It is not my mistress who means you ill. You have invited a rabid dog into your bed, my Queen, and he will turn on you and rip out your throat..."

"Get out," she hissed. "Go. Go!"

He merely held his hand out to her again.

Anais would never know why, with a despairing sob, she lurched across the bed and took his hand. His fingers were warm and dry in hers. Instead of leading her from the room, he moved to the wall, stretching up on tiptoes to press his fingers against a carved wooden rose. With a soft snick, a section of the wall swung inwards, releasing a whiff of stale air.

Letting go of her hand, he took a small tinderbox from a pouch at his waist and lit one of the candles that sat on a chest by the door. With a faint look of challenge on his impassive face, he took her hand in his and led her into the passageway.

She balked after a few steps, pulling against his firm grip. "What is this? Where does it lead?"

"You have been here in the palace all these years and you haven't yet discovered the secret ways that honeycomb it? I must admit to a sense of disappointment. I thought you more enterprising than that."

She bridled at the mockery in his voice. "Perhaps, unlike you, I am unaccustomed to scuttling around in dark places like a rat!"

"Perhaps," he said equably. "In truth it took me little enough time to discover these passages. You are probably right. I am more suited to the dark."

Anais stole a look at him, unaccountably saddened by his bitter tone. Why did he unsettle her so? And why was she following him down a dark passageway? In all likelihood he would slit her throat and leave her body here to rot.

Still, she went with him.

After climbing up a flight of dusty stairs and numerous twists and turns that convinced Anais she would never find her way out alone again if it came to that, the dwarf came to a halt.

“You must keep quiet now,” he said.

Anais nodded.

He gave her a hard look, and she nodded again. He blew out the candle. A few feet ahead, Anais could see faint stripes of light falling across the floor. Moving carefully he led her forward. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he gently pressed her to her knees. The light came through two thin slits in the wall, wide enough to put an eye against and to peer through. She followed his lead and placed her eye to the peephole.

She recognised the room immediately. Rui’s room. The peephole looked down upon the bed where two people lay entwined in a tangle of long, pale limbs. Anais’s heart stuttered. She knew each curve, every muscled inch of Rui’s body. She watched him now as he moved languidly against the second body in the bed, sweat gleaming on his back. His spine bowed as he gave a soft moan and a shudder ripped through him. He rolled onto his back, legs akimbo, one arm flung across his face.

Charming pillowed his head on one arm and watched him. The other hand stroked Rui’s chest.

Anais’s fingernails dug into her palms.

“Do you feel better now?” Charming asked.

Rui laughed, lowering his arm. He stared up at the ceiling. “I can’t shake the feeling that this is all going awry. That we are sitting atop a runaway horse with no means of bringing it to a halt.”

“Doubts, my love? That’s not like you. Tonight the queen comes to my bed. In five days, I wed the princess...”

“She is not fond of you. Your little interlude with the dwarf came dangerously close to ruining everything.”

Charming’s eyebrows rose. “*Your* interlude with the dwarf, I think you mean.”

“You started it.”

“And you, my darling, finished it. Beautifully, I might add. So what if she had her eyes opened a little as to my...temper. She will learn soon enough once we are wed who the master is. Besides, if you had listened to me and done as I wanted, the dwarf would have been dead and no one the wiser. Instead you had to develop a hitherto unknown predilection for dwarves.”

Rui turned his head to look at Charming. “I developed a hitherto unknown predilection for dwarves?”

Charming was laughing at him. "Well, perhaps we both did." He rose on one elbow and lowered his mouth to Rui's.

Anais was acutely aware of the man beside her. She could sense the tension and the fury coiled within him. She should have been afraid. Instead she felt numb. Was she still asleep upon her bed and this all some terrible dream?

"You need to get her with child at once," Rui said as Charming lifted his head. His mouth was kiss-swollen, and Anais shuddered as she recalled all the times she had kissed those same lips. "I'll go mad if we have to wait much longer."

"Yet this was all your idea," Charming said, his mouth trailing kisses down Rui's neck. "Still, once your queen has had a taste of me tonight, she should be less willing to come to your bed."

"My queen?" Anais recoiled from the vehemence in his voice. "Gods, but if I have to listen to her whine that she loves me once more..."

"Sshh," Charming soothed. "I'll make her love me. She seems willing enough. She had her hands on my cock this afternoon and I thought she'd never let go."

Rui moved suddenly, straddling the other man and pinning his arms above his head. "You are such a liar."

Charming bucked underneath him. "It's true. I swear it," he said, laughing.

They tussled fiercely for a few moments before Charming flipped Rui on his back. "We are so close," he whispered against his mouth. "So close. A year, my love, and both the young bitch and the old one dead. Then we need merely wait for my father to go to his just reward and we can go home again. I will be king. And you will be by my side. Always. Now, say something wicked to me."

"I love you."

The words pierced Anais to the heart. Words he had never said to her.

"And I love you. But that isn't wicked. That's a fundamental truth."

"Then perhaps for once I want to deal in truths and not wickedness."

"And perhaps the sun will rise at midnight. You were born wicked, Rui." Charming claimed Rui's mouth in a kiss.

Anais reached out blindly and, finding the dwarf's forearm, dug her fingers into it. Quietly he helped her to her feet, and they backed away. She was sick twice before they reached her rooms again. The second time he held her upright, holding her hair back from her face. When they entered her room, she stumbled to her bed and collapsed upon it, curling herself into a ball.

Numbly she was aware of the dwarf moving around her room. Sitting on the bed beside her, he gently wiped her hot face with a damp cloth. She opened tear-swollen eyes to look at him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. She pushed herself upright against the pillows.

"What is your name?"

“Gault.”

“You lied,” Anais said hoarsely. “You said you wouldn’t hurt me. But you did. You have.”

He said nothing.

“And you would use me too, Gault. Yet when you tell me you are sorry for it, I believe you. Why is that?”

He merely watched her with his dark eyes.

Anais touched his bruised face. “They did this to you.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw. Rising from the bed, he once more offered her his hand. When she stood beside him, he was a half-head shorter. “There is one thing more I would show you.”

Anais gave a wild laugh.

Taking his dagger from his belt, he closed her stiff fingers about the hilt. Then he unbuttoned his shirt. There were bruises on his body too, and high on one shoulder the marks of someone’s teeth. He placed his hands over hers and guided the tip of the dagger to rest against his chest, just below his left nipple.

“Here,” he breathed. “Between these two ribs. It’ll slide in like butter.” His eyes remained locked on hers, the dagger pressing against his skin. He let his hands drop. Anais’s hands trembled and a bead of blood formed. She let the dagger go and it fell to the floor.

“You won’t find your death at my hands,” Anais breathed just as softly, and a smile flashed across his face, transforming it to something of sheer beauty.

“My queen,” he said, bowing his head. He turned about and walked from the room, leaving the dagger lying there on the floor.

Having established through one of her women that Charming was presently to be found in the great hall, Anais made her way to Rui’s room. She didn’t knock. Closing the door behind her, she leaned against it and gazed across at the disordered bed. Rui sprawled naked atop the sheets, his dark head pillowed on his arms. Anais crossed the floor to kneel beside the bed. She stroked his dark hair back from his face, and his eyes opened, blinking at her sleepily.

“Anais? What are you doing here?”

“Do I need a reason? I missed you.” She sought his mouth with hers and kissed him.

“Mmmm,” he murmured. He stretched, and a pang shot through her as she drank her fill once more of all his dark beauty.

One last time...

She leaned down to kiss him again, carefully shaking the dagger she had concealed in her sleeve into the palm of her hand. Her other hand gripping his shoulder, she drove the dagger into his chest. Right where Gault had directed her to. Then she released him.

He gave a small sound, a tiny huff of breath, looking down at the hilt protruding from his chest with an air of puzzlement before sagging sideways and dying.

It was that easy.

For a time, she sat unmoving beside Rui's cooling body. Then she carefully straightened his arms and legs. She combed her fingers through the black silk of his hair. She kissed away the smear of blood at the corner of his mouth. Lastly she looked into the mirror of his eyes, frozen open in death, and tried to convince herself that she was still the fairest of them all.

There was an ironbound casket beneath Anais's bed. She withdrew it now, pressing her fingers against the secret catch that sprang the lid. Inside nestled an apple. A red apple, glossy-skinned and perfect. Back before Rui had come up with his new plan to get rid of the Snow Bitch, Anais had arranged for the apple's creation. One of the travelling hedge witches who passed through the city periodically had taken her silver and brewed a deadly poison. Each full moon for three months saw Anais dipping the apple in the witch's brew.

She had meant the apple for Snow White.

She took it from the casket, cradling it between fingers that shook only slightly. Lying down upon the bed, she lifted the fruit to her mouth. It smelt of summer. A summer she would never see.

Closing her eyes, Anais bit into the apple.

The Prince

Charming took another swallow of his drink, an irritated frown creasing his forehead. Where was the queen? The bitch was late. The note he received from her had indicated that she would join him in his apartments over an hour ago. A rap on the door made him utter a grunt of satisfaction. At last.

There was no queen waiting in the corridor. Only a nervous-looking servant who handed Charming another note in a bold sprawling hand that he recognised immediately. He frowned again.

“Wait here,” he directed the servant. He had dismissed his own retainers earlier. “If the queen comes, tell her I will return shortly. Ask her to wait.”

The servant’s eyes widened, but she nodded obediently. Charming crumpled the note in his pocket and strode down the hallway. He flung open the door to Rui’s room with a bang.

“What is so urgent that I had to drop everything and come running?” he began before his words stuttered to an abrupt halt. “Rui?”

Charming could hear his heartbeat echoing in his head. The blood in his body seemed to have turned thick and cold. He took a step forward and his breath sawed in his throat.

Step by step, on feet that had turned to lead, Charming approached the bed. There was no doubt that the man who lay upon it was dead, even without the evidence of the dagger that protruded from his chest. Rui lay still and straight, his blue eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling, and Charming felt his heart crack open. He reached out a trembling hand. Someone was muttering, “No. No. No.” Over and over. He threw his head back and screamed.

“Rui!”

There was remarkably little blood. Just a small dried trail that ran from where the dagger had pierced his chest, down across his belly. He hadn’t been dead long. A few hours, maybe more. The body was only now beginning to stiffen. Charming pulled the dagger free. It slid from Rui’s body like a piece of silk.

He was weeping. He couldn’t remember the last time he had wept, but he thought now that he might never stop. Charming stared at the blade in his hand. The chased silver work of the hilt and the runes incised on the blade made it instantly recognisable as dwarven work. Something dark and cold uncoiled itself in Charming’s chest. Raked his belly with sharp claws.

There was another note. There on the bed beneath Rui’s limp hand. It was in Rui’s handwriting, but Charming knew it had not been written by him, any more than the note in his pocket had.

Consider this a thank you gift. A token of how much I enjoyed your company and that of your late friend. Should you wish to renew the acquaintance, you know where to find me.

Gault Bessarion

The Princess

The day of her wedding galloped inexorably closer. Snow White had a host of scholars and clerics poring over the marriage contract, looking for a legal way to break it that would not lead her country into bankruptcy or worse.

"It is watertight," she said with frustration to Kaliko as they lay in her bed. "Charming's father has overlooked nothing."

"He has overlooked me," said Kaliko, his hands idly stroking her hip. "Charming will never have you, Snow. Trust me. Trust all of us. None of us will let you come to harm." His hand drifted lower to the damp flesh between her legs. In the past days, they had learnt much of what pleased the other. Each time they made love revealed some new delight.

How she loved him.

The sound he made when he was buried deep inside her. How he always cried her name when he came. The wonder and the love in his dark eyes as he looked down at her, his body moving so sweetly against hers.

How she loved him.

If not for the ever-present worry of her wedding, everything would have been perfect. That, and her worry for Gault.

Gault, who was present in body, but not in spirit. He was achingly polite whenever Snow White addressed him, trying to coax him from the dark place to which he had retreated. He was achingly polite to all of them. Even to Ander, and that was the worst hurt of all. Seeing the growing despair on Ander's face as each day seemed to take Gault farther away from him. Ander carried the marks of strain like scars.

Until this morning when she and Kaliko had risen from her bed to take breakfast and Ander had entered the dining room. There was colour in his face for the first time in days. He exuded a joy that was palpable.

"Gault came to me last night," he said, eyes shining.

Snow White had taken his hand with a glad smile.

"Perhaps? Perhaps it will be all right?" said Ander.

She nodded, her throat tight, squeezing his fingers.

Gault came to the table a short time later. There was an ease to his dealings with Ander and the other dwarves that Snow White had never seen him display before. He even went so far as to smile at one of Hiram's inexorable jokes. Snow White stared at him, arrested. When Gault smiled, he was truly beautiful.

When he had finished his meal, Gault rose and shocked them all even further by leaning down and giving Ander a slow, deep kiss. Hiram's mouth fell open. Ander touched his own lips with dazed fingertips.

"I love you," Gault said. His hand lingered against Ander's face a moment before he turned to Snow White. "Will you excuse me, Snow? I have some things I need to take care of."

She nodded. He had never called her Snow before. Her heart felt lighter as she went to attend to her daily affairs.

Perhaps it will be all right...

It was the feast day of Dwalen, one of the dwarven gods, and that night her dwarves were to go down into the city to worship at one of the shrines. They gathered at the door now, all except Meris, who would remain to guard her. And Gault.

"I'll stay too," he said. "I have no desire for prayer tonight."

"If you are sure?" Ander said uncertainly. Gault gave him a brief smile.

"Go. You say a prayer for me instead. I'm sure your words will have more weight with the god than mine."

Kaliko took Snow White's hand and kissed it. "Shall I bring you back something sweet from the town?"

"I have sweets enough," she said, kissing the top of his dark curly head.

"We'll be back by moon-fall."

Snow White sat now in her sitting room, a book in her hands. Meris was about somewhere. There was a new serving maid and it appeared that she had allowed him to catch more than her eye. Gault prowled restlessly about the room, stopping here and there to pick up some item and turn it over in his hands before replacing it. She studied him over the top of her book. Finally he ceased his pacing and leaned against the fireplace.

"Will you make him your king? Kaliko, I mean," he asked suddenly.

Snow White blushed. Gault didn't look at her. Instead, he ran his fingers over the mantle as though searching for dust.

"I love him," she replied. "And yes. He will be my king. He *is* my king."

She saw the corner of Gault's mouth turn up. "Good. He is kind. And he loves you."

"He is everything to me," she said before adding carefully. "As Ander is to you."

“Yes,” Gault agreed softly. “He is my soul. If...you would take care of him, Snow? If anything happened to me?”

A frisson of unease trickled down her spine. “Nothing is going to happen to you, Gault. What has brought on these maudlin thoughts?”

He gave a rueful laugh. “Nothing. Just...nothing.” He glanced towards the door, and she became aware of the air of urgent expectancy that coiled around him. Her unease deepened.

“Are you happy, Gault?” she blurted out. “Truly happy?”

“Happy?” He paused as if struggling to find an answer. From outside came the sound of voices, shouting. Gault stiffened, straining towards the sounds. The door to her sitting room crashed open, and he smiled at her. Aching beautiful. “I am now.”

Charming stood in her doorway. He looked deranged, his hair loose about his face and his eyes swollen and red with weeping. The expression in those eyes made her cold down to her very toes. In his hands he held a silver dagger and his eyes were fixed on Gault, who simply stood there, smiling at him.

Snow White surged to her feet, her book falling to the floor.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Charming ignored her. “I’ve come to return something to you.” He threw the dagger at Gault, but it was not aimed to kill. It hit the marble fireplace and clattered to the ground. He crossed the room in half a dozen rapid strides, drawing the sword he wore belted at his hip free of its sheath. Snow White grabbed at his arm as he passed, and he shook her off. She fell against a parquetry table which collapsed under her, to sprawl upon the floor.

“Meris,” she screamed, knowing as she did so that it would be too late.

Gault said not a word. He spread his arms wide across the mantelpiece and went to his death, smiling.

Charming’s sword slashed down, cleaving through his shoulder and chest until it became lodged against his hip. Gault remained standing for a moment before falling, firstly to his knees and then collapsing on his side to lie sprawled and bloody upon the tiled floor.

Charming died an instant later. He reached behind him to fumble at the axe between his shoulder blades, then fell face first beside Gault’s body.

“Snow!” Meris, naked and white-faced, knelt beside her. “My princess? Are you hurt?”

She shook her head, pushing him away to crawl towards Gault. Meris took hold of her shoulders, pressing her face against his chest. She was crying, great tearing sobs that shook her entire body.

“Snow?” Kaliko’s voice. She turned blindly in Meris’s grip, holding her hands out towards him. He took her in his arms and held her, murmuring soft words. Stroking her hair.

Ander stood frozen in the doorway. Like someone in a trance, he moved across the room and sank to his knees beside Gault. He made a terrible sound, a sound Snow White would hear forever in her dreams,

and gathered Gault's broken body against his chest, rocking Gault in his arms as he continued to make that dreadful low keening.

Kaliko lifted Snow White in his arms. Small as he was, he was strong. As he carried her from the room, she looked back over her shoulder. Kaffion and Shyla were trying to pull Ander away from Gault's body. Meris still knelt on the floor, his face a mask of shock and grief. Hiram stood beside him, one hand on his shoulder. Tears tracked down his cheeks.

She buried her face against Kaliko's shoulder and wept.

Spring was turning into summer when Snow White wed Kaliko. It had taken weeks for the shocked amazement of the court at the events of Dwalen Eve to settle from a raging boil to a low simmer. The salacious details had been discussed with relish in the court and city for days, slowly trickling out into the countryside and beyond to add spice to countless dinner tables and tavern bars. Sex and murder, perfect ingredients for a gossip's supper. The queen's lover murdered. The queen dead by her own hands. The apparent insanity of the foreign prince and his attempt on the life of their own Snow White. The brave dwarf who had saved her life and in doing so lost his own.

And just as the gossip began to quieten down, the announcement that Snow White was to wed one of her dwarves.

If the men of the court looked askance at that news, there were ladies enough who had enjoyed a night's pleasure with one of Snow White's attendants to nod knowingly at each other. And in truth, they made a delightful couple, she so pale and fair and her companion so dark and comely. There was many a woman who longed to run her fingers through his mop of dark hair.

That they loved each other could not be doubted. It was evident in every touch or glance. Every shared smile.

Her wedding day dawned bright and fair. It would have been perfect if not for one thing. All of her companions were to attend her and Kaliko. Except Gault, whose absence was still a dull ache in her heart, and Ander.

He had come to her a few weeks ago. He had lost flesh. She thought he would carry his grief in his bones forever.

"I have to leave, Snow," he said. "I want to go home. There is nothing here now except memories of blood and pain. I want to return to the mountains. To where we played as boys. Gault was happy there. I want to remember him that way."

When he left, he carried a small silver casket with him. Gault's heart rested within. Ander would take him home and bury him beneath the soil of his homeland.

"Will I ever see you again?" Snow White asked him, tears trembling at the edge of her lashes.

He wiped one away with his thumb. "Perhaps. One day. But if that day never comes, my Snow, you will still be happy?"

She nodded tremulously. "Happy ever after," she whispered. "Just as in the fairy tales."

"Happy ever after. I like the sound of that." Ander smiled. "Promise me, then, that you and Kaliko will live happily ever after, Snow."

"I promise."

And so they did.

About the Author

Deborah Brown is an Australian author who shares her house in country Victoria with a miniature dachshund called Mr. Frodo, a blue heeler called Ruby and four chooks. She is a scientist by profession but writing is her passion. Her dreams include having one of her novels published and having her football team win the AFL premiership before she is too old to enjoy it!

An angry fairy queen trapped his body. A woman's love could imprison his heart.

Awaken

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An Enchanted Story

Prince Ryllio once lived so charmed a life, even he began to believe nothing bad could touch him. Then a moment's indiscretion brought Queen Mab's wrath raining down, encasing him in stone.

Hundreds of years later, he is losing hope that anyone will find him, much less counter the spell. Until a beautiful young woman wanders into his hidden glade to privately discover the pleasures of her own body. Her sensual innocence reignites his acute longing for freedom.

Lured into the old forest by an irresistible impulse, Myrina finds intimate communion with Ryllio's imprisoned spirit. His whispered guidance weaves an erotic spell, rousing her to undreamed heights of ecstasy.

The intertwining of their minds comes at a devastating price. As each encounter intensifies, Myrina falls in love with a man she can never touch. And Ryllio realizes he must give up the last vestiges of his humanity—or condemn her to life devoid of a flesh-and-blood lover...

Warning: Bawdy faeries cause mayhem and wicked self-love abounds, as a voyeuristic prince and a shy but willing commoner both get a fine erotic comeuppance (put the emphasis in 'comeuppance' where you will)

Enjoy the following excerpt for Awaken:

"I can't help thinking your friend was only partly right."

"In what way?" Myrina asked in surprise.

"There are some things you can learn on your own, but others only a lover can teach."

"What kinds of things?"

Ryllio's voice grew low, caressing. "The touch of your own hands is unlike the touch of another. What you do to yourself cannot feel the same or give the same sensations as when a lover gives you pleasure."

Myrina shivered, her skin prickling to life, body growing warm and liquid inside. Words failed her, for she remembered the imagined ecstasy of his mouth on her quim, wondered if it could have been even better in reality.

"And," he continued in the same low, seductive tone, "each lover is different, is inspired to do different things, or the same loving actions in different ways. It is only in the moment you can know whether these new sensations are pleasurable or not. But Elawen also was right. There can be no harm in learning your body's desires for yourself."

Flushed with arousal, yet also embarrassed, Myrina thought it best to leave, but could not bring herself to go. It was not just the desire holding her in place, but a bone-deep reluctance to abandon Ryllo now that she knew of his lonely existence. There could be no harm in staying for a while, in being with him during this moonlit night, in asking him some of the questions burning in her mind.

It took some courage, however, to finally reply, and her voice faltered from her throat. “Are lovers so different, one from the other, then?”

“Yes, and you will be different with each one too. What one man will do to you without hesitation, another would never consider doing. And what you enjoy with one man, you will find repulsive if another tried.”

Considering his words, Myrina realised he must have had many lovers before his punishment began, and a spark of something akin to jealousy came to life deep in her belly. It made her voice stronger, with a bit of a snap, when she spoke. “What kinds of things would a lover such as yourself never do? Surely there cannot be many?”

But when he replied, his words doused the flame of her anger, even as they ignited a flash-fire of passion.

“For you, with you, I would do everything, give you every liberty over my body, take whichever you would give in return. There is nothing I wouldn’t try in my quest to give you pleasure, to satisfy you, to make your desire burn so hot it incinerates us both with the ecstasy of our joining.”

There was no need to ask what he meant, for in her mind she saw them together, in flickers of images conjured by his imagination. He was bent to her breasts, lips curved to receive her straining nipple—kissing her back, hands stroking her belly—kneeling between her legs, his hair dark against her thighs—curled around her from behind, the head of his cock poised for entry into her hungry body. She was tied, naked, to a bed—then he was likewise held immobilized for her pleasure. He was behind, in front, between—in her quim, her mouth, her hand, her arse. She was over, under, beside him, her hair unbound, trailing over his skin. Gentle here, masterful there—in control and ceding control—kissing, stroking, licking, sucking places Myrina never thought another would touch.

She pressed trembling palms to her cheeks, trying to rise, wanting to flee, but finding her legs too weak. The images were so real they left her gasping, burning—titillated and confused.

“I’ve shocked and frightened you.” His voice was rueful, but filled with such harsh longing the desire rampaging through her body climbed even higher. *“I’m sorry. You are more innocent than I realised. Please—”* he added, as Myrina once more tried to rise, *“—don’t go.”*

She subsided, quivering, drawing her cloak closer around her as though it could protect her from the unfamiliar swirl of emotion between them. His words and images were like an iron chain, binding and drawing her further into an unknown world she desperately longed to explore.

But there was also a sense of shame for being so ignorant. Jecil had been her only lover, coaxing until curiosity and the knowledge he would soon be leaving convinced her to accept his attentions. She had been tired of hearing Elawen's stories and not having any of her own to share. Tired too of not knowing what it felt like to be held, caressed, loved. Now she realised she was still almost as naive as before Jecil breached her maidenhead.

"You think me silly—like the old biddy Elawen accuses me of being."

"No, Myrina." Sincerity gave his words a gentle edge. "*Your inexperience is not something to be scorned.*"

"How can you say that when I could hardly understand what you showed me?" Tears prickled behind her eyes, and she hugged her knees beneath her cloak. "When I can hardly understand what I am feeling?"

"*What do you feel?*"

How could she describe the heated sensitivity of her body, the need washing through her in rough, tempestuous waves? How to explain to Ryllio just the sound of his voice, the vision of his fantasies, had ignited a passionate conflagration within? In its light all other sensation dimmed, cast into insignificance.

Gently, as mist creeps over the warmth of a slow flowing river, he cast a picture into her mind. Holding her cheeks, he tipped her face up so the deep green eyes with their slumberous lids and amorous gleam looked deep into hers.

"*So lovely,*" he murmured, fingers tracing the lines of her brows, the curve of her lips. "*So beautiful.*"

The feathery sensations came from her own hands, but still Myrina allowed the love-dream to pull her deep, gladly sinking into the drowning pleasure, leaving reality behind. Ryllio's voice, tender and enthralling, guided her to discard constraint along with her cloak, inhibition with her shift.

Loosening her hair to toss the heavy mass behind her shoulders, Myrina combed fingers through it as she raised her face to the star-flung sky. The movement lifted her breasts—an offering made to love's primacy—and the puckered tips, kissed by moonlight and the warm night air, ached. At Ryllio's sighing moan, the last of vestiges of reserve fell away, and she felt reborn—a woman desired and desiring, confident of her allure.

Taking her time, Myrina stroked neck and breasts, belly and thighs—making contact with fluttering touches and sure, strong caresses. Ryllio's whispers entreated her to search out and delight in the softness and sensitivity of her skin, the supple firmness of the muscles beneath.

She felt like a wild thing, unfettered by rules and expectations, open only to the satisfaction of the moment. In the cradle of the night, Ryllio's voice enfolded her, sheltering and freeing all at once.

Marriage? No, thanks. She'd rather kiss a dragon.

Slayer

© 2010 D.L. Snow

An Enchanted Story

All Prince Cahill needs to assume the throne is one simple thing: a wife. Except every virgin princess in the kingdom has turned up deflowered before the deal can be sealed. The very next maiden to cross this threshold, he vows, will be his bride.

When she appears—injured, half-frozen and reeking of dragon dung—he holds to his promise and puts her to the final test to prove her worthiness. A test that involves a mattress and a pea.

Breanna couldn't be less interested in marriage, especially to a cocksure royal like Cahill. Since losing her family to a dragon horde, she has become the continent's finest slayer—a job she doesn't plan on giving up until the last dragon's blood drips from her sword.

Yet her sleepless nights are plagued with visions of Cahill doing wicked things to her untutored body. And when she fights at his side to repel a dragon attack, her visions become delicious reality.

But Queen Eleanor, whose reign is about to end, has no intention of giving up her power. Not to Prince Cahill, and certainly not to some young upstart...

Warning: This book contains corruption, seduction, conspiracy and magically-induced erotic dreams. And that's just the first chapter.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Slayer:

Cahill hung from the tree, like Brea had taught him, trying to regulate his breathing, but finding it difficult with a glob of dragon shit sliding down his left cheek. This was soon forgotten, however, when the thundering hooves of an approaching horse alerted him to action. It was Brea riding Elrond hard, heading straight for him with a fire-breather right on her tail.

"Attack from above," Brea had said. "Dragons never look up."

Brea flew by, then Cahill let go of the branch, landing squarely straddling the beast's neck. With one swift movement, he pulled his sword, lifted it high and drove it to the hilt through the black slit in the dragon's yellow eye.

"Think of it as a bulls-eye," Brea had instructed.

Sure enough, death came instantly. The dragon's wings stretched taut in its final convulsion and the stinking body glided gently to the ground where Cahill was able to easily slide off. He jogged to join Brea and Elrond a safe distance away before the body went up in flames. "I can't believe it!" he crowed. "It's so easy."

Brea narrowed her eyes and scoffed, "Easy?"

“I mean efficient,” Cahill said and grinned. “There’s no hacking at a writhing neck covered in almost impenetrable scales. No fire, no mess.” He raised his hand to Brea to pull her down from the horse and she accepted the help without hesitation. “We make quite a team.”

She nodded, but her face was turned to the surrounding countryside where only blackened patches on the ground indicated the number of dragons that died that day. “That’s it,” Brea sighed. “We did it. We killed them all.”

In a voice filled with wonder and dread, Cahill said, “Maybe not all. What the hell is that?”

Brea followed his outstretched arm and finger and then muttered, “Fuck a duck.”

Cahill swung his head to look at her in surprise, then turned his attention back to the monster that glided overhead.

“That, my prince, is the beast that gave me this.” Cahill glanced back at Brea and to where she was pointing down at her leggings which were stained where her old wound had reopened and oozed blood.

“You fought that thing?” he said with admiration.

Brea nodded grimly. “As you can see, it won.”

Slowly Cahill shook his head back and forth. “You’re still here,” he said. “I call that a draw.”

The enormous dragon circled high overhead, squawking shrilly so that both Cahill and Brea had to cover their ears. Then it swooped, flying low over the land, its head swaying back and forth as if looking for something, or someone. Finally the dragon rose and flew off, out of sight.

“We’ll save that one for another day,” Cahill said as he reached for her hand and squeezed it.

Brea settled back against the copper tub, her knees drawn to her chest, reveling in the soothing warmth of the water. She’d washed first in a nearby stream, but only lye soap would get the dragon smell out of her hair. As for her clothes, the cook had confiscated them in order to boil them in vinegar in hopes of removing the stink. After another dunk of her head beneath the water, Brea rose, dripping, and used a blanket to dry herself. Cahill had given her one of his spare shirts to wear and Brea laughed at herself as she cinched the garment around her waist with a strip of leather. It was long enough to be a dress. Not a proper dress, but a nightdress at least, and that’s all she needed it for. Her clothes would be dry enough by morning when the company rode out.

Peeking out through the tent flap, Brea called to Cahill’s valet to remove the washtub and bring in some food. She tucked a fur around her shoulders for decency’s sake, then Brea sat at the table and waited for the food and Cahill to arrive. He came in moments later, smelling clean and masculine. Brea kept her lashes lowered as a sudden shyness descended over her.

They ate in relative silence, making mundane remarks about the flavor of this dish and that. Finally Cahill cleared his throat and said, “I cannot go on like this. I must make my intentions known.”

Slowly Brea looked up from her food. The firelight flickered in Cahill's dark eyes, making him appear more sinister than regal.

"Breanna, I beg you. No, I beseech you to consent to be my wife."

Though Brea knew it was coming, had known his intentions all along, her answer became lodged in her throat. She licked her suddenly dry lips and said, "I'm sorry, Cahill. I can't."

He didn't move for a long time. Finally he spoke. "Why?"

All her old resentments, her old prejudices about marriage reared their ugly heads in her mind. "I know how these things work. The minute I marry you, I belong to you. I give up everything."

"What do you give up?" Cahill argued. "Marry me and you gain a title and a kingdom."

"Both of which I already have," Brea countered.

"Bah!" Cahill fumed. "You have nothing."

"Nothing?" Brea rose in anger. "I have everything I need, Prince." She limped purposefully around to the other side of the table, using the fact that he was still seated to her advantage. "I don't need your land, I don't need your title." With each item she listed, she poked him in the shoulder. "I don't need a stinking husband to making demands of me once he thinks he owns me."

"What do you mean, make demands?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. I'm not one of your sheltered young princesses who has no idea of the filthy rutting tendencies of men. I know what goes on behind closed doors."

Cahill's expression changed. First understanding, then shock, and then anger. "You're not a virgin," he said in a low voice. "Someone abused you."

Brea laughed. "No, I'm a virgin." She pulled her dagger out from her leather belt and twisted it between her hands. "I wouldn't let a stinking, breeding male near enough to abuse me."

Cahill frowned. "Then what do you know of things that take place 'behind closed doors'?"

"You may find this shocking, Your Highness, but commoners rut regardless of whether doors are open or closed. In fact doors have very little to do with it. Stables, tavern floors, up against walls." Brea shivered with revulsion. "Beastly copulations. No thank you."

"Ah," Cahill said. "A tavern education." He stood, and Brea found herself no longer at an advantage. "I'm afraid, Princess, your education may be lacking. What you have witnessed is only a very limited version of the act in question."

"I'd wager I know more than enough."

"A wager." The prince smiled as he lifted her chin with his thumb, forcing her to look at him. "Now that's a wager I'd be willing to take."

Brea scowled, but Cahill tightened his grip on her chin, holding her in place. "What if I was to convince you otherwise, Princess? What if I was to prove there was more to this carnal act than you are

aware and what if I was to wager that by the end of it, you will be begging me to take you to our marriage bed?"

Still holding her dagger, Brea pressed the tip into the juncture of his rib cage. With satisfaction she watched his eyes widen at the sharp pain of it. "I will make no such wager."

Cahill released her face and stepped back, out of the reach of her dagger's lethal point. "Because you know you'll lose."

"Ha!"

"Remind me, Brea, who was tugging at the draw to my breeches the other day. I might be mistaken, but I'm almost certain it was you."

"You swine!"

"Yes. A talking swine, at that. Come on, Brea. Stop fighting it." His hand moved so swiftly she wasn't able to get away in time. He grasped her wrist and squeezed until she dropped the dagger. Then he pulled Brea to the bed of furs and pushed her down. "Tell me you don't want me."

"I don't want you," she snapped. And she didn't. Not logically. But apparently her hands did because they wound around Cahill's neck and pulled him down onto the furs beside her.

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