

# EVER AFTER

**Susan Palwick**

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*“Ever After” was purchased by Gardner Dozois, and appeared in the November 1987 issue of Asimov’s with an illustration by Linda Burr. Susan Palwick had a string of popular stories in Asimov’s and in other markets such as Amazing during the eighties, fell silent for a couple of years, and then made a strong comeback in 1992 with the publication of her first novel, Flying in Place, which received enthusiastic critical acclaim almost everywhere. We hope to coax her back into the pages of Asimov’s as well in the near future. She lives in Jersey City, New Jersey.*

*Here she gives us a taut, hard-edged look at the gritty underside of a classic fairy tale...*

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“Velvet,” she says, pushing back her sleep-tousled hair. “I want green velvet this time, with lace around the neck and wrists. Cream lace—not white—and sea-green velvet. Can you do that?”

“Of course.” She’s getting vain, this one; vain and a little bossy. The wonder has worn off. All for the best. Soon now, very soon, I’ll have to tell her the truth.

She bends, here in the dark kitchen, to peer at the back of her mother’s prized copper kettle. It’s just after dusk, and by the light of the lantern I’m holding a vague reflection flickers and dances on the metal. She scowls. “Can’t you get me a real mirror? That ought to be simple enough.”

I remember when the light I brought filled her with awe. Wasting good fuel, just to see yourself by! “No mirrors. I clothe you only in seeming, not in fact. You know that.”

“Ah.” She waves a hand, airily. She’s proud of her hands: delicate and pale and long-fingered, a noblewoman’s hands; all the years before I came she protected them against the harsh work of her mother’s kitchen. “Yes, the prince. I have to many a prince, so I can have his jewels for my own. Will it be this time, do you think?”

“There will be no princes at this dance, Caitlin. You are practicing for princes.”

“Hah! And when I’m good enough at last, will you let me wear glass slippers?”

“Nonsense. You might break them during a gavotte, and cut yourself.” She knew the story before I found her; they always do. It enters their blood as soon as they can follow speech, and lodges in their hearts like the promise of spring. All poor mothers tell their daughters this story, as they sit together in dark kitchens, scrubbing pots and trying to save their hands for the day when the tale becomes real. I often wonder if that first young woman was one of ours, but the facts don’t matter. Like all good stories, this one is true.

“Princess Caitlin,” she says dreamily. “That will be very fine. Oh, how they will envy me! It’s begun already, in just the little time since you’ve made me beautiful. Ugly old Lady Alison—did you see her giving me the evil eye, at the last ball? Just because my skin is smooth and hers wrinkled, and I a newcomer?”

“Yes,” I tell her. I am wary of Lady Alison, who looks too hard and says too little. Lady Alison is dangerous.

“Jealousy,” Caitlin says complacently. “I’d be jealous, if I looked like she does.”

“You are very lovely,” I say, and it is true. With her blue eyes and raven hair, and those hands, she could have caught the eye of many princes on her own. Except, of course, that without me they never would have seen her.

Laughing, she sits to let me plait her hair. “So serious! You never smile at me. Do magic folks never smile? Aren’t you proud of me?”

“Very proud,” I say, parting the thick cascade and beginning to braid it. She smells like smoke and the thin, sour stew which simmers on the hearth, but at the dance tonight she will be scented with all the flowers of summer.

“Will you smile and laugh when I have my jewels and land? I shall give you riches, then.”

So soon, I think, and my breath catches. So soon she offers me gifts, and forgets the woman who bore her, who now lies snoring in the other room. All for the best; and yet I am visited by something very like pity. “No wife has riches but from her lord, Caitlin. Not in this kingdom.”

“I shall have riches of my own, when I am married,” she says grandly; and then, her face clouding as if she regrets having forgotten, “My mother will be rich too, then. She’ll like you, when we’re rich. Godmother, why doesn’t she like you now?”

“Because I am stealing you away from her. She has never been invited to a ball. And because I am beautiful, and she isn’t anymore.”

What I have said is true enough, as always; and, as always, I find myself wondering if there is more than that. No matter. If Caitlin’s mother suspects, she says nothing. I am the only chance she and her daughter have to approach nobility, and for the sake of that dream she has tolerated my presence, and Caitlin’s odd new moods, and the schedule which keeps the girl away from work to keep her fresh for dances.

Caitlin bends her head, and the shining braids slip through my fingers like water. “She’ll come to the castle whenever she wants to, when I’m married to a prince. We’ll make her beautiful too, then. I’ll buy her clothing and paint for her face.”

“There are years of toil on her, Caitlin. Lady Alison is your mother’s age, and all her riches can’t make her lovely again.”

“Oh, but Lady Alison’s mean. That makes you ugly.” Caitlin dismisses her enemy with the ignorance of youth. Lady Alison is no meaner than anyone, but she has borne illnesses and childlessness and the unfaithfulness of her rich lord. Her young nephew will fall in love with Caitlin tonight—a match Lord Gregory suggested, I suspect, precisely because Alison will oppose it.

Caitlin’s hair is done, piled in coiled, lustrous plaits. “Do you have the invitation? Where did I put it?”

“On the table, next to the onions.”

She nods, crosses the room, snatches up the thick piece of paper and fans herself with it. I remember her first invitation, only six dances ago, her eagerness and innocence and purity, the wide eyes and wonder. *I? I have been invited to the ball?* She refused to let go of the invitation then; afraid it might vanish as suddenly as it had come, she carried it with her for hours. They are always at their most beautiful that first time, when they believe most fully in the story and are most awe-stricken at having been chosen to play the heroine. No glamour we give them can ever match that first glow.

“Clothe me,” Caitlin commands now, standing with her eyes closed in the middle of the kitchen, and I put the glamour on her and her grubby kitchen-gown is transformed by desire and shadow into sea-green velvet and cream lace. She smiles. She opens her eyes, which gleam with joy and the giddiness of transformation. She has taken easily to that rush; she craves it. Already she has forsaken dreams of love for dreams of power.

“I’m hungry,” she says. “I want to eat before the dance. What was that soup you gave me last night? You must have put wine in it, because it made me drunk. I want more of that.”

“No food before you dance,” I tell her. “You don’t want to look fat, do you?”

No chance of that, for this girl who has starved in a meager kitchen all her life; but at the thought of dancing she forgets her hunger and takes a few light steps in anticipation of the music. “Let me stay longer this time— please. Just an hour or two. I never get tired anymore.” . “Midnight,” I tell her flatly. It won’t do to change that part of the story until she knows everything.

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So we go to the dance, in a battered carriage made resplendent not by any glamour of mine but by Caitlin’s belief in her own beauty. This, too, she has learned easily; already the spells are more hers than mine, although she doesn’t yet realize it.

At the gates, Caitlin hands the invitation to the footman. She has grown to relish this moment, the thrill of bending him to her will with a piece of paper, of forcing him to admit someone he suspects—quite rightly—doesn’t belong here. It is very important that she learn to play this game. Later she will learn to win her own invitations, to cajole the powerful into admitting her where, without their permission, she cannot go at all.

Only tonight it is less simple. The footman glances at the envelope, frowns, says, “I’m sorry, but I can’t admit you.”

“Can’t admit us?” Caitlin summons the proper frosty indignation, and so I let her keep talking. She needs to learn this, too. “Can’t admit us, with a handwritten note from Lord Gregory?”

“Just so, mistress. Lady Alison has instructed—”

“Lady Alison didn’t issue the invitation.”

The footman coughs, shuffles his feet. “Just so, I have the very strictest instructions—”

“What does Lord Gregory instruct?”

“Lord Gregory has not—”

“Lord Gregory wrote the invitation. Lord Gregory wants us here. If Lord Gregory learned we were denied it would go badly for you, footman.”

He looks up at us; he looks miserable. “Just so,” he says, sounding wretched.

“I shall speak to her for you,” I tell him, and Caitlin smiles at me and we are through the gates, passing ornate gardens and high, neat hedges. I lean back in my seat, shaking. Lady Alison is very dangerous, but she has made a blunder. The servant could not possibly refuse her husband’s invitation; all she has done is to warn us. “Be very careful tonight,” I say to Caitlin. “Avoid her.”

“I’d like to scratch her eyes out! How dare she, that jealous old—”

“Avoid her, Caitlin! I’ll deal with her. I don’t want to see you anywhere near her.”

She subsides. Already we can hear music from the great hall, and her eyes brighten as she taps time to the beat.

The people at the dance are the ones who are always at dances; by now, all of them know her. She excites the men and unnerves the women, and where she passes she leaves a trail of uncomfortable silence, followed by hushed whispers. I strain to hear what they are saying, but catch only the usual comments about her youth, her beauty, her low birth.

“Is she someone’s illegitimate child, do you think?”

“A concubine, surely.”

“She’ll never enter a convent, not that one.”

“Scheming husband-hunter, and may she find one soon. I don’t want her taking mine.”

The usual. I catch sight of Lady Alison sitting across the wide room. She studies us with narrowed eyes. One arthritic hand, covered with jeweled rings, taps purposefully on her knee. She sees me watching her and meets my gaze without flinching. She crosses herself.

I look away, wishing we hadn’t come here. What does she intend to do? I wonder how much she has learned simply by observation, and how much Gregory let slip. I scan the room again and spot him, in a corner, nursing a chalice of wine. He is watching Caitlin as intently as his wife did, but with a different expression.

And someone else is watching Caitlin, among the many people who glance at her and then warily away: Randolph, Gregory’s young nephew, who is tall and well-formed and pleasant of face. Caitlin looks to me for confirmation and I nod. She smiles at Randolph—that artful smile there has never been need to teach—and he extends a hand to invite her to dance.

I watch them for a moment, studying how she looks up .at him, the angle of her head, the flutter of her lashes. She started with the smile, and I gave her the rest. She has learned her skills well.

“So,” someone says behind me, “she’s growing accustomed to these late nights.”

I turn. Lady Alison stands there, unlovely and shrunken, having crossed the room with improbable speed. “Almost as used to them as you,” she says.

I bow my head, carefully acquiescent. “ ‘Or you yourself. Those who would dance in these halls must learn to do without sleep.’ ”

“Some sleep during the day.” Her mouth twitches. “I am Randolph’s aunt, mistress. While he stays within these walls his care lies in my keeping, even as the care of the girl lies in yours. I will safeguard him however I must.”

I laugh, the throaty chuckle which thrills Gregory, but my amusement is as much an act as Caitlin’s flirtatiousness. “Against dancing with pretty young women?”

“Against being alone with those who would entrap him with his own ignorance. He knows much too little of the world; he places more faith in fairy tales than in history, and neither I nor the Church have been

able to persuade him to believe in evil. I pray you, by our Lord in heaven and his holy saints, leave this house.”

“So you requested at the gates.” Her piety nauseates me, as she no doubt intended, and I keep my voice steady only with some effort. “The Lord of this castle is Lord Gregory, Lady Alison, by whose invitation we are here and in whose hospitality we will remain.”

She grimaces. “I have some small power of my own, although it does not extend to choosing my guests. Pray chaperon your charge.”

“No need. They are only dancing.” I glance at Caitlin and Randolph, who gaze at each other as raptly as if no one else were in the room. Randolph’s face is silly and soft; Caitlin’s, when I catch a glimpse of it, is soft and ardent. I frown, suddenly uneasy; that look is a bit too sudden and far too unguarded, and may be more than artifice.

Lady Alison snorts. “Both will want more than dancing presently, I warrant, although they will want different things. Chaperon her—or I will do it for you, less kindly.”

With that she turns and vanishes into the crowd. I turn back to the young couple, thinking that a chaperon would indeed be wise tonight; but the players have struck up a minuet, and Caitlin and Randolph glide gracefully through steps as intricate and measured as any court intrigue. The dance itself will keep them safe, for a little while.

Instead I make my way to Gregory, slowly, drifting around knots of people as if I am only surveying the crowd. Alison has positioned herself to watch Caitlin and Randolph, who dip and twirl through the steps of the dance; I hope she won’t notice me talking to her husband.

“She is very beautiful,” says Gregory softly when I reach his side. “Even lovelier than you, my dear. What a charming couple they make. I would give much to be Randolph, for a few measures of this dance.”

He thinks he can make me jealous. Were this any other ball I might pretend he had succeeded, but I have no time for games tonight. “Gregory, Alison tried to have us barred at the gate. And she just threatened me.”

He smiles. “That was foolish of her. Also futile.”

“Granted,” I say, although I suspect Lady Alison has resources of which neither of us are aware. Most wives of the nobility do: faithful servants, devoted priests, networks of spies in kitchens and corridors.

Gregory reaches out to touch my cheek; I draw away from him, uneasy. Everyone here suspects I am his mistress, but there is little sense in giving them public proof. He laughs gently. “You need not be afraid of her. She loves the boy and wishes only to keep him cloistered in a chapel, with his head buried in scripture. I tell her that is no sport for a young man and certainly no education for a titled lord, who must learn how to resist the blandishments of far more experienced women. So he and our little Caitlin will be merry, and take their lessons from each other, with no one the worse for it. See how they dance together!”

They dance as I have taught Caitlin she should dance with princes: lingering over the steps, fingertips touching, lips parted and eyes bright. Alison watches them, looking worried, and I cannot help but feel the same way. Caitlin is too obvious, too oblivious; she has grown innocent again, in a mere hour. I remember what Alison said about history, and fairy tales; if Caitlin and Randolph both believe themselves in that same old story, things will go harshly for all of us.

“Let them be happy together,” Gregory says softly. “They have need of happiness, both of them—Randolph with his father surely dying, and the complexities of power about to bewilder him, and Caitlin soon to learn her true nature. You cannot keep it from her much longer, Juliana. She has changed too much. Let them be happy, for this one night; and let their elders, for once, abandon care and profit from their example.”

He reaches for my hand again, drawing me closer to him, refusing to let go. His eyes are as bright as Randolph’s; he has had rather too much wine. “‘Profit from recklessness?’” I ask, wrenching my fingers from his fist. Alison has looked away from her nephew and watches us now, expressionless. I hear murmurs around us; a young courtier in purple satin and green hose raises an eyebrow.

“This is my castle,” Gregory says. “My halls and land, my musicians, my servants and clerics and nobles; my wife. No one can hurt you here, Juliana.”

“No one save you, my lord. Kindly retain your good sense—”

“My invitation.” His voice holds little kindness now. “My invitation allowed you entrance, as it has many other times; I provide you with splendor, and fine nourishment, and a training ground for the girl, and I am glad to do so.

I am no slave of Alison’s priests, Juliana; I know full well that you are not evil.“

“Kindly be more quiet and discreet, my lord!” The courtier is carefully ignoring us now, evidently fascinated with a bunch of grapes. Caitlin and Randolph, transfixed by each other, sway in the last steps of the minuet.

Gregory continues in the same tone, “Of late you have paid far more attention to Caitlin than to me. Even noblemen are human, and can be hurt. Let the young have their pleasures tonight, and let me have mine.”

I lower my own voice, since he refuses to lower his. “What, in the middle of the ballroom? That would be a fine entertainment for your guests! I will come to you tomorrow—”

“Tonight,” he says, into the sudden silence of the dance’s end. “Come to me tonight, in the usual chamber—”

“It is a poor lord who leaves his guests untended,” I tell him sharply, “and a poor teacher who abandons her student. You will excuse me.”

He reaches for me again, but I slip past his hands and go to find Caitlin, wending my way around gaudily-dressed lords and ladies and squires, catching snippets of gossip and conversation.

“Did you see them dancing—”

“So the venison disagreed with me, but thank goodness it was only a trifling ailment—”

“Penelope’s violet silk! I said, my dear, I simply must have the pattern and wherever did you find that seamstress—”

“Gregory’s brother in failing health, and the young heir staying here? No uncle can be trusted that far. The boy had best have a quick dagger and watch his back, is what I say.”

That comment hurries my steps. Gregory’s brother is an obscure duke, but he is a duke nonetheless, and Gregory is next in the line of succession after Randolph. If Randolph is in danger, and Caitlin with him—

I have been a fool. We should not have come here, and we must leave. I scan the colorful crowd more anxiously than ever for Caitlin, but my fears are groundless; she has found me first, and rushes towards me, radiant. “Oh, godmother—”

“Caitlin! My dear, listen: you must stay by me—”

But she hasn't heard me. “Godmother, he's so sweet and kind, so sad with his father ill and yet trying to be merry— did you see how he danced? Why does it have to be a prince I love? I don't care if he's not a prince, truly I don't, and just five days ago I scorned that other gawky fellow for not having a title, but he wasn't nearly as nice—”

“Caitlin!” Yes, we most assuredly must leave. I lower my voice and take her by the elbow. “Listen to me: many men are nice. If you want a nice man you may marry a blacksmith. I am not training you to be a mere duchess.”

She grows haughty now. “Duchess sounds quite well enough to me. Lord Gregory is no king.”

Were we in private I would slap her for that. “No, he isn't, but he is a grown man and come into his limited power, and so he is still more useful to us than Randolph. Caitlin, we must leave now—”

“No! We can't leave; it's nowhere near midnight. I don't want to leave. You can't make me.”

“I can strip you of your finery right here.”

“Randolph wouldn't care.”

“Everyone else would, and he is outnumbered.”

“Randolph picks his own companions—”

“Randolph,” I say, losing all patience, “still picks his pimples. He is a fine young man, Caitlin, but he is young nonetheless. My dear, many more things are happening here tonight than your little romance. I am your magic godmother, and on some subjects you must trust me. We are leaving.”

“I won't leave,” she says, raising her chin. “I'll stay here until after midnight. I don't care if you turn me into a toad; Randolph will save me, and make me a duchess.”

“Princesses are safer,” I tell her grimly, not at all sure it's even true. On the far side of the room I see the courtier in the green hose talking intently to Lady Alison, and a chill cuts through me. Well, he cannot have heard much which isn't general rumor, and soon we will be in the carriage... and away from all this.

“Caitlin!” Randolph hurries up to us, as welcoming and guileless as some friendly dog. “Why did you leave me? I didn't know where you'd gone. Will you dance with me again? Here, some wine if you don't mind sharing, I thought you'd be thirsty—”

She takes the goblet and sips, laughing. “Of course I'll dance with you.”

I frown at Caitlin and clear my throat. “I regret that she cannot, my lord—”

“This is my godmother Juliana,” Caitlin cuts in, taking another sip of wine and giving Randolph a dazzling smile, “ ‘who worries overmuch about propriety and thinks people will gossip if I dance with you too often.’”

“And so they shall,” he says, bowing and kissing my hand, “because everyone gossips about beauty.” He straightens and smiles down at me, still holding my hand. His cheeks are flushed and his fingers very

warm; I can feel the faint, steady throb of his pulse against my skin. What could Caitlin do but melt, in such heat?

“Randolph!” Two voices, one cry; Alison and Gregory approach us from opposite directions, the sea of guests parting before them.

Alison, breathless, reaches us a moment before her husband does. “Randolph, my love—the players are going to give us another slow tune, at my request. You’ll dance with your crippled old aunt, won’t you?”

He bows; he can hardly refuse her. Gregory, standing next to Caitlin, says smoothly, “And I will have the honor of dancing with the young lady, with her kind godmother’s assent.”

It isn’t a petition. I briefly consider feigning illness, but such a ruse would shake Caitlin’s faith in my power and give Gregory the excuse to protest that I must stay here, spend the night and be made comfortable in his household’s care.

Instead I station myself next to a pillar to watch the dancers. Alison’s lips move as Randolph guides her carefully around the floor. I see her press a small pouch into his hand; he smiles indulgently and puts it in a pocket.

She is warning him away from Caitlin, then. This dance is maddeningly slow, and far too long; I crane my neck to find Caitlin and Gregory, only to realize that they are about to sweep past me. “‘Yes, I prefer roses to all other blooms,’” Caitlin says lightly. (That too is artifice; she preferred forget-me-nots until I taught her otherwise.)

So at least one of these conversations is insignificant, and Caitlin safe. Alison and Randolph, meanwhile, glare at each other; she is trying to give him something on a chain, and he is refusing it. They pass me, but say nothing; Caitlin and Gregory go by again a moment later. “‘Left left right, left left right,’” he tells her, before they are past my hearing, “it is a pleasing pattern and very fashionable; you must try it.”

A new court dance, no doubt. This old one ends at last and I dart for Caitlin, only to be halted by a group of rowdy acrobats who have just burst into the hall. “Your pleasure!” they cry, doing flips and twists in front of me as the crowd laughs and gathers to watch them. “Your entertainment, your dancing hearts!” I try to go around them, but find myself blocked by a motley-clad clown juggling pewter goblets. “Hey! We’ll make you merry, at the generous lord’s invitation we’ll woo you, we’ll win you—”

You’ll distract us, I think—but from what? I manage to circle the juggler, but there is no sign of Caitlin or Randolph. Gregory seems likewise to have disappeared.

Alison is all too evident, however. “Where are they? What have you done with them?” She stands in front of me, her hands clenched on the fine silk of her skirt. “I turned away from Randolph for a mere moment to answer a servant’s question, and when I looked back he was gone—”

“My lady, I was standing on the side. You no doubt saw me. I am honestly eager to honor your wishes and be gone, and I dislike this confusion as much as you do.”

“I know you,” she says, trembling, her voice very low. “I know you for what you are. I told Randolph but he would not believe me, and Gregory fairly revels in dissolution. I would unmask you in this hall and send town criers to spread the truth about you, save that my good lord would be set upon by decent Christian folk were it known he had trafficked with such a creature.”

And your household destroyed and all your riches plundered, I think; yes, the poor welcome such pretexts. You do well to maintain silence, Alison, since it buys your own safety.



But I dare not admit to what she knows. “I am but a woman as yourself, my lady, and I share your concern for Randolph and the girl—”

“Nonsense. They are both charming young people who dance superbly.” Gregory has reappeared, affable and urbane; he seems more relaxed than he has all evening, and I trust him less.

So does Alison, by the look of her. “And where have you hidden our two paragons of sprightliness, my lord?”

“I? I have not hidden them anywhere. Doubtless they have stolen away and found some quiet corner to themselves. The young will do such things. Alison, my sweet, you look fatigued—”

“And the old, when they get a chance. No: I am not going to retire conveniently and leave you alone with this creature. I value your soul far more than that.”

“Although not my body,” Gregory says, raising an eyebrow. “Well, then, shall we dance, all three? With linked hands in a circle, like children? Shall we sit and discuss the crops, or have a hand of cards? What would you, my lovelies?”

Alison takes his hand. “Let us go find our nephew.”

He sighs heavily and rolls his eyes, but he allows himself to be led away. I am glad to be rid of them; now I can search on my own and make a hasty exit. The conversation with Alison worries me. She is too cautious to destroy us here, but she may well try to have us followed into the countryside.

So I make my way through corridors, through courtyards, peering into corners and behind pillars, climbing winding staircases and descending them, until I am lost and can no longer hear the music from the great hall I meet other furtive lovers, dim shapes embracing in shadows, but none are Randolph and Caitlin. When I have exhausted every passageway I can find I remember Caitlin and Gregory’s discussion of roses and hurry outside, through a doorway I have never seen before, but the moonlit gardens yield nothing. The sky tells me that it is midnight: Caitlin will be rejoicing at having eluded me.

Wherever she is. These halls and grounds are too vast; I could wander all night and still not find her by dawn. Gregory knows where she is: I am convinced he does, convinced he arranged the couple’s disappearance. He may have done so to force me into keeping the tryst with him. That would be very like him; he would be thrilled by my seeking him out while his guests gossip and dance in the great hall. Gregory delights in private indiscretions at public events.

So I will play his game this once, although it angers me, and lie with him, and be artful and cajoling. I go back inside and follow hallways I know to Gregory’s chambers, glancing behind me to be sure I am not seen.

The small chapel where Lady Alison takes her devotions lies along the same path, and as I pass it I hear moans of pain. I stop, listening, wary of a trap—but the noise comes again, and the agony sounds genuine: a thin, childish whimpering clearly made by a woman.

*Caitlin?* I remember Alison’s threats, and my vision blackens for a moment. I slip into the room, hiding in shadows, tensed to leap. If Alison led the girl here—

Alison is indeed here, but Caitlin is not with her. Doubled over in front of the altar, Gregory’s wife gasps for breath and clutches her side; her face is sweaty, gray, the pupils dilated. She sees me and recoils, making her habitual sign of the cross; her hand is trembling, but her voice remains steady. “So. Didn’t you find them, either?”

“My lady Alison, what—”

“He called it a quick poison,” she says, her face contorting with pain, “but I am stronger than he thinks, or the potion weaker. I was tired—my leg... we came here; it was close. I asked him to pray with me, and he repented very prettily. ”I will bring some wine,“ he said, ”and we will both drink to my salvation.“ Two cups he brought, and I took the one he gave me... I thought him saved, and relief dulled my wits. ”Mulled wine,“ he said, ”I ground the spices for you myself,“ and so he did, no doubt. Pray none other taste them.”

So much speech has visibly drained her; shaken, I help her into a chair. What motive could Gregory have for killing his wife? Her powers of observation were an asset to him, though he rarely heeded them, and he couldn't have felt constrained by his marriage vows; he never honored them while she was alive.

“It is well I believe in the justice of God,” she says. “No one will punish him here in the world. They will pretend I ate bad meat, or had an attack of bile.”

“Be silent and save your strength,” I tell her, but she talks anyway, crying now, fumbling to wipe her face through spasms.

“He tired of me because I am old. He grew tired of a wife who said her prayers, and loved other people's children although she could have none of her own. No doubt he will install you by his side now, since you are made of darkness *and* steal the daughters of simple folk.”

Gregory knows far better than to make me his formal consort, whatever Alison thinks. “We choose daughters only when one of us has been killed, Lady Alison. We wish no more than anyone does—to continue, and to be safe.”

“I will continue in heaven,” she says, and then cries out, a thin keening which whistles between her teeth. She no longer sounds human.

I kneel beside her, uncertain she will be able to understand my words. This does not look like a quick-acting potion, whatever Gregory said; it will possibly take her hours to die, and she will likely be made before then. “I cannot save you, my lady, but I can make your end swift and painless.”

“I need no mercy from such as you!”

“You must take mercy where you can get it. Who else will help you?”

She moans and then subsides, trembling. “I have not been shriven. He could have allowed me that.”

“ ‘But he did not. Perhaps you will be called a saint someday, and this declared your martyrdom; for now, the only last rites you will be offered are mine.”

She crosses herself again, but this time it is clearly an effort for her to lift her hand. “A true death?”

“A true death,” I say gently. “We do not perpetuate pain.”

Her lips draw back from her teeth. “Be merciful, then; and when you go to your assignation, tell Gregory he harms himself far worse than he has harmed me.”

It is quick and painless, as I promised, but I am shaking when I finish, and the thought of seeing Gregory fills me with dread. I will have to pretend not to know that he has murdered his wife; I will have to be charming, and seductive, and disguise my concern for my own safety and Caitlin's so I can trick her whereabouts out of him.

I knock on his door and hear the soft “Enter.” Even here I need an invitation, to enter this chamber where Gregory will be sprawled on the bed, peeling an apple or trimming his fingernails, his clothing already unfastened.

Tonight the room is unlit. I see someone sitting next to the window, silhouetted in moonlight; only as my eyes adjust to the dimness do I realize that Gregory has not kept our appointment. A priest waits in his place, surrounded by crucifixes and bottles of holy water and plaster statues of saints. On the bed where I have lain so often is something long and sharp which I force myself not to look at too closely.

“Hello,” he says, as the door thuds shut behind me. I should have turned and run, but it is too late now; I have frozen at the sight of the priest, as they say animals do in unexpected light. In the hallway I hear heavy footsteps—the corridor is guarded, then.

The priest holds an open Bible; he glances down at it, and then, with a grimace of distaste, sideways at the bed.

“No, lady, it won’t come to that. You needn’t look so frightened.”

I say nothing. I tell myself I must think clearly, and be very quick, but I cannot think at all. We are warned about these small rooms, these implements. All the warnings I have heard have done me no good.

“There’s the window,” he explains. “You could get out that way if you had to. That is how I shall tell them you escaped, when they question me.” He gestures at his cheek, and I see a thin, cruel scar running from forehead to jaw. “‘When I was still a child, my father took me poaching for boar on our lord’s estate. It was my first hunt. It taught me not to corner frightened beasts, especially when they have young. Sit down, lady. Don’t be afraid.”

I sit, cautiously and without hope, and he closes the book with a soft sound of sighing parchment. “You are afraid, of course; well you should be. Lord Gregory has trapped you, for reasons he says involve piety but doubtless have more to do with politics; Lady Alison has been weaving her own schemes to destroy you, and the Church has declared you incapable of redemption. You have been quite unanimously consigned to the stake. Which is—” he smiles—“why I am here. Do you believe in God, my dear? Do your kind believe in miracles?”

When I don’t answer he smiles again and goes on easily, as if we were chatting downstairs at the dance, “You should. It is a kind of miracle that has brought you to me. I have prayed for this since I was very young, and now I am old and my prayer has been answered. I was scarcely more than a boy when I entered the religious life, and for many years I was miserable, but now I see that this is why it happened.”

He laughs, quite kindly. His kindness terrifies me. I fear he is mad. “I came from a poor family,” he says. “I was the youngest son, and so, naturally, I became a priest. The Church cannot get sons the normal way, so it takes other people’s and leaves the best young men to breed more souls. You and I are not, you see, so very different.”

He leans back in his chair. “There were ten other children in my family. Four died. The littlest and weakest was my youngest sister, who was visited one day by a very beautiful woman who made her lovely, and took her to parties, and then took her away. I never got to say goodbye to my sister—her name was Sofia—and I never got to tell her that, although I knew what she had become, I still loved her. I thought she would be coming back, you see.”

He leans forward earnestly, and his chair makes a scraping sound. “I have always prayed for a way to reach her. The Church tells me to destroy you, but I do not believe God wants you destroyed—because

He has sent you to me, who thinks of you only with pity and gratitude and love. I am glad my little sister was made beautiful. If you know her, Sofia with green eyes and yellow hair, tell her Thomas loves her, eh? Tell her I am doubtless a heretic, for forgiving her what she is. Tell her I think of her every day when I take the Holy Communion. Will you do that for me?"

I stare at him, wondering if the watchers in the hallway can distinguish words through the thick wooden door.

He sighs. "So suspicious! Yes, of course you will. You will deliver my message, and I'll say you confounded me by magic and escaped through the window. Eh?"

"They'll kill you," I tell him. The calmness of my voice shocks me. I am angry now: not at Lord Gregory who betrayed me, not at Lady Alison, who was likewise betrayed and died believing me about to lie with her husband, but with this meandering holy man who prattles of miracles and ignores his own safety. "The ones set to guard the door. They'll say you must have been possessed by demons, to let me escape."

He nods and pats his book. "We will quite probably both be killed. Lady Alison means to set watchers on the roads."

So he doesn't know. "Lady Alison is dead. Gregory poisoned her."

He pales and bows his head for a moment. "Ah. It is certainly political, then, and no one is safe tonight. I have bought you only a very little time; you had best use it. Now go: gather your charge and flee, and God be with you both.

I shall chant exorcisms and hold them off, eh? Go on: use the window."

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I use the window. I dislike changing shape and do so only in moments of extreme danger; it requires too much energy, and the consequent hunger can make one reckless.

I have made myself an owl, not the normal choice but a good one; I need acute vision, and a form which won't arouse suspicion in alert watchers. From this height I can see the entire estate: the castle, the surrounding land, gardens and pathways and fountains—and something else I never knew about, and could not have recognized from the ground.

The high hedges lining the road to the castle form, in one section, the side of a maze, one of those ornate topiary follies which pass in and out of botanical fashion. In the center of it is a small rose garden with a white fountain; on the edge of the fountain sit two foreshortened figures, very close to one another. Just outside the center enclosure, in a cul-de-sac which anyone exiting the maze must pass, another figure stands hidden.

*Left left right.* Gregory wasn't explaining a new dance at all: he was telling Caitlin how to reach the rose garden, the secret place where she and Randolph hid while Alison and I searched so frantically. Doubtless he went with his wife to keep her from the spot; with Alison's bad leg, and the maze this far from the castle, it wouldn't have been difficult.

I land a few feet behind him and return to myself again. Hunger and hatred enhance my strength, already greater than his. He isn't expecting an approach from behind; I knock him flat, his weapons and charms scattering in darkness, and have his arms pinned behind his back before he can cry out. "I am not dead," I say very quietly into his ear, "but your wife is, and soon you will be."

He whimpers and struggles, but I give his arm an extra twist and he subsides, panting. "Why, Gregory?"

What was all of this for? So you could spy on them murmuring poetry to one another? Surely not that. Tell me!”

“so I can be a duke.”

“By your wife’s death?”

“By the boy’s.”

“How?” I answer sharply, thinking of Randolph and Caitlin sharing the same goblet. “How did you mean to kill him? More poison?”

“She will kill him,” he says softly, “because she is aroused, and does not yet know her own appetites or how to control them. Is is not so, my lady?”

My own hunger is a red throbbing behind my eyes. “No, my lord. Caitlin is no murder weapon: she does not yet know what she is or where her hungers come from. She can no more feed on her own than a kitten can, who depends on the mother cat to bring food and teach it how to eat.”

“You shall teach her with my puling nephew, I warrant.”

“No, my lord Gregory. I shall not. I shall not teach her with you either, more’s the pity; we mangle as we learn, just as kittens do—and as kittens do, she will practice on little animals as long as they will sustain her. I should like to see you mangled, my lord.”

Instead I break his neck, cleanly, as I broke Alison’s. Afterwards, the body still warm, I feed fully; it would be more satisfying were he still alive, but he shall have no more pleasure. Feeding me aroused him as coupling seldom did; he begged to do it more often, and now I am glad I refused. As terrible as he was, he would have been worse as one of us.

When I am finished I lick my fingers clean, wipe my face as best I can, and drag the body back into the cul-de-sac, where it will not be immediately visible. Shaking, I hide the most obvious and dangerous of Gregory’s weapons and step into the rose garden.

Caitlin, glowing in moonlight, sits on the edge of the fountain, as I saw her from the air. Randolph is handing her a white rose, which he has evidently just picked: there is blood on his hands where the thorns have scratched him. She takes the rose from him and bends to kiss his fingers, the tip of her tongue flicking towards the wounds.

“Caitlin!” She turns, startled, and lets go of Randolph’s hands. “Caitlin, we must leave now.”

“No,” she says, her eyes very bright. “No. It is already after midnight, and you see—nothing horrid has happened.”

“We must leave,” I tell her firmly. “Come along.”

“But I can come back?” she says, laughing, and then to Randolph, “I’ll come back. Soon, I promise you. The next dance, or before that even. Godmother, promise I can come back—“

“Come along, Caitlin! Randolph, we bid you goodnight—“

“May I see you out of the maze, my ladies?”

I think of the watchers on the road, the watchers who may have been set on the maze by now. I wish I could warn him, teach him of the world in an instant. Disguise yourself, Randolph; leave this place as

quickly as you can, and steal down swift and secret roads to your father's bedside.

But I cannot yet speak freely in front of Caitlin, and we have time only to save ourselves. Perhaps the maze will protect him, for a little while. "Thank you, my lord, but we know the way. Pray you stay here and think kindly of us; my magic is aided by good wishes."

"Then you shall have them in abundance, whatever my aunt says."

Caitlin comes at last, dragging and prattling. On my own I would escape with shape-changing, but Caitlin doesn't have those skills yet, and were I to tell her of our danger now she would panic and become unmanageable. So I lead her, right right left, right right left, through interminable turns.

But we meet no one else in the maze, and when at last we step into open air there are no priests waiting in ambush. Music still sounds faintly from the castle; the host and hostess have not yet been missed, and the good father must still be muttering incantations in his chamber.

And so we reach the carriage safely; I deposit Caitlin inside and instruct the driver to take us to one of the spots I have prepared for such emergencies. We should be there well before sun up. I can only hope Lady Alison's watchers have grown tired or afraid, and left off their vigil; there is no way to be sure. I listen for hoofbeats on the road behind us and hear nothing. Perhaps, this time, we have been lucky.

Caitlin doesn't know what I saw, there in the rose garden. She babbles about it in the carriage. "We went into the garden, in the moonlight—he kissed me and held my hands, because he said they were cold. His were so warm! He told me I was beautiful; he said he loved me. And he picked roses for me, and he bled where the thorns had pricked him. He bled for me, godmother—oh, this is the one! This is my prince. How could I not love him?"

I remain silent. She doesn't yet know what she loves. At length she says, "Why aren't we home yet? It's taking so long. I'm hungry. I never had any dinner."

"We aren't going home," I tell her, lighting my lantern and pulling down the shades which cover the carriage's windows. "We have been discovered, Caitlin. It is quite possible we are being followed. I am taking you somewhere safe. There will be food there."

"Discovered?" She laughs. "What have they discovered? That I am poor? That I love Randolph? What could they do to me? He will protect me; he said so. He will marry me."

This is the moment I must tell her. For all the times I have done this, it never hurts any less. "Caitlin, listen to me. You shall never marry Prince Randolph, or anyone else. It was never meant that you should. I am sorry you have to hear this now. I had wanted you to learn some gentler way." She stares at me, bewildered, and, sadly, I smile at her—that expression she has teased me about, asked me for, wondered why I withhold; and when she sees it she understands. The pale eyes go wide, the beautiful hands go to her throat; she backs away from me, crossing herself as if in imitation of Lady Alison.

"Away," she tells me, trembling. "I exorcise thee, de-mon. In vain dost thou boast of this deed—"

I think of kind Thomas, chanting valiantly in an empty stone chamber as men at arms wait outside the door. "Keep your charms, Caitlin. They'll do you no good. Don't you understand, child? Why do you think everyone has begun to look at you so oddly; why do you think I wouldn't give you a mirror? What do you think was in the soup I gave you?"

The hands go to her mouth now, to the small sharp teeth. She cries out, understanding everything at once—her odd lassitude after the first few balls, the blood I took from her to cure it, her changing hours

and changing thirsts—and, as always, this moment of birth rends whatever I have left of a heart. Because for a moment the young creature sitting in front of me is not the apprentice hunter I have made her, but the innocent young girl who stood holding that first invitation to the ball, her heart in her eyes. *I? I have been invited?* I force myself not to turn away as Caitlin cries out, “You tricked me! The story wasn’t true!”

She tears at her face with shapely nails, and ribbons of flesh follow her fingers. “You can’t weep anymore,” I tell her. I would weep for her, if I could. “You can’t bleed, either. You’re past that. Don’t disfigure yourself.”

“The story was a lie! None of it was true, ever—”

I make my voice as cold as iron. “The story was perfectly true, Caitlin. You were simply never told all of it before.”

“It wasn’t supposed to end like this!” All the tears she can’t shed are in her voice. “In the story the girl falls in love and marries the prince and—everyone knows that! You lied to me! This isn’t the right ending!”

“It’s the only ending! The only one there is—Caitlin, surely you see that. Living women have no more protection than we do here. They feed off their men, as we do, and they require permission to enter houses and go to dances, as we do, and they depend on spells of seeming. There is only one difference: you will never, ever look like Lady Alison. You will never look like your mother. You have escaped that.”

She stares at me and shrinks against the side of the carriage, holding her hands in front of her—her precious hands which Prince Randolph held, kissed, warmed with his own life. “I love him,” she says defiantly. “I love him and he loves me. That part of it is true—”

“You loved his bleeding hands, Caitlin. If I hadn’t interrupted, you would have fed from them, and known then, and hated him for it. And he would have hated you, for allowing him to speak of love when all along you had been precisely what his aunt warned him against.”

Her mouth quivers. She hates me for having seen, and for telling her the truth. She doesn’t understand our danger; she doesn’t know how the woman she has scorned all these weeks died, or how close she came to dying herself.

Gregory was a clever man; the plot was a clean one. To sacrifice Randolph to Caitlin, and kill Caitlin as she tried to escape the maze; Gregory would have mourned his nephew in the proper public manner, and been declared a hero for murdering one fiend in person as the other was destroyed in the castle. Any gossip about his own soul would have been effectively stilled; perhaps he had been seduced, but surely he was pure again, to summon the righteousness to kill the beasts?

Oh yes, clever. Alison would have known the truth, and would never have accepted a title won by Randolph’s murder. Alison could have ruined the entire plan, but it is easy enough to silence wives.

“Can I pray?” Caitlin demands of me, as we rattle towards daybreak. “If I can’t shed tears or blood, if I can’t love, can I still pray?”

“We can pray,” I tell her gently, thinking again of Thomas who spared me, of those tenuous bonds between the living and the dead. “We must pray, foremost, that someone hear us. Caitlin, it’s the same. The same story, with that one difference.”

She trembles, huddling against the side of the carriage, her eyes closed. When at last she speaks, her voice is stunned. "I'll never see my mother again."

"I am your mother now." What are mothers and daughters, if not women who share blood?

She whimpers in her throat then, and I stroke her hair. At last she says, "I'll never grow old."

"You will grow as old as the hills," I tell her, putting my arm around her as one comforts a child who has woken from a nightmare, "but you will never be ugly. You will always be as beautiful as you are now, as beautiful as I am. Your hair and nails will grow and I will trim them for you, to keep them lovely, and you will go to every dance, and wear different gowns to all of them."

She blinks and plucks aimlessly at the poor fabric of her dress, once again a kitchen smock. "I'll never be ugly?"

"Never," I say. "You'll never change." We cannot cry or bleed or age; there are so many things we cannot do. But for her, now, it is a comfort.

She hugs herself, shivering, and I sit beside her and hold her, rocking her towards the certain sleep which will come with dawn. It would be better if Randolph were here, with his human warmth, but at least she doesn't have to be alone. I remember my own shock and despair, although they happened longer ago than anyone who is not one of us can remember; I too tried to pray, and afterwards was thankful that my own godmother had stayed with me.

After a while Caitlin's breathing evens, and I am grateful that she hasn't said, as so many of them do, *Now I will never die.*

We shelter our young, as the mortal mothers shelter theirs—those human women who of necessity are as predatory as we, and as dependent on the invitation to feed— and so there are some truths I have not told her. She will learn them soon enough.

She is more beautiful than Lady Alison or her mother, but no less vulnerable. Her very beauty contains the certainty of her destruction. There is no law protecting women in this kingdom, where wives can be poisoned in their own halls and their murderers never punished. Still less are there laws protecting us.

I have told her she will not grow ugly, but I have not said what a curse beauty can be, how time after time she will be forced to flee the rumors of her perpetual loveliness and all that it implies. Men will arrive to feed her and kiss her and bring her roses; but for all the centuries of gentle princes swearing love, there will inevitably be someone— jealous wife or jaded lord, peasant or priest—who has heard the whispers and believed, and who will come to her resting place, in the light hours when she cannot move, bearing a hammer and a wooden stake.