

Snow White: My Story

by Verna McKinnon

Once upon a time, I was Princess Snow White and lived in a grand castle; now I cower in exile with seven irascible dwarfs in a cramped cottage afraid for my life. I'm not some hysterical, spoiled 'Princess.' My wicked stepmother wants me *dead*. Well, it's not surprising, since she's an evil witch.

Personally, I find witches fascinating. Witches are clever women, who understand mystic secrets, but my stepmother isn't a good witch—she is a *wicked witch!* You know-the type who cackles while simmering vile brews in a reeking black cauldron. Stepmother should be a hideous, gnarled creature with warty skin, swathed in tattered robes; but Stepmother is beauty itself robed in velvet. Everyone bows to her will, so I can only guess it must be a terrible spell. *No one is that gorgeous.*

Before my father, King Gregory, remarried, my life was pleasantly quiet. I required nothing more than love, good food, a warm bed, and mud puddles to jump in. I was a messy girl, so much so that my nurse, Peg, called me 'Princess Piglet.' Father was forever busy, but he did sometimes inspect my development before running off to battle a dragon or something.

Peg once told me of Mother's prophecy about my coming. One winter's day, my mother sat by a window doing needlepoint and told her ladies gathered about the hearth fire how she dreamed for a little girl beyond all else. I was thrilled with the notion of being wanted, especially when queens so often wished for boys. The room had grown hot, so she set aside her work to open the casement window. Snow mantled the earth and she welcomed the rush of brisk air. When she reached for her sewing, she pricked her finger on the needle. Holding her injured hand outside the window, three drops of blood fell upon the snow and in her mind a vision appeared, of a daughter with skin white as snow (and don't I just burn like a sinner in summer because of it), hair black as night and lips red as blood. I was born on the next Winter Solstice, during a terrible blizzard. Wild, in a feverish delirium from delivering me, she cried out I be named 'Snow'. Then she died.

My father and I would take roses to Mother's crypt on her birthday and the anniversary of her death (which sadly was my birthday). That stopped when he married Stepmother, but I treasured those sad visits, because it was a rare time when my father included me in his kingly life.

Nurse Peg often told me how beautiful my mother was and that I looked like her. Kind lies, as I was a feral child with a birds-nest tangle of hair. When I looked into a mirror,

a smudged-faced girl stared back with big eyes and bigger ears. I was not pretty, but I did not care.

Despite my grim beginning, I was a happy child until the age of seven-- when *Stepmother* came. One bright morning, Father burst into my nursery proclaiming he had found a new queen and a mother for me, and that the wedding was set for the morrow. The next morning, Peg scrubbed me from head to toe, brushed out my knotty hair, dressed me in a blue frock, and gave me a bouquet of white daisies.

At first, I was thrilled with the prospect of a mother, but my happy hopes for a mother were crushed into bleak disappointment when I met Father's bride. Despite her charms and golden beauty, I sensed something ghastly about her. I found her cold and creepy as she clung to my father's arm; a dazzling smile etched upon her perfect features. Father was so besotted with his new bride, that I quickly realized he no longer saw me either.

I lost my father that day and had I understood, I should have mourned him like my poor mother.

Stepmother chose to ignore me, unless I threatened to touch her with my sticky hands-- until one day, I decided to be clever. I loved to collect frogs and butterflies, though I would never hurt my precious friends; always releasing them again at the end of the day. Stepmother had forbidden me entry to her private chambers because my hands were always grubby.

Late one evening, I snuck into her pristine room to leave a gift--the biggest, slimiest frog I could find. Everyone was at a banquet downstairs with Stepmother the center of attention. Tall candles lit the room with a hazy glow, illuminating the richly decorated opulence of dark silks and velvets. From the heart of the room rose a towering black four-poster bed adorned with red drapes and a black and scarlet damask coverlet. I climbed atop her majestic bed, stuffed plump with downy feathers, jumping up and down until I became bored. I was about to burrow beneath the crimson silk of her sheets to deposit my slimy and croaking gift, which I knew would annoy her royal personage to no end... then I saw the *Mirror*.

The mirror loomed against the far wall across from the bed, an ornate and ancient *thing*, tucked into a small stone alcove. Tall candles burned with crimson flame that cast flickering shadows on the mysterious murky glass. It was oval shaped and its length at least as tall as Stepmother. Framed in dark twisted wood, and intricately engraved with tiny, strange faces wrapped in thorns. It mesmerized me, radiating smoky, disquieting shadows. I was unaware of time's passing until without warning, Stepmother rushed into the room!

I dove for the floor, as yet unseen and thankful for thick cushions and carpets buffering my clumsy efforts as I slithered beneath the bed. I lifted the heavy damask bed skirt to peek, holding my breath. Her flowing black velvet gown swept over the same carpets I'd occupied only an instant before. The dusky candlelight reflected the gleam of her ruby necklace that glistened on creamy skin as she strode toward the ominous mirror.

She chanted, "Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of all?"

How vain can this woman be?

Then the Mirror answered! A hollow, disembodied voice from within its depths replied, "You are my Queen, the fairest of all."

I swallowed my smirk, but the mirror radiated and cast a scarlet nimbus around her and I trembled. I chewed my lip until it bled; too scared to move from my safe haven in the gloom. Even the poor frog was mute with terror.

She continued to radiate like a fiery demon. Sensations coursed through me as burning sorcery engulfed the chamber. Light-headed from lack of air, scorched by the mystical heat, I struggled to breathe. Finally, the mirror's inferno dimmed and the air cooled. Grateful, I opened my eyes and peered out. She whispered more strange words until the mirror resumed its former state. The glow faded and she stepped behind a broad dressing screen lavishly decorated with peacock feathers. She began to hum and I began my escape.

My stomach churned from the residue of dark magic that hung in the air. It was *nasty!* I crept toward the door, soundless and frightened, jamming my poor (and blessedly silent) frog back into my pocket. I turned the door handle and the hinges groaned. I froze in panic!

"Who's there?" she demanded, angrily.

That unfroze my limbs! I bolted out the door, heart thundering, and fled down the long stone corridor to the sanctuary of my room. I hurried inside and slammed the door shut, pushing my tiny princess throne to block entry (though it would've stopped no one, the effort comforted me) and scrambled beneath the covers of my bed, shivering uncontrollably. I dipped into my pocket and checked my poor frog. He was croaking again and glared at me in annoyance.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, realizing suddenly what she might have done to the poor creature.

The following morning I tried to tell my father about Stepmother's enchanted mirror and only mute breath escaped my lips. I felt like a village idiot! Father patted me on the head and told me to run along. When next I saw Stepmother I tried to run away, but she grabbed my arm roughly, swinging me about. She knelt so low that we were eye to eye and cupped my chin in her cold, perfect hands.

"Beware little Snow, you tread where you are not welcome."

I *did* beware. Fear is an excellent motivator.

I stayed away from her as much as possible. I often took solace in the nearby woods. The forest animals came to know me and were my only friends during this lonely time. Robins and would land on my shoulder. Deer nuzzled my hand. Bluebirds and robins chirped at me, always demanding attention. Even the usually nocturnal owls would poke their heads out of the nests to hoot a hello.

Despite the fear, my thoughts often dwelled on Stepmother. Her heritage was a complete mystery. What kingdom had she come from? Her personal retinue was just as mysterious. These pallid grey-robed creatures that waited upon my stepmother rarely spoke and never mingled with the other castle servants.

One unique member among her followers was Dunham, her Huntsman. A brawny fellow with bushy dark hair and a heavy beard, his cruel bow killed many of my forest friends, and that made me hate him.

Years passed, but Stepmother's beauty never faded. Her tall, shapely figure remained as flawless as a marble statue; her perfect ivory skin untouched by a single freckle or line. Vibrant green eyes, bordered with thick, dark lashes, sparkled like stars and her lips flushed a soft rosy pink. Long flaxen hair, that rare color of the sun, had not sprouted a single grey lock since marrying Father eight years earlier.

Could no one see that such impossible magnificence might only be the result of magic? Everyone praised her. Well, she is the Queen-- so, of course people praised her. Even ugly queens are praised.

One day, Stepmother decided I was too old for a nursemaid and dismissed poor Peg. She was just gone! My father never questioned her judgment. He was too busy chasing dragons and vanquishing ogres to care. I begged her not to send my old nurse away; but she ignored my pleas. I never saw my poor Peg again. I was dreadfully lonely after that.

Then a strange thing happened that changed everything. It was a snowy Solstice morning and my fifteenth birthday. I had taken a rose to my mother's tomb, grown in the royal greenhouse. Later, while combing out my hair after a hot bath, I glimpsed my reflection in the mirror and gasped. My gleaming black hair hung straight as a waterfall to my waist. My gangly frame had filled out with feminine curves. My deep-set, dark blue eyes rimmed with thick lashes and gently arched brows, and my fair skin flushed softly.

I usually had supper in the solitude of my room. Tonight, I wanted to show off, especially since Father had returned home after a long campaign the day before; celebrating victory over some far-away troll king. I was elated by the idea of a double feast-- my birthday and Father's victory.

Green and red garland decorated the castle for Solstice. I entered the royal dining hall dressed in a blue velvet gown and matching slippers, my long hair crowned with a delicate silver circlet. I actually felt like a Princess. The appreciative looks of every male member of the court made me blush. Father noticed the change in me and was astonished.

"My little Snow has blossomed," Father boomed. "A true Princess of the Royal House of White! Isn't she, my Queen?"

My joy evaporated when I glimpsed the twin daggers of Stepmother's stare, though her expression softened when she turned to my father.

"Indeed, my King and husband," she whispered, "Snow is pretty... very pretty."

The word *pretty* oozed like venom from her lips!

Why was I foolish enough to think my birthday would bode well? I mean, my own mother died on my birthday! Stepmother hates me even more now!

What is it with evil stepmothers anyway?

A knot of terror gripped my stomach and I could barely make it through supper. All the more disappointing, because there was cake! I adore cake, but Stepmother's icy stare precluded enjoyment of such a treat. I was also very confused. What difference did it make if I were beautiful or not? It's not as if it affected her beauty or status. Or could it? Later, as I lay sleepless in my bed, I found myself, not for the first time, pondering Stepmother's mysterious beauty. There were few enough noble women at the court these days, and they were rather plain. Every last female servant, as well, was either

old, or quite plain. I'd not seen a comely lady since I could remember. When I tried to recall how women looked before Stepmother came, my memory was hazy.

Was that a spell, too?

That night another thing happened to me. I began to bleed in the way that women do. I knew of this change because I often listened to other women talk, learning about the menses time while they babbled on over the wash or stirred the stew pot. I was a woman now, officially, and that terrified me.

The next day, Father informed us he'd been summoned to a meeting with a neighboring king. They were uniting to fight off some marauding giants who had joined forces with the Goblin King in the south. As I watched him ride away, I waved goodbye, desperate to shout about my fear of Stepmother, but I could not utter a single word.

I cursed her magic, and my inability to fend off her wretched spells. Standing at her side I shivered, the chill of her breath keener than the snow falling around me.

"You're a woman now," Stepmother whispered.

How did she know?

Her voice was cold and compelling. "You should have told me. It is important we talk as women. Come to my chambers tonight. We shall sup together and talk."

I suddenly wished for the grubby hands of my childhood and tugged my cloak around my shoulders. "Thank you, Stepmother. Excuse me, I don't feel very well."

I fled back to the castle, fearful of the malicious magic she might use against me. Desperate to avoid her, I hid in the armory. My father's dusty weapons collection brought on a sneezing fit, and fearing discovery despite the growing wintry gloom, I fled for the blessed woods; my haven from the castle and the dark witch within.

I walked to the river, the snowfall gentle at first, but soon a flurry whipped up, turning the wind bitter. I stood on the shore, absently tossing pebbles into the water, trying to think on why my life must be so complicated! It was near sunset, but I feared returning to the castle-- and Stepmother!

A twig snap startled me. I spun about and saw Dunham! For years I'd watched with disgust as her huntsman offered up his bloody tribute of my animal friends to my Stepmother. Now, he regarded me with dead eyes and dagger in hand.

"Stop!" I commanded. I had never commanded anyone before, not even old Peg. The Huntsman paused, no more than a breath, before moving closer. I turned and ran, fast as I could into the forest. I heard him giving chase, and though young and strong, with tree limbs scratching my face and I ran for so long! Exertion overtook me and I stumbled, ripping my gown.

Animals, normally silent when the Huntsman trespassed, began to screech and growl. Robins and crows attacked! He covered his face to shield razor-sharp talons from ripping flesh, sprinting wildly to avoid their fury, refusing to relent.

His heavy footfalls grew closer; his breath ragged, face bleeding when I dared to look back. I still had a stone clenched in my hand and in a foolish burst of courage I turned and hurled it at his head. Anger guided my aim and the rock struck him solidly above his right eye. He fell to his knees, dropping the blade and pressed both hands to his bleeding brow. Seizing the fallen dagger, I gripped it with as much threat as I could muster. In the snow dusted trees, I could see hundreds of ravens gather and watch over me.

Astounded but still fearful, I faced my assassin. "Why?" I demanded. "Speak murderous traitor! Did the Queen order this?"

Dunham wept, blood pouring from the wound I had, with some pride, achieved. Neither fear nor pity could lessen my resolve, though my hands trembled.

"It's true; the Queen demands your death." He reached into his satchel, and I stepped back, holding the blade all the more resolute. He produced a small iron casket covered with strange carvings. "Jealousy rules her soul! Her fiendish craft controls me, Princess. The Queen commanded that I slay you and deliver your heart in this casket."

My disgust overwhelmed further curiosity.

The Huntsman dropped the iron box at my feet. In the tall trees, the birds stirred and warning caws made Dunham flinch. "She desires your death. You must flee!" He hunched over, his thick-muscled body shaking. "Forgive me!" he wailed. "Run Princess Snow, run far away and do not come back. We are all doomed here."

"What of my father?"

"The King's life is not in danger, so long as she controls his heart and mind." He rocked back and forth in great agony, belying the seriousness of my injury to him, though I think Stepmother's foul magic is the true cause of his affliction.

"I will go, Huntsman, but someday I shall return. What will you tell...*Her*?"

"I'll place a pig's heart in the casket and offer that to her. I can do no more. RUN! RUN NOW!"

So I fled; alone, without provisions and a single dagger, as far as I could go, into the bitter winter wilderness.

That first night I hid in a small cave, shivering and crying. I covered myself in dead leaves and branches to ward off the bitter cold. The next morning I awoke starving, but found nothing better than some water from a nearby stream. Clutching my damp cloak tight around me, I pressed on. Hungry and tired, I kept going, hoping for the haven of a village somewhere.

Having never ventured beyond of my home and the nearby forest before, I was soon hopelessly lost. Snow flurries continued throughout the day. New terrors constantly battered at my thoughts. What about Ogres? Goblins? I was a monster's snack for the taking! I walked faster at the notion, my feet soaked by soggy snow. Even my sturdy shoes were not designed for such hard and long treks in such weather. Hunger gnawed at my stomach, and I realized I'd never been deprived of a meal until now.

The second night, I found a hole within a large tree, carpeted with moldy leaves and grass. With no way to make a fire, I packed the hollow with more fallen leaves and needles, taking extra care in padding my earthy tree bed. Then, I added a barrier of broken branches to help keep out the wind. Stripping off my wet shoes and stockings, I hung them inside the barrier to dry. I rubbed my feet briskly and tore off the hem of my cloak to make foot bindings for extra warmth, though I cried and despised myself for it. To slake my thirst, I ate snow, hating the hollowness of my stomach.

By the third day, I was so weak from hunger and cold I thought I would perish. Staggering through the snowy woods, I wondered whether I shouldn't have given in to Stepmother's cruel demand for my heart. At least it would have been quick. While I morosely imagined even more horrific things to distract me-- like being roasted by ravenous ogres, I stumbled into a broad clearing and beheld a modest two-story cottage with a stout chimney and smoke rising like a beacon of welcome. It was well thatched and white-washed. Someone lived here! I ran to the door and banged on it with my fists.

"Please help! Let me in!"

No one answered. Desperate for warmth I turned the latch and the door opened. I stepped inside and called out again, but still there was no reply. Closing the door

against the icy wind, I noticed a fire burned low in the hearth. Drawn to the wonderfully toasty heat, I pulled off my freezing wet shoes and stockings. As I laid them and my cloak across a small chair nearby, a wondrous aroma prickled at my famished senses.

Food!

At the center of the room, was a long, low table loaded with breakfast leftovers! I snatched up bits of cold toasted bread, devouring them as I surveyed the remaining bounty. I was too hungry to notice how small the scale of everything was in the cottage; numb with cold, not to mention the distress of a wicked stepmother thirsting for my heart. I checked the small iron pot near the hearth and it was full of porridge. Oh, how I'd missed the taste of porridge! I dug in with my fingers, the gooey ambrosia still warm from the hearth fire. I devoured it plain at first, until I noticed crocks of milk and honey on the table! Snatching a bowl from the table, I scooped the remaining mixture into it, adding in generous portions of milk and honey. Never had anything tasted so marvelous!

Giddy, with sticky face and fingers, and a little bloated, as my stomach had shrunk during my three-day flight, I chanced looking upstairs. Seven beds lined the long attic-style room. They were small- like the kind I had as a child. Sunlight streamed through the oval windows of thick glass, making it feel quite cozy. The joy of a snug soft bed, covered with a thick quilt was too much. I curled up on the nearest bed to rest, just for a moment, mind you. All I desired was a few moments' warmth and peace...

I awoke in the dark and sensed that I was not alone. Terrified, I bolted upright! Shadowy figures encircled the bed and I cowered against the headboard. What foul demons were these? I could feel their eyes bore into me! Having left my dagger downstairs, and lacking anything more lethal, I screamed and threw a pillow.

"Hey, this girl is wild!" shouted one of them, laughing.

"She's got spunk," replied another.

"Betcha she's a woodsy!" said a third. "Looks like she's been living rough, too. Smells like it."

"She is a bit stinky," someone agreed.

"She's in my bed messing up my clean sheets!"

A lamp flared, revealing the sinister beings that surrounded me. They were neither demons nor imps, but seven little men. Then rational thought returned.

"You're Dwarf folk!" I exclaimed.

"Bit daft, ain't she," grunted a red-haired fellow.

"I am not daft!" I hugged the quilt tight and started to sob. "I'm Princess Snow White."

"You're joking!" snorted the black-haired Dwarf, "*SNOW WHITE!* Bit redundant, eh?"

"What's wrong with my name? My mother named me on her deathbed!"

"Sorry lass," another apologized. This dwarf was chunky with soft blonde hair and kind eyes. "We mean no disrespect to your mother's blessed memory."

They introduced themselves, one at a time. The grouchy one with red hair was Broc, and it was his bed I'd messed up. The blonde was Edan and the youngest. Aiden was a quiet serious man, but was friendly once I got to know him. Mungo was sweet, but didn't seem very bright. Gowan was chubby and bashful. Roghan, the strongest, sported a long black beard worn in elaborate braids. Darach was the eldest and wisest, and as it turns out, was a wizard.

"What brings you here?" asked Darach, who at least had not mocked me like the others.

"I'm in danger. Truly! My stepmother is a witch. She wants to kill me. I had to run away to save my life."

"Hysterical *and* full of tales," Broc grumbled.

"If someone wanted to cut out your heart and put it in a casket," I countered, "you might be hysterical, too."

"Hush!" Darach commanded, apparently the leader, for they all seemed to defer to him. He had a long silky white beard and wisdom sparkled in his eyes. "What is your father's name, Lass?"

"King Gregory White."

"And your stepmother's name?" Darach inquired.

I opened my mouth to answer, but faltered. "Oh my, I don't know. I've no idea what her name is, though she's been my bane since I was seven! Father always calls her by husbandly endearments. It's rather sickening. At court everyone addresses her by royal title. It's always 'Your Majesty' or 'Your Highness.'

"Sounds witchy alright," Darach agreed and winked at me.

"More like, this young chit is an escaped village idiot," Broc protested. "Not knowing anyone's name, save the one she's made up. Anyone can claim they're a Princess."

"I am neither idiot, nor a liar! Stepmother has a magic mirror and it speaks to her! My father is under her power and I fear for him!" I was stunned that I could speak of it all. "Goodness, I've never been able to tell anyone until now about her mirror. I was spelled by her, too."

My weeping made them all apologetic. Men of any race cannot deal with crying females-- save some few heartless beasts. These seven men were not heartless; cranky and surly, even sarcastic perhaps, but never heartless.

Darach studied me for a moment and remarked, "Her gown, though torn and dirty, is very fine velvet. Her hands are smooth. Poor folks and commoners hands are rough; callused by hard work."

"You believe me?" I sniffled, wiping my nose on my sleeve.

"Let's hear your whole story, first," Darach smiled, "Princess Snow."

They fetched me hot tea with cream and honey, and I told them everything between gulps. They also a plate of oatmeal cookies, which I munched gratefully as I babbled on about Stepmother's mirror, the dreadful confrontation with the Huntsman and his dagger, my flight into the woods, and ending with greedily eating their leftover breakfast.

Darach told me his mother was a witch (*a good witch*) and, while he could do some spells, preferred being a soldier. He sensed there was some magic binding me, though beyond the castle and away from Stepmother, many of her bindings had begun to loosen. He said some words over me and the darkness seemed to fall away.

"What did you do?" I asked.

Darach grinned. "I removed her spells. They were not exceptional; one only needs simple spells to control a child."

I found it curious there would be seven men, living in the woods without wives or family. "If I may ask, what do you gentlemen do here? Are you miners?"

They all laughed.

"People always think dwarf folk are miners!" Broc guffawed.

"Manners!" Darach scowled, admonishing them all with that single word, and then slapped Broc on the back of the head before turning once more to me. "This is an outpost. You have crossed the border into the Dwarven kingdom of Brachnu. We are Watchers; charged with patrolling the borders of our kingdom."

"I recall my father talking about the warriors of Brachnu. 'Hawks of the Borderlands,' he called them. The Order of the Hawks is legendary throughout other kingdoms."

Darach nodded and replied, "We also keep watch on the realms near our border. Your father's castle is nearest to our kingdom. He has a treaty and trade agreement with our King, so being you're no enemy of the Crown, I can offer you sanctuary with us."

"Thank you," I replied gratefully.

Roghan nodded and added, "We have heard tales that King Gregory has a beautiful queen. From what you say, perhaps that is why nothing else is known of her. Names are powerful, and if she be the witch you suspect, keeping her true identity secret would be one of her tricks."

"You believe me!" I asked, hopeful.

"Yes, Princess, I do," Darach replied, offering me another cookie.

All agreed that if my Stepmother had most of the castle under her dark spells, she must be powerful indeed. After much discussion, my new friends decided it was not safe for me to leave their cottage for the village. Until they could glean more of what was happening in my kingdom, I should stay hidden. They agreed to be my protectors, but I had to earn my keep; cleaning, mending clothes, and doing the dishes. Cooking, however, would be another matter.

That first morning, I burned the pancakes so badly that the skillet blackened with charred batter, coating the surface like armor. After the smoke cleared, and while the skillet soaked for several days to loosen the wretched veneer, they resumed the cooking duties until I could learn properly. Who knew boiling water required such skill? In time I managed to toast bread without burning down the cottage.

They fixed me up a bedroom in the back near the kitchen, and soon they began to care for me like doting uncles. Even the local wildlife became my friends, and when Darach saw me hand-feeding a badger, while a row of sparrows perched on both my shoulders, he did not seem surprised.

"You're a natural witch," he stated simply.

"Nonsense," I laughed.

"Badgers are the crankiest of animals, yet that one's tame as a kitten around you. Sparrows do not nestle on just anyone's shoulder. My mother's a witch and critters flock to her the same way. Good witches have a bond with nature. Was your mother a witch, perhaps?"

"I don't know, but the vision she had about my birth always fascinated me."

"You told me about that. She may have been untrained," he nodded. "Her magic did not have a chance to grow. *Your* witchcraft is sprouting like a weed. That could explain why your stepmother wants you dead."

"I don't understand," I looked away, suddenly feeling uneasy.

"You said you always knew she was bad, but couldn't explain why. Perhaps it was not the hurt and petulant child speaking, but a budding witch sensing evil. You should begin to train your witch powers, Snow. I will help you."

The idea that I was a witch intrigued and frightened, me. I wondered about my mother's lost heritage. "Thank you, Darach. I do want to learn. Perhaps I may have a useful weapon against the evil that hunts me."

"Let us hope, then, you're better at magic than you are at cooking," he called back.

I threw a handful of seeds at him, but laughed in spite of myself.

Darach lessons began and he gave me simple magical books to study. I soon realized just what a novice I was. Learning to control magic; bending it to your will is not so simple, even for those born to the magic. But it was a beginning.

After my arrival, and with winter upon us, my Dwarven guardians decided it might be their last chance to purchase extra foodstuffs and some needed clothes for me. Darach warned me to keep the door bolted, and be wary. The nearest village was twenty miles away, so there were no curious neighbors to pay a visit. Promising to return in a few

days, they departed. I enjoyed my new-found solitude. Sharing a small cottage with seven Dwarven men can be a bit nerve-wracking, for they *are* males and thus, messy by nature. Add to that the heavy drinking, cursing, and the late night card games.

They promised to bring me fabric, so I might make some needed dresses. The gown I'd arrived in was not in the best condition, even after washing and mending. Still, it had to suffice for now. I was spreading a thick slice of bread with sweet butter when someone knocked at the door. Startled, my guardians warned me not to open the door to strangers. Perhaps if I remained silent, whoever it was would just... go away. But the knocking persisted. A commanding but aged voice from the other side of the door spoke. "Let me in." So I unbolted the door. Yes, I was terrified it might be Stepmother at my doorstep, knife in one hand and iron box in the other. It was stupid. Believe me that my common sense was cursing me out. Of course I suspected magic. Fighting it is another issue.

A crooked old woman stood on the doorstep, withered as a raisin with tufts of sparse gray hair poking out from beneath a hood of sturdy brown homespun. The crone carried a basket on her arm stuffed with pretty ribbons, lace, velvet and damask piping for trimming cloaks and gowns, needles, thread, and thimbles. Just such items as to remake some much needed clothes.

Yes, I know-- very convenient items to tempt me.

"Ribbons and lace, my dear," the old woman offered. "Come child, help out a poor old lady, and buy a trinket."

"Where did you come from?" I asked. Despite my inability to keep the door closed, I distrusted this woman.

The crone replied, "I saw this sweet cottage and thought I would be polite and offer my goods."

"Very considerate of you," I replied. "But I have no coin, or anything to trade, for your goods. My protectors will return soon, perhaps you might want to sell something to them?"

She shook her basket at me with a wide toothless grin. Well, I did spot three teeth. I was about to shut the door, when the crone plucked a deep red, beautiful velvet corset from her basket. Suddenly, I desired that corset more than anything. My inner voice was furious with me.

She waved the enticement before my eager eyes, "A fine garment to show off that slim figure."

I touched the corset, helpless to resist, and I wrapped it around my waist.

"Very pretty," she smiled, "for such a *pretty girl!*"

Her words edged with menace, my head jerked up and confronted Stepmother's cruel gaze in that aged face. Tendrils of smoke shot from her withered hands; the corset laces wrapping strangling my ribs like black snakes.

Desperate to rip off the corset; I gasped for breath as her laughter rang in my ears. Stumbling back, my vision blurred and I collapsed; the thunder of her cackling delight filling my ears until blackness washed over me.

A sharp, painful slap across my face, and a sweet rush of breath revived me. I coughed until my chest burned, and slowly my vision returned.

Seven worried faces peered down at me.

"What? Where..." I croaked, trying to sit up. "Where is—"

"What did I say about strangers?" Darach demanded. "What did I tell you about opening the door?"

"Not to," I coughed, accepting an offered cup of water and drinking it down. "But..."

Darach held up the hexed corset with the tip of his dagger, tossing it in the fire. It flared up, vanishing in a whoosh of scarlet smoke.

"Dark magic," Darach pronounced, "always burns red."

I explained what happened. Afterwards, Darach's anger softened, realizing the events were not under my control.

"Was it *her*?" Darach asked.

I hesitated. "Yes, though it's hard to imagine she would allow herself look so ugly. How did she find me?"

"Evil is capable of anything," Darach said, "had I not sensed something was wrong; had we not returned to see an old woman standing on the open threshold and challenged

her, you would be dead. Pity she vanished in a haze of black smoke before we could kill her."

Gowan, his chubby faced flushed with worry, cried, "We can't leave Snow alone."

"We won't now," Darach agreed, "if your stepmother's desperate enough to track you here, we must be on guard. We still need to go to town, but only four of us will go. Three will remain here on guard."

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

"Be smart, not sorry," Darach replied.

So, Roghan, Aiden, Mungo and Gowan set out again on their ponies for the village, while Darach, Edan and Broc remained to watch over me. The days passed without further incident, though I still jumped like a mouse at the slightest noise.

One morning, Broc announced. "I'm going to chop some wood. Remember, if anything happens, yell!"

I sat combing my hair by the fire. The old wooden comb Mungo gave me had broken teeth, but it did smooth the tangles.

Darach, too, put on his cloak, "And, I am going to check on the ponies." He then added, "You're looking a bit pale, child. Perhaps some fresh air might help, but mind, stay near the house."

Mungo was helping by washing the dishes. "I'll watch her from the window," he added.

Despite my fears, I needed some air, so I gathered my cloak around me and headed for the door. The snow glistened brightly as I walked a short distance from the cottage and breathed in the crisp cool air. A strange voice startled me.

"Excuse me my lady, but..."

I spun around to see a tall, handsome young man smiling at me, hat in hand, his deep green cloak billowing in the breeze. Blonde and blue-eyed, he bowed deeply with a practiced grace.

"I have lost my way, fair maiden. But having been brought me to your door step, I now consider myself most fortunate to have strayed from the forest path."

I was briefly transfixed by such a comely face, but my infatuation quickly dissolved into panic. It had to be another of *her* tricks! He could not be real I decided in an instant, but the wicked queen in supernatural disguise! Did her vile powers have no limit?

I fled toward the front door, screaming like a banshee, "DARACH! HELP! WITCH! WITCH!"

The young man hurried after me. "Forgive me!" he called. "Please, I did not intend to frighten so beautiful a lady. Wait! What's wrong? What witch?"

I grabbed a fallen branch and spun about, determined to beat down my enemy. "Hideous wicked creature!" I challenged, striking him over and over, "you'll not trick me again!"

Broc burst into the clearing swinging his axe. "Get away from her!"

Sword raised, Darach, appeared a moment later at a dead run. "Foul black witch! I'll lop yer' head off, if you dare to touch her!"

Even Mungo, wielding a still soapy-wet iron frying pan, joined the fray.

"Please, good people!" The young man fell to his knees, raising his hands in supplication. "I mean no harm! I am only lost."

I stopped swatting him with my branch and stepped back. Broc, quite menacing despite his diminutive stature, leveled his axe like some legendary warrior of old. Mungo loomed over the vanquished opponent, while Darach mumbled words I could not understand.

"It's all right," Darach sighed finally. "The lad's not the witch. A fool perhaps, but nothing wicked enough about him we need fuss over."

"Witch?" the young man muttered with confusion. "Let me assure you, I am neither witch nor wizard, just a traveler who has lost his way."

"Well, I *am* a wizard," Darach replied coldly. "As you have no magic in you, boy, I will let you live. Move along, before my mood changes. GO!"

The young man looked relieved and regained his feet with as much dignity as he could muster. "Please, let me introduce myself, I am Prin-"

"I don't care who you are! Leave my property, now!" Darach commanded, his sword pointed menacingly.

The young man looked crushed, but before he departed, smiled and bowed deeply before me. "Fairest maiden, I take my leave, but I hope to see you again one day when your guardians are less agitated... and, unarmed."

He mounted his fine, white stallion in colorful livery, grinned broadly at me, and rode away. I suddenly felt a bit miffed he had not more tenaciously defied Darach's orders to leave.

"He seemed well mannered," I commented wistfully as he rode away. "His attire and horse were fine, indeed. He kindly excused us for thumping him. I wonder who he is."

"Looking for a husband, Princess?" Darach asked archly. "Prince Charming is only in fey tales."

I must have blushed because Darach walked away laughing.

"You're mocking me!" I shouted after him.

Darach just kept laughing.

The next day passed quietly and after an early supper, my three guardians fell asleep in their chairs, snoring contentedly before the fire. To escape the racket, I carried the dirty dishes to the kitchen sink, and as I poured hearth-heated water from a copper kettle into the sink, wondered if I could convince Mungo to help me bake a cake. Our four companions were due to return tomorrow from the village. My sweet tooth craved a treat. I also thought about the handsome young man, and though I didn't want to be silly about it, found myself wishing he was still be out there... still lost, and that I might be the one to find him.

As my gaze wistfully drifted out the window, I noticed the laundry, still hanging, and frozen stiff upon the line. Putting on my cloak, I grabbed a large wicker basket, and ventured outside. Plucking at the wooden clothes pins, I struggled to fold the ice-stiffened shirts and long johns, that so they might fit into the basket. My numbed fingers dropped one of the pins, and bending down to pick it up, I noted a gleam in the snow.

Entranced, I saw upon closer inspection a lovely hair comb, burnished gold with a rich lapis inlay, all but hidden by the snow. Of course, I could not resist putting it in my

hair. And, of course, in hind-sight I realize it was a stupid thing to do, because the comb was, of course, ENCHANTED!

The odd thing about enchanted objects, evil or good, is that they snag you no matter what your inner voice warns. As I slipped the comb into my hair, I felt a tiny prick on my scalp. I immediately felt dizzy, my limbs grew weak, and it was all I could do to stagger to the backdoor.

"Help me!" I whimpered, unable to tear out the cursed comb. "Darach!" I collapsed, the life seeping out of me. "Help me-"

All too familiar laughter echoed all around, and for an instant the beautiful and terrible visage of Stepmother loomed before me. Oh, how I hate it when she gloats!

Magical flames struck her and she screamed, swirling into a cloud of smoke before vanishing. Darach! I saw him standing there with blue magic burning in the palm of his hand.

Darach's acrid cursing revived me a little. He tugged roughly on my hair, shouting strange magical words until the comb, at last, came loose. He tossed it away with a look of pure disgust. Weak as a kitten, the others helped me inside, while Darach hurried ahead. He brewed up some putrid-smelling potion and forced me drink it. After a nasty bout of losing everything I'd eaten over the past several days, I started to feel better.

"Was that punishment?" I asked later, lying on my little bed and holding a cold cloth to my head.

"No, a strong antidote," Darach replied. "It purged whatever nasty mystical poisons remained in your body. How do you feel now?"

"Weak... and foolish," I whimpered.

"It's better than dead."

"I'm debating that. Where's the cursed comb?"

"I burned it in the fire," Darach answered. "It's the safest way to cleanse an object of dark magic. You're a lot of trouble, Princess."

"Don't pick on her," Mungo protested.

"This has gone too far," Broc scratched his armpits and spat.

"We need to catch this evil witch and deal with her for once and all."

Darach nodded. "True, she's too great of a threat." He dropped in his chair and lit a pipe; smoke rings soon filled the air. "Also, I'm tired of her giving magic a bad name. I'm going to make an amulet for you to provide protection from her spells and some runes to keep that bitch away from the cottage. The runes are easy enough, but the amulet will take a little time. Don't fret, Snow."

But I did fret. I was too afraid to venture out of the house after her trick with the comb. My Dwarven guardians were even more protective of me. Nightmares plagued my sleep; with Stepmother standing over my body, laughing as her sorcery drained my beauty and left me a withered husk.

One morning after breakfast, most of my guardians were off on border patrol, except for Roghan and Darach. Darach had laid rune charms around the outside of the house. Smooth blue and silver stones with symbols etched on them, mumbling mystic words until the stones glowed.

I sat before the fire, trying to warm my spirit as much as my body, when a strange and disquieting silence fell. Darach was putting the finishing touches on my magical amulet.

This is where my tale takes a dark turn.

The wind in the trees ceased, and even the crackling hearth flames made no sound. I was compelled to step outside. Nothing in the world moved, it was as if time was stilled by the hand of god. Beyond the circle of Darach's runes, a cloaked and hooded woman waited, holding a basket of apples. Though not the same crone who had offered up the deadly corset, I knew at once it was Stepmother!

Why adopt such guises, when I'd already seen through them?

I walked closer and she lifted her face to me. She was especially ugly this time, more than just age; a repulsive evil etched her features that vanquished any humanity.

"Come," she beckoned, holding out the most scrumptious apple I had ever seen. I had to have it! As I reached the edge of the yard, the runes began to shimmer. I could not go further-- and neither could she. She tried to cross the barrier, but could not pass Darach's magical defenses. That angered her.

"Clever Dwarf," she grumbled. "No matter, you will still do what I want. It took strong magic to summon you and control your protectors. I will not leave without my bounty." She leaned close; her hideous grin revealing twin rows of sharp teeth, and eyes that shimmered pure black. Her skin was warty and green as bile. I sensed this must be her true form, but my elation at being right; that she really *was* some impish creature, quickly diminished as I comprehended the power she had over me. My hand touched the deadly fruit.

"You're not a witch," I whispered, reaching for my doom, "are you, Stepmother?"

"Silly Snow, of course I am not a witch. I am better than that. Now eat up dear, so I can kill you."

"Must I die, then?"

"Beauty is easy to steal. But magic such as yours does not part from the body so easily. That requires your death-- and your heart!"

"I've no magic," I protested, gripping the cold hard apple of my doom.

"Oh, you have magic, child. How else could you suspect me all those years ago? You sensed the deception I created. Only a natural born witch can do that. I thieved beauty from the court women and servants to maintain my image. But magic is draining, and only my magic mirror maintained my illusion. I snatched it from the witch I killed, and stole her form, though the mirror improved its beauty. I sensed your magic when you were a child, but in order to reap its benefits, I had to let you ripen, like the apple. When the mirror recognized you as 'fairest of them all;' that your time of woman had come, I knew it was time take your magic along with your bloody heart."

Why must they always be so gruesome?

She held out one of my old ribbons and dangled it before me. "Easy enough to track you by using the many personal possessions you left behind, Princess. You cannot escape me, any more than my huntsman could. He paid for his disobedience when I ate his heart. It was tasty, but your heart will be sweeter with your magic."

"If you are not a witch," I whispered. "What are you?"

"I'm a Changeling. Hard to catch, is a Changeling. Clever am I to live among the human folk. Demon born and earthbound, we steal the shapes and lives of humans. It cannot last long, which is why I need magic to retain my form. The magic mirror kept me not only human, but cloaks me with beauty."

Vain bitch.

"The others lost only their looks and vitality. Your Peg lost her life when she defied me about leaving you."

"You killed Peg!" I choked.

"Yes, she was a wonderful sacrifice for my mirror. She was old and past any beauty, so not good for anything else. My mirror has a price, you know. My huntsman helped me feed the magic mirror with the blood of his kills, but the mirror prefers human blood. Being queen, I had to take care not to kill too many of you. Now it's time to lose both your magic and your life, Snow White. I shall feast on both!"

Struggling, I raised the apple to my lips, unable to look away from her vile green skin, the lips black as death, and elongated fingers, tipped with red curved talons. My mind struggled as my body bent to her will.

Stop thinking about what she is, I scolded myself. Think of what she is doing to you! You are magical! A witch! Fight back!

I began to chant in my head, over and over, "I will not die, I will die, I will not die," as I bit into the crisp apple, wincing at the bloody tang while I chewed its dark skin.

A wave of dizziness swept over me and I fell to my knees. I looked down, aware that I was still within the shimmering circle of Darach's runes; where this dark creature dared not trespass. That is why she (it?) used spells to summon me. Clutching a long dagger in its hand, the Changeling reached for me, trying to drag me from the enchanted circle.

Suddenly, through the haze of weariness, a great chatter and chirping of forest animals arose, all but lost amid the Changeling's screams of rage and frustration as they attacked it without mercy. I heard Darach and the others, their voices booming as they rushed to my side, before I drifted deeper into a strange, inexplicable state. Though I lay still as death, my mind was awake. The forest animals surrounded me; wolf beside squirrel, badger with rabbit, raven and owl, all working in harmony to shield me. They barred the Changeling from any hope of taking me. The Changeling's wicked glee shifted to rage before vanishing in a thunderous explosion of foul smoke.

When Darach reached me, he knew that I was not dead, though I could not move or speak. What happened next was a series of events that, while I knew what was going on about me, I did not fully understand until later.

Darach and the others took great pains to construct for me a coffin a glass, lining it with plush, deep blue velvet. It seemed a bit morbid, but Darach knew it would protect me from the Changeling. Glass holds mystical elements that mages use in their craft. As the object of my protection took shape, I could actually smell the magic he used to enchant the coffin with powerful spells.

"Keep faith," Darach whispered in my ear. "I cast these spells to keep you safe, Princess. Put your trust in me. Magic is the root of your trouble, and shall resolve it as well."

As I lay in that ridiculous state, I knew the Changeling still watched me. There was at least one time when I was aware of her, but she fled from the warning glyphs Darach planted within the mystic glass. I wish I could have seen the expression on its face, but alas, opening my eyes was impossible.

My entombment became very boring very quickly, and I hoped Darach found a solution soon. I wanted to live; live and take revenge on that terrible creature that ensnared Father, killed my Peg, and tried to kill me. The dwarves took turns sitting with me and talking to me. Poor Mungo cried all the time. I wanted to comfort him, but I was bound by this deathlike sleep.

One day, I heard shouting outside my glass coffin. I strained to hear the exchange, but it was all a jumble of raised voices. A long rhyming speech from Darach filled my ears, followed by a shift in the air. Cool. Yes, I felt the chill of winter, but also the whisper of spring in the air, too. Warm lips pressed against mine and I felt a vibrant surge of life spreading through my limbs. I opened my eyes and beheld the same handsome young man I'd beaten with a stick so mercilessly leaning over me.

"She lives!" the young man exclaimed.

"Yes, Prince," Darach replied. "The death spell she's been fighting has been lifted."

I sat up, happy to move, squinting in the bright daylight, and suddenly ravenous. "What happened?" I asked. "And, how did you manage this?"

The young man helped me out of my glass casket and I stood free, though on somewhat wobbly legs, for the first time since that awful day. "Your guardians came looking for me," he replied. "They found me at my father's court. I am Prince Justin. Manners called for me to introduce myself when we first met," he grinned broadly, "but it seemed you and your fine companions were not in the mood for visitors."

I saw a kind humor in his face, as well as rugged good looks. I liked him.

Lending his strong arm, we walked back to the cottage, slowly, as I was still unsure of my footing. "Master Darach explained my part in this, though I had no idea if my kiss would help. I am very glad it did. It would be an equal tragedy to lose my heart to a maiden who is dead."

"A strange part to played in all this," I agreed. "Not that I'm ungrateful; just confused and *so* very hungry!"

They all laughed and escorted me inside. My guardians laid out a feast of pancakes with syrup and butter. My favorite!

Between mouthfuls, Darach explained about the spell of death and the foul creature that nearly destroyed me. "I believe your desire to stay alive manifested itself into a sort of spell. Rare, but it does happen. Since you have not been trained, you could not completely fight off its dark craft. That's why we had to protect you, until we could locate the pure magic needed to bring you back and release you from the Changeling's hold," Darach nodded. "You created the counter spell; raw, unfocused, but it kept you alive. Your spell was pure; you simply needed something to augment it. Pure anything is hard to find."

I turned to Justin. "But I still don't understand how your kiss broke my death spell?"

"It was then I recalled this young man and the smitten expression on his face when we chased him off," Darach laughed. "Pure *love* was the obvious answer! So, we searched the neighboring kingdoms until we found him again, and though the magic didn't require he be a genuine prince, I knew it certainly couldn't hurt. I made an antidote for the apple's poison in the form of a balm which he applied to his lips. It was this combination that broke the spell."

"Pure love?" I whispered in Justin's ear with a smile, and he nodded.

"Once I explained your predicament, a room full of dragons couldn't have stopped him helping to free you," Darach added with a wink.

"But what about Stepmother, I mean the Changeling?" "Has there been any sign of the wicked thing?"

Justin shook his head. "Not yet. A sealed letter sent by my father to yours, revealed Master Darach's discovery that King Gregory's wife was actually a Changeling; also telling him of your fate at the impious creature's hands. King Gregory, ashamed, admitted that his Queen had vanished. He has been searching for you ever since. He awaits you now at my father's castle."

"Changeling's are thieves," Darach added, "like carrion birds of the otherworld. Their own magic is actually weak. To maintain her human form for so long a time, she needed to use high divining magic. No doubt the magic mirror she covets gives her that power, and I'd wager good gold that it too, is stolen. With the mirror, she used your father's court like a well-stocked larder of humans to maintain her illusion of beauty.

"Draining all the ladies at court of their charms," I added, forking another stack of pancakes. "Though my fate would have been far worse, had I stayed in the castle."

"I'm relieved you did not stay," Justin poured more maple syrup for me. "If your companions permit, I... *we*, will escort you to my father's castle. You will be safe there. They, of course, shall be our welcome guests."

Immediately after breakfast, we prepared for the journey to Justin's kingdom. Before we departed, Justin quietly asked me to marry him, and I said yes! After all, any man willing to kiss a girl in a coffin, just to break a curse... In my book, he's a keeper.

Justin's parents were charming and very welcoming. The reunion with my father was awkward. I hoped he might cheer up, once the vile hag that caused so much trouble, was dead.

Justin and I married the following week, and it was wonderful! I wore his mother's wedding gown and my Dwarven uncles acted as my guard of honor. Father gave me away with tears in his eyes.

Leaving the church, arm in arm with my new husband, I glimpsed a figure in the shadows in a hooded black velvet cloak. I sensed a familiar presence; for my recognition of my former Stepmother's malevolent magic had grown sharp.

It was not unexpected. Darach warned that Changelings do not surrender their prey easily; much like a starving dog defending a bone. So we allowed her have a whiff of that bone-- *Me*.

"Beautiful bride," she approached, lifting her hood, "I offer a gift," she smiled, once again wearing her illusion of beauty. It was a different face, but I knew her for what she was. Her smile was quite smug as she held out a handful of ribbons spiced with spells.

This time I was ready for her treachery. The blue rune stone I wore around my neck, the mystic amulet Darach made, glowed brightly. "Hex me once, Stepmother," I said, "shame on you. Hex me twice, death be upon you!" I stepped back and commanded, "Guards! Seize her!"

Soldiers, cloaked and concealed within the crowd, threw off their fine robes to reveal armor clad warriors. They too wore protective amulets against her powers, charmed by both Darach and myself. They overwhelmed the Changeling within a heartbeat. She wailed and cursed as iron chains, enchanted by Darach's strongest magic, bound her. Roghan made his way carefully through the crowd of well-wishers that backed away; for his blacksmith's tongs gripped a pair of glowing hot iron slippers, fresh from the forging furnace.

Now, some may think this a cruel thing. But, fire and iron is the key combination that will bind and destroy a Changeling. The burning iron slippers were necessary to send this thing back to hell. Darach spoke a final charm over the red-hot iron shoes and the guards forced her feet into them. She continued screaming her vile curses, but I could feel her powers waning.

What happened next we did not expect. She began to dance.

Wild, jerky movements; leaping and whirling like so much wind-tossed grass. We all moved away in a broad circle as we witnessed the bizarre ballet. Her false mask of beauty, which had held my father enthralled for so many years, melted away like drifting leaves, to reveal the foul green skin and claw-like hands of her true form. She spun, faster and faster, the red-hot slippers blazing all the brighter, all the hotter, until at last the good magic consumed her, and she erupted in a column of fire and vanished. Not even ashes remained.

There was much to celebrate. I was at last free of the Changeling's dark hold (as was my poor father), and completely in love! The next full moon after our honeymoon, we visited Father's castle. While the people at court still appeared haggard and subdued, my father seemed greatly recovered. We were given a grand suite, newly decorated in blue, my favorite color. Our welcome dinner was cheerful, but something was... missing.

That night, as I lay with Justin, remembering the scarlet and black bedchamber of Stepmother-- and her magic mirror, I suddenly realized there was one last thing I had to do. Slipping from our bed, I went to her old chambers.

The mirror still burned with enchantment as I entered. It shimmered, sensing someone new within its domain. A face, like molded water, appeared in the murky glass.

"Come enchantress," it whispered. "You have conquered the evil queen. Claim your prize. I offer you power... beauty... love! With me, you shall be beautiful forever."

At that moment, I saw the true scope of its power and seduction; feeding, as the Changeling had, on the beauty of others. I sensed its evil core, and by way of an enticement, it allowed me to see the remnants of Stepmother's victims.

Shadowy faces... faces I'd known from Father's court since childhood; their beauty ensnared as a conduit for the now dead Changeling. Her victims. They pressed their ghostly faces to the glass, begging for release. Somehow, I had to free them, restore the beauty to their rightful owners!

Picking up a heavy gold candlestick, I swung, hard as I could, and smashed the mirror. It burst like rotted fruit, flooding the room with a powerful red light that almost knocked me over. Glass shards flew everywhere, but somehow I remained untouched. A rush of magical energy bloomed, forcing me to shield my eyes, and then faded. When I looked at the mirror again, only the hideous frame remained.

"Beloved!" Justin rushed in, still in his nightshirt, and sword in hand. "What happened?"

I found a broom and began to sweep the broken shards into the heap. "Nothing, my love. Just cleaning up leftover evil."

He looked at the hideous wooden frame, and frowned. "Is this *her* mirror... or should I say, what's left of it?"

"I want no part of her evil to remain in my father's house. Make good use of that sword, Sweetheart. The frame will provide for good kindling."

"Of course, Beloved," he laughed. "You might have told me what you meant to do. A husband job to protect his wife, you know. It's what I'm trained to do... be heroic."

I smiled. "Of course, my love, but smashing the wretched thing myself, that pleasure was mine. It's vexed me since I was a child. Next time, I promise, be it ogre or goblin, you may defend me to your heart's content."

"As long as we are straight on that point." Justin insisted.

I looked at the pile of broken wood and glass. "Now, stoke the fireplace, my love. We need a roaring blaze to cleanse the dark from this evil magic. Darach taught me that."

"Yes beloved," he replied with a grin.

We met Father in the grand hall the next day, and to my relief, the women of his court were beautiful again! On the spot, Father announced there must be a ball that very evening.

"So many beautiful women," Father laughed, "deserve a king to dance with."

"You are still the fairest of them all," Justin whispered in my ear.

I laughed and hugged him. "As long as you know that, my love, I shall always be content."

The End

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