

The Case of Prince Charming

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*Her fierce gaze lent the sun its blaze
As she rode out of the west
With a heart full of pride, and a
sword by her side
And chain mail on her breast.
She didn't complain of the chafing pain;
She never let out a whimper;
She didn't flinch, nor give an inch,
But that gal was quick to temper!
Now since days of old her story's been told
In poesy, fiction, and song
By children dear both far and near—
Yet everyone got it wrong!*

Name's Rose. Bad Rose in some villages. I move around a lot; that's best in my line of work. Get in, get out, solve the problem, do the job, move on. This wasn't always my life, but it beats swabbing floors in some dark forest shack for a bunch of leering dwarves, and with every monk and nun from here to Shrewsbury making names for themselves at this game, I figured I'd try it. I'm good at poking my nose in, asking questions.

I'd gone a while between hires. My purse was flatter than a wedding singer when I passed through the woodlands of Sardeenia. Without warning, six horsemen emerged from the trees, armed and armored identically. Red tabards with gold baldrics covered the steel plate under which they sweated and stank. On each baldric was emblazoned a small gray fish.

Bringing Asta, my piebald mount, to a halt, I put a hand to the hilt of my sword and straightened in the saddle. "Fashion statement?" I asked, sneering. A good sneer can hide a lot of uncertainty; I practice mine. "Or are you just really fond of each other?"

A seventh figure rode up beside the others. A little skunk of a man in black robes with white ruffles at collar and cuffs. A seal of office on a red ribbon hung around his squat neck. I guess it was supposed to impress someone.

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He sniffed a pinch of snuff. "Your own armor—" he said with a sneer as practiced as my own, "—what there is of it. A fashion statement, too? That *barbarian princess* look is so stale."

"It's practical," I answered. "It's cool in this heat." I sat up straighter and adjusted the leather strap over my right sun-reddened shoulder. "And when I walk into a fight, my opponent ogles my chest for three or four seconds before he notices my sword. By that time, I'm wearing his testicles for earrings."

He had a voice like a barrel of oil and a manner twice as slick. "I see I've found the right woman." He

made a bow from his saddle. "I am Lord Parfum, advisor to His Majesty Leonardo, who, hearing a rumor that you were traveling through Sardeenia, sent me to find you, Rose."

Leonardo. The Lion-King, himself. "He has a job for me? A thief to catch? A murder to solve? Some mystery beyond the talents of his constables?"

Parfum demurred. "He has dinner."

My stomach growled.

* * *

That was five days ago.

I fingered the purse on my belt, which jingled half full of fish-shaped gold sardeenmars. Leonardo had a job for me, all right, but I'd earned these coins the hard way. Two days and nights of feasting, and his hands had been busier under the table than the palace mice. My thighs were bruised and mottled from his insistent pawing.

His gold was good, though, and it wasn't as if I hadn't fended off such advances before. Especially from employers.

Asta shifted restlessly. I steadied him with a pat on the withers. From the edge of the woods, I observed the gates of an ancient castle. Its walls were burned blacker than a new bride's biscuits, yet they stood stout and formidable.

Quiet, too. The old stones kept their secrets. Nothing moved on the parapets, no sentries, no pennants stirring in the breeze, not even birds.

On the bank of the moat, charred ribcages stuck up like driftwood, a legbone here, a skull there. Scattered among those, a few rusted tools—rakes and hoes mostly—stark testimony to the evil of the queen who dwelled inside.

If she had a name, no one used it. Leonardo, whose sister-in-law she was, called her the "Evil Queen," or sometimes the "Old Witch," though his voice dropped when he spoke of her, and he tended to look over his shoulder a lot.

I brushed a hand through a shock of tangled black hair that had strayed over my shoulder. I wanted a bath, but I guided Asta in a slow circle around the castle, careful to keep out of sight beneath the surrounding trees.

I disliked kidnapping cases; I disliked magic even more. Sorcerers, wizards, witches—all river rats as far as I was concerned, best left to the night. But Leonardo had paid me well and promised more, enough for an office and a secretary if I ever chose to settle somewhere. I liked the idea of a secretary; some masculine piece of candy to lounge across my desk, who'd taunt me with his efficiencies on slow, hot days. Someone to take a little shorthand, or even a little longhand.

A low branch slapped me across the face. I dismissed my fantasies and brought my mind back to business.

The Old Witch—all right, Leonardo hadn't really said "witch"—had poisoned his brother Clarence and seized control of neighboring Anchovia, crushing all opposition with her black arts. "But I have a nephew," Leonardo had continued as he squeezed my thigh. "Clarence's son, the rightful sovereign of Anchovia. He hasn't been seen since Clarence's murder."

I'd lifted his hand from my leg and pressed it firmly into a bowl of mashed potatoes. Lord Parfum had sniggered, then quickly raised his napkin to hide his grin. An uncomfortable silence had filled the dining hall as Leonardo stiffly wiped his hand on the tablecloth's hem. When he leaned close again, I had the creepy feeling he had enjoyed that.

He'd resumed the conversation as if nothing had happened, describing his nephew: nineteen, fair of face, blue eyes, hair black as his mother's heart. Leonardo had winked then. "And a manner that can charm the skin off a snake. He's known as Prince Charming."

From the far side of the table, Lord Parfum had murmured, "The prince takes after his uncle." He'd smiled slyly, showing perfect teeth like the boards in a white picket fence. "If you could bottle and sell whatever that boy's got, you'd make a fortune."

* * *

I could learn nothing more from the outside of the castle. I turned Asta and followed a narrow stream to the village a half mile away. It wasn't much of a village. It lay nestled in a valley among the wooded hills, nearly abandoned now. The cottages on the outskirts were aged and deteriorated. Shops and businesses were ill-kempt or empty. Mud and filth had long buried the paving stones of Main Street.

I remembered those charred bones outside the castle walls. Perhaps the populace had decided living next to a wicked witch wasn't such a great idea.

The inn looked a little better. A sign hung on rusty chains above its door, and a pale stick figure over faded black letters proclaimed the inn's name: THE THIN MAN. I draped Asta's reins over a post and tugged my saddlebags from behind the saddle.

An old woman, her face as rough and rutted as the street outside, glared at me over a bucket of water and a mop as I entered. She eyeballed my armor and sword, then resumed her work. "Ye looks like trouble," she grumbled. "I don't needs no trouble in my place."

"Trouble is my business," I answered. Moving carefully around the wet edge of her floor, I lay a gold sardeenmar on a counter. "I need a room, a bite to eat, and some wine if you have it. A bath, too."

She leaned on her mop and licked her lips as she looked at the small, gleaming fish. Her tongue painted a smile where a frown had been. "Well now, milady," she said with newfound cheerfulness, "yer business don't be any business o' mine. An' I gots a fine room with a sunset view freshly made up."

I held up a second coin. "Can someone stable my horse?"

She snatched the sardeenmar from my fingers and swept up the other in the same motion. "Done an' done," she answered. "We gots a stable out back, an' feed's no extra charge." She winked. An ornery glint sparkled in her eye. "I can even digs out a spare sweater for ye. Come evening ye might gets a bit chilly in that outfit."

It had been a long day. I was tired from the saddle and itchy with scratches from brush and tree limbs. My manners and my patience melted. "Most men think the less I wear the hotter I am. Not that you'd understand that."

She barked a laugh. "Now I know how ye makes so much money." She parked the mop in the bucket of water and beckoned as she led the way across the room and down a corridor. "All yer tartin' won't earn ye much here, milady. We don't gots but one real man in this town, an' he be locked up in the castle."

That caught my attention. "Prince Charming?"

She glowered over her shoulder, a look that on a younger woman I might have construed as jealousy. "Aye, every woman what's left in this dunghill town pines for that beautiful boy," she admitted, "an' all their husbands be sulkin'." She pushed open a door. "I'll fetch ye a bite to eat now. The bath'll be a basin bowl an' a pitcher o' water. I'd heat it up for ye, but seein' as how ye're so hot already . . ."

I sighed and offered another goldfish as I entered the room.

". . . Seein' as how ye're so generous with yer riches," she corrected, "I'll heat it nice an' hot." She backed out with a mocking bow, closing the door, muttering as she went, "An' if'n ye scald yer pretty pink opportunities it's no fault o' mine!"

The room, as promised, was meticulously clean. A polished little oak chair stood by the door. Dropping my saddlebags, I sat and wearily began pulling off my boots. For a moment, the place reminded me of the domestic life I'd left behind. The floor gleamed in sunlight that came through the open-shuttered window. A dainty oak table and another chair occupied the center of the room. On the table, a vase of fresh flowers rested on a crocheted doily.

The bed made me gasp. It was piled with feather mattresses, pillows, and covered with elaborate piece-quilts.

I fumbled with my belt, let sword and purse fall to the floor, armor next. Forgetting all else, I stretched naked on that plushness. With no intention to sleep, I closed my eyes. For an instant, I heard singing saucers and dancing teacups—a strangely recurrent nightmare—then even that melted away.

"Let me die in such a bed!" I breathed.

"I can arrange that."

A gloved hand settled over my mouth. I opened my eyes. The bare edge of a dagger teased my breast. My uninvited visitor added, "But it would be such a waste."

I lay still, irritatingly aware of my sword belt out of reach on the floor and the open window through which my guest had come. His eyes gazed into mine as he slid the dagger over my belly.

"Bad Rose," he murmured. "You don't look so bad to me. Not bad at all."

A grin spread over his weather-beaten face. As faces went, it wasn't unpleasant; the smattering of dark whiskers and the broad mustache gave it character. A falconer, I assumed, for on the shoulder of his laced jerkin, a black bird was embroidered, and I recognized it—a Maltese falcon.

I made myself as provocatively comfortable as I could under his dagger point. Maybe I could lull him into carelessness. "Such a big blade," I purred, "must take a tight sheath."

A clatter sounded at the door; an ancient foot kicked it open. The falconer shot a look over his shoulder. With a folded towel on one arm and a pan of steaming water between her hands, the landlady entered. She stopped; a look spread over her face that might have heated the water another ten degrees.

The startled falconer leaped from the bed. Taking advantage of his inattention, I planted a foot on his conveniently turned, not to mention well-shaped, rump and shoved.

"Rape!" screamed the landlady. She threw the pan's scalding contents.

The falconer's scream rivaled hers for shrillness. He clutched his face, then his clothes as the water penetrated to his skin. He danced around in pain. The landlady had at him with the empty pan, beating him about the head and shoulders, while crouched at the foot of the bed, I watched in amusement until he batted her aside with an enraged gesture.

Half-blinded, he lurched toward the window, overturning a chair, stumbling against the table.

I dived for his legs, wrapping my arms around handsomely muscled calves. Even in the midst of combat such things should be appreciated; there had to be a reason to call it *close combat*. He fell with a crash. I snatched up his dagger, grabbed a handful of his nicely textured black hair, and jerked his head back.

At the touch of steel against his throat, his groans stopped. I sat on his spine, his arms pinned under my knees, suddenly enjoying myself. "Now this is my idea of a provocative posture!"

"Rutters!" screamed the landlady. She ran at me, her face contorted, the pan raised high.

Before she could strike, I turned the blade toward her. She stopped in mid-charge. "Don't make me kick

your saggy baggy butt out of here, old mother," I warned.

She lowered the pan; her shoulders drooped; she turned and slunk toward the door. "I never gets to play," she grumbled. "Why don't they ever invites me to play in their sick games?"

"Don't forget my dinner!" I called after her.

The falconer shifted uncomfortably, his garments still steaming. I rapped his head with the flat of the dagger, and he grew still once more. "Isn't this nice?" I chirped pleasantly.

He gave a low groan. "Nice," he agreed uncertainly. "Are you going to cut my throat or not? If not, let go of the hair, please. I couldn't attract a nice piece like you with a bald spot."

"Sassy," I purred. Moving the dagger point to the back of his neck, I let go of his hair and reached between his legs. He gave a shiver and groaned an entirely new note.

"On the other hand, I hear some women like bald men," he hissed through clenched teeth.

I gave him a couple of gentle squeezes. He twitched and squirmed as much as he dared. "Not that I object to company," I said conversationally, "but I usually prefer to dress for my guests. What must you think of me?"

His voice turned husky. "My opinion is going up by the minute." And to my surprise, I noticed, so it was. I let go of the grip I had between his legs and slapped his rump sharply.

"Yes!" he moaned. He raised his head from the floor; his eyes were closed. "Spank me!"

I drove my fist between his shoulder blades. "What kind of girl do you think I am?"

"Punish me!" he begged. "I've been bad!"

I'd heard of men who craved abuse. Living with a bunch of dwarves in the woods, I'd heard of just about

everything. And who was I to judge? Ripping free his jerkin's leather lacing, I draped it over his neck like a horse's reins and bounced jauntily on his back.

It was time to get down to serious business, though. I dealt his rump a sharp slap. "You didn't just happen by my window," I said, slapping him harder. "You knew my name—who sent you?"

"You can't make me tell!" he challenged. I knew he wanted to prolong the fun.

He arched his back, an invitation, and I grabbed him between the legs again. The landlady surely heard the sound he made. "No, no!" He shook his head furiously. One arm slipped from beneath my pinning knee, but he made no effort to throw me off.

"Who?" I shouted. I jerked on the lacing. The landlady must have heard me, too. In fact, by the shuffling and the shadow at the bottom of my door, the nosy crone was in the hallway listening. "Give it to me," I ordered. "Give me what I want!"

I lashed him with the thin leather, snapping it on cheeks and shoulders. My thighs squeezed his ribs. His feet drummed the floor; his vertebrae popped noisily, I rode him so hard. "No!" he cried. "You'll never make me betray my queen!"

I frowned. I stood up.

He rolled onto his back, disappointment flooding his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Careful not to slip on the wet floor, I righted the overturned chair, centered the flower vase, and lay the dagger on the table. "I don't like easy men," I answered without looking at him. A breeze from the window reminded me I was naked. I pulled the sheet from the bed, wrapped it around myself, then picked up my sheathed sword.

When I turned around, the disheveled falconer stood holding the dagger limply in his hand. The lacing dangled from his neck. "Maybe I lied," he said half-heartedly. "Maybe I have more information."

I shook my head. "Just leave the way you came." With the tip of the sword's sheath I nudged him toward the window.

He backed up reluctantly. "She saw you spying on the castle," he said as he sheathed his smaller weapon and tried to straighten his clothes. "You'll never get in. The place is impregnable."

"Tell her I'm coming to see her."

His expression brightened. "You're into that, too?"

I leaned on the sword. With an awkward cry, he tumbled backward over the sill and out the window. I heard frantic scrambling in the bushes as I closed and locked the shutters.

With a sigh, I placed my sword on the table and tiptoed to the door. I jerked it open. The landlady, on her knees at the keyhole, looked up. Sweat beaded her forehead. She might have been startled, but not a hint of embarrassment showed on her face unless it was hidden somewhere in all those wrinkles. Without rising, she lifted a platter. "Ye like chicken?"

I sighed again. "I prefer aged beef," I answered, sure the sarcasm wasn't wasted. But I took the chicken. "Wine, please."

"Looks at all that water on my floor! I'll have to mop it! Ye might have wrecked my room! I grows roses outside that window, ye knows! Is that my good sheet?"

I closed the door and sat down to eat. At least the old bag had been thoughtful enough to include a few bits of cooked turnip and leeks on the side. I'll give her this, too, none of it tasted bad.

* * *

Night fell like a broken curtain, like the hopes of jilted lovers, like a black bird shot from the sky.

As similes went, I didn't like that last one. It reminded me of the falconer. He really wasn't a bad sort. Maybe I'd been too rough on him.

While I polished my armor and contemplated nightfall, the landlady returned. Not bothering to knock, she pushed the door open with her mop, which she carried under one arm as if it was a lance. No matter that the floor had dried by itself an hour ago. She also carried a small oil lamp, which she sat on the table. Wordlessly, she cleared away the cold chicken bones and exited again.

I leaned back in the chair and put my bare feet up on the table, my sword in my lap.

The door opened swiftly. "Ye better not scuffs my furniture, ye better not!" Then she was gone again.

Night fell like an old woman's breasts after the age of fifty.

I wondered why I'd bothered to reopen the shutters. Night was only depressing me. At least the lamp's steady flame offered some cheer. I fetched my saddlebag from under the bed and withdrew the scrolled map Leonardo had given me in Sardeenia. King Clarence, he'd said, had given it to him just before Clarence's untimely demise.

It revealed a secret, forgotten way into the castle.

After studying the scroll's markings, I returned it to my saddlebag, shoved that back under the bed, and dressed for work.

One thing I could say for my armor; I didn't need a squire to assist me, although I'm sure I could have found one without too much advertising or for too much money. When all the hooks were fastened and both breasts in place, I stamped into my boots. Lastly, I buckled on my sword.

I could almost hear theme music, I looked so good.

No sign of the landlady in the hallway. Still, I tiptoed to the front of the inn. There I exchanged my small lamp for a bailed oil lantern hanging conveniently on a peg. As I reached for the doorknob, she popped up from behind a counter. "I knew'd it!" she cackled. "I knew'd ye'd be walkin' the streets. So I left that's fer ye!" She winked. "Good huntin', dearie! Sure ye don't want that sweater?"

I growled at her. "I'll bring you back a carcass to gnaw, you old buzzard." In truth, she was beginning to grow on me.

The lantern cast a yellowish circle of light as I walked quietly to the end of town. There I turned toward the stream and followed its bank into the woods. Darkness and I were old friends. I loved the forest at night, and the tree branches waved as if I'd just come home.

After a time I found an old church—the Church in the Wild Wood, later known as the Church in the Dell, but in any case long abandoned. If not for a bit of moonlight, I might have missed it altogether, it was so overgrown with moss and vines, and the trees had grown up close around it. With the lantern high, I strode into the weeds. The windows were empty of the stained glass they had once contained, but the doors stood like patient, if aged, sentries. I pushed one back and stepped inside.

Birds or bats—I couldn't tell which—filled the blackness with an urgent fluttering. The stone floor was slick with droppings. I crept down the long aisle between the wooden pews, trying to be silent for no reason. The place had long since been stripped of anything valuable, and I was quite alone.

Three stairs led up to the altar, which was a huge rectangle of weighty marble. Like the floor, droppings covered it. Birds and bats respected nothing. Shining the lantern around, I recalled Leonardo's map and its instructions. On the wall behind the altar hung three tall wooden crosses, the middle one slightly higher than the outer ones. Like everything else, they were covered in droppings.

I couldn't help frowning as I moved to the rightmost cross and leaned against its filthy bottom. A fine white powder of dried birdshit cascaded down onto my head and shoulders. I leaped away, sputtering in disgust.

According to my light, the cross hadn't budged so much as an inch.

I cringed inside; I was going to get very dirty. Sometimes it came with the job. I set my lantern on the altar, and this time planted my shoulder against the foot of the same cross. Another powdery shower rewarded me. Cursing under my breath even if it was a church, I strained harder.

Old gears gave a metallic screech. The rightmost cross shifted suddenly. I nearly toppled. My screech rivaled the gears as ancient birdshit accumulated along the cross's horizontal arms rained down. I sprang away, shaking my hair, brushing my arms. The stuff had gotten into everything, even my boots!

When I looked up, however, the cross's tip had moved to touch the center cross.

Halfway done. I wondered if all the goldfish in Sardeenia were worth this degradation. The leftmost cross remained to be shifted. Why, oh why, hadn't I brought a raincoat, or a cloak, or accepted the old woman's offered sweater?

Leonardo was going to pay me double for this!

Trying not to breathe the chalkish air, I returned to work. The leftmost cross proved more stubborn than the rightmost; my delicate shoulder was going to bruise. But like the first, it eventually lurched into position and all three came together in a point.

A complaining rumble filled the church; a vibration shivered through the floor. My lantern's flame trembled and quivered. I lunged to save it, suddenly fearful of the dark.

The altar stone grated and scraped. It might have been a pit into hell, so black was the hole exposed by its shifting. Licking the powder that caked my lips, I gathered my courage and crept forward with my light.

Steps led down into that hole.

One by one, I took them, nervously at first, then more surely, twelve in all. By the time I reached the bottom and a stony cavern floor, I exhaled with relief. At least, there weren't thirteen, not that I was superstitious. I gave a little laugh and wiped my brow, surprised to find a few beads of sweat. I raised my hand to the light and found white paint on my fingers.

Then I spat, nearly gagged. My lips! I'd licked them! I wiped at my mouth. It was no use. Birdshit all over me!

There was nothing to do but finish the job, get into the castle, and try to discover the fate of Prince Charming. I'd come this far; no turning back.

The map had been simple. Whenever the cavern forked, I took the left turn and made good time with my lantern to light the way. Only a few bats quickened my heart, and once a deep crack in the cavern floor. I leaped it easily.

Then, a sound whispered past my ear. I froze. The sound—a voice!—came again.

"Here comes Peter Cottontail,
hopping down the bunny trail;
grab him, squeeze him, make him wail,
gut him with my fingernail,
suck his blood and sweet entrails!"

I paused to consider. That wasn't the way I'd learned that song. Goldfish or no goldfish, I wondered if I should go on. Again, the voice.

"Now I lay me down to sleep
under the earth so cold and deep;
Death is long, and life is cheap;
Shiver, quiver, wail and weep,
Oh, shiver, quiver, wail and weep!"

Someone was trying to frighten me. Well, Bad Rose didn't frighten easily. Besides, I hated bad poetry.

"Oh yeah?" I shouted. "Here's one for you, buddy! Roses are red and violets are blue—your momma's a slut, and your daddy's one, too!"

A pause, followed by a gasp, then a fleshy sound as of a hand striking a cheek in surprise. "Oh my gawd! You're a girl!"

A figure moved out of the darkness and sashayed to the edge of my light, manlike, but dressed in out-of-date flared trousers and a pink shirt with ruffles at the neck and the lapels. Gold chains encircled its gray-skinned throat and sparkled in a thatch of withering chest hair. Jewelry dangled from its wrists. Rings flashed.

A stronger iron chain entrapped one of its ankles. Heavy links trailed back into the gloom.

"An old troll," I muttered.

Astonished eyes looked me up and down. "Why honey!" The scary whisper was gone, replaced by an almost breathless drawl. "When I smelled human, I assumed somebody upstairs had finally remembered to feed me! They treat me like a dog you know, all leashed up and everything!" It shook the ankle chain and made a face. "Not that they treat me at all these days, or trick me, either!" It laughed. "It's been forever since I've seen anyone! Now here you are and so welcome, let me tell you!" It flapped its wrists until I could feel the wind passing. "Don't you be nervous, either—everyone knows I wouldn't eat a girl!"

I wasn't so sure, so I stood my ground. "What are you doing down here?"

It tilted its head. "Why, honey, old King Clarence imprisoned me here to guard his tunnel!" It leaned forward conspiratorially and cupped one hand to the side of its mouth. "As if his tunnel hadn't already been breached, and more than once, if you know what I mean!—the stories I could tell!"

My mind began to race. I only knew trolls by their reputations. I needed to get by, but I wasn't inclined to hurt the poor creature if it wasn't here by choice. I edged a step closer to show I wasn't afraid. "Would you mind . . ."

I'd been a fool, suckered by its most powerful weapon—its amusing charm. It had yet more length of chain, enough to reach me. It lunged. Powerful arms encircled me. The lantern fell from my grip.

In complete darkness, I felt its breath like a cheap cologne on my face. "You said you wouldn't eat a girl!" I shouted angrily.

"I might keep one around for company," it answered. "I've been so lonely. And later, who knows—it's been ages between snacks!"

I didn't want to hurt it, but it wasn't giving me a choice. "This is no way to make friends!" I warned.

I didn't have enough freedom to draw my sword, but I could raise it a couple of inches from the scabbard. A bright blue light surged around us. The troll squealed, cast me aside, and scurried back into darkness. "Dwarf light!" it cried. "Horrid, hurtful dwarf light! Your blade—a dwarf forged it!"

It was my turn to laugh as I strode forward. "Not one, but seven dwarves! All your charms can't stand against its magic!"

It shivered as it cringed on its knees and pressed its head against the ground. Then it wept like any frightened child.

"Star light, star bright!
Horrid, nasty, dirty light!
Sears the skin, and stings the sight!
I wish I may, I wish I might
Beg mercy from this snow white knight!"

An improvement over his last versification, I thought, and his last line genuinely surprised me. I raised my arm. In the sword's blue dwarf light, the powdered birdshit that covered me sparkled and glowed! "I

really am snow white!"

Call me a woman. A man would have simply killed the creature, but my heart went out to it. I offered a bargain. "If I sever your chain," I said, "will you promise not to eat me?"

It lifted its head and peered with one eye between two fingers. "You'd do that?" it said. "For me? I'd be your friend for life—your best friend!"

I shook my head. "I don't need a dog."

It fingered its lip, suddenly thoughtful. "Well, I do have relatives I haven't seen in ages! And you're not really my type. It's a deal!"

I raised the sword high over my head. The troll covered its eyes as I brought the blade down on the iron chain. Sparks fountained as dwarf magic sliced through iron. The links shattered.

The old troll squealed with delight. It lingered long enough to clap its hands and cry, "Thank you, thank you!" Then, leaping upward, it jackknifed and plunged headfirst into the earth.

Life was just one adventure after another in my occupation. I brushed my toe at the ruined lantern, then continued on with my sword's light to guide me.

Not far beyond I encountered another set of stone steps. Eager for fresh air, I mounted them two at a time and found myself on a narrow landing. A rather loud ticking made me nervous. Raising the sword higher, I discovered a network of intermeshed gears.

I sheathed my sword. When my eyes had adjusted to the darkness again, I put a hand experimentally on the wall directly ahead and pushed. With little effort, it gave way. I stepped through the wooden casement of a giant grandfather's clock.

I found myself in a vast hall. Aside from the clock, there was little furniture, only a large table laden with platters of fruit, a pitcher, a bottle. Certain I was alone, I started forward, thirsty for a drink.

Halfway across the room, I noticed the glass coffin.

It lay on a dais that someone had draped with red velvet. A pair of braziers stood on either end of it, providing a reddish light. The glass construct glittered. Forgetting food or drink, I crept toward it, drawn by the handsome youth laid with ceremonial splendor within.

For moments, I looked down at him. No glass lid or other barrier separated us. My heart pounded. His hair, black as night and gleaming; skin flawlessly fair; lips redder, more inviting than ripe cherries!

Beyond a doubt, I had found Prince Charming. Alas, he was dead!

I couldn't help myself. Tears welled in my eyes. Never had I seen such beauty—such sleeping beauty—in man or woman. I bent over the coffin's side and brushed my lips upon his.

Behind me, a feminine voice screamed. "Stop! Don't . . . !"

I spun around. A woman stood frozen, halfway down a gracefully curving staircase, her eyes wide, frightened. She had her own graceful curves. Not even the stern black dress and cloak she wore could conceal her striking loveliness. Had I been a man, my tongue would have unfurled from my mouth and written *mercy!* on the floor. *This was the Evil Queen?*

"Don't stop," said a deeper voice. Before I could speak a hand caught my arm and spun me about again. I looked into sea-blue eyes. Prince Charming, now sitting up awake, cupped one hand on the back of my head, drew me close, shoved his tongue so far down my throat my tonsils started packing to vacate.

I couldn't—didn't want to—resist. When he finally pushed me away, it was as if gravity had ended. I reached for him again, his witch-mother completely forgotten, but he put out a hand. "I'm thirsty," he said, climbing out of the coffin and stretching long unused limbs. "Find my slippers, and bring me a beer at once."

I had no will to resist. His command rang in my brain; nothing mattered but to please him. I whirled, wondering where in this huge place a prince might keep his slippers. I ran to the table like a common serving wench. I could get his beer first, then look for the slippers.

His mother beat me to the table. Snatching up an apple, she offered it to him. "You must be hungry after your long sleep," she urged.

He brushed her hand aside; the apple rolled across the floor. "Oh, Mother!" His voice dripped scorn. "The old poisoned apple trick again!"

My heart pounded. There was no beer on the table, no beverage at all but a pitcher of water and a brown bottle of liquor. I snatched it up. *Hammitt & Chandler Old Brandy*. A good brand! I ran back to him, throwing myself at his feet.

"Good dog." He patted my head, then took the bottle, raised it to his lips, and swigged. He gave a loud sigh of pleasure, belched, and smiled. Then the smile vanished. He glared at his mother. "Bitch . . . !" He barely got the word out. The bottle slipped from his hand, shattering. He sank to the floor. I tried to catch him, but his weight proved too much.

Pinned beneath him, I struggled to make sense of what had happened. A veil seemed to lift from my brain. "What the . . . !" I thrust him off and sprang to my feet. "You've poisoned him!"

The Evil Queen dug a slippared toe into her son's ribs. "He's only sleeping," she answered with a weary sigh. "He thought it was just the apple, but everything on that table is enchanted—just in case he ever woke when I wasn't around."

I protested. "Why?"

She looked at me as if I were an addled schoolgirl. "Didn't you feel it?" she said. "Did you really want to fetch his slippers? Did you want to get his beer?" She shook her head, her eyes heavy with sadness. "He has an affect on women. We do anything he says. It's a power, his *charm*, and he has no compunction against using it. He's raised every skirt in the kingdom." She laughed bitterly, and with a startling display of strength, lifted him back into the coffin. "He had this trick with a glass slipper; you wouldn't believe how many foolish young girls fell for it!"

She offered her hand. "My name's Glenda," she said. "I so seldom have company."

I took a step back, eyeing her with suspicion. "You're an evil witch!" I said ungraciously. "I saw the charred bones outside your walls!"

She shrugged. "Peasants and torches," she replied. "They drink a little courage, storm the castle, start waving fire around. The local women went crazy the first time I put Bobo to sleep."

I glanced at the coffin and the beautiful boy within. *Bobo?*

Glenda shrugged again. "Okay, there was oil in the moat instead of water, but a woman alone has to protect herself. When Clarence ran off with that damned Blair Witch . . ."

I interrupted. "Leonardo told me you murdered him!"

It was her turn to regard me suspiciously. "His brother put you up to this?"

"No, I put her up to it!" Lord Parfum stepped through the clock, his face triumphant. His entourage of six soldiers followed with drawn swords. His lips curled in a snarl. "Where's the Prince Charming?"

I drew my own sword and stood protectively before the coffin. No one seemed impressed by its dwarf light. But Glenda fled across the vast chamber, her cloak spreading out like birds' wings. She flung her arms across a previously unnoticed liquor cabinet. "You'll never get it!" she challenged. A desperate fear filled her voice. "I'll blast you into ashes if you try!"

Lord Parfum sent his men forward. "You silly bat! We know the Blair babe stole, not only your man, but most of your power, too." He gestured smugly at me. "We only needed her to clear any traps in Clarence's so-called secret tunnel."

I looked from Parfum to Glenda to Bobo, and jerked my gaze away from Bobo as I felt the urge to kiss him awake again. "If you didn't want Leonardo's nephew," I muttered, "what the heck *are* you after?"

He chuckled. "I told you over dinner; if you could bottle and sell whatever that brat has, you could make a fortune." A glint of insanity shone suddenly in his rodent eyes. "Bobo found a way to do that! He comes from a sorcerous family, after all. Locked in that cabinet over there is a whole case of the little stud's private brew—Old Prince Charming." He laughed. "Women will never resist me again!"

"You, or any man!" Glenda cried. "Bobo's brew is too strong! If one bottle is uncorked, the fumes will turn women everywhere into subservient weaklings!"

Parfum nodded. "Sounds good to me." His men agreed as they flung Glenda aside and threw open the

cabinet doors. Neatly racked, twenty-four glass bottles gleamed in the braziers' light.

It didn't sound so good to me. I ran at Parfum, my blade upraised, but the little skunk dodged and slashed at my ribs with a small dagger. I danced away, unhurt. Two of his men hurried to his defense. I engaged them both, fighting furiously, while by the liquor cabinet, another soldier withdrew a bottle.

A new player—the falconer!—ran out of the shadows. "I'll take that!" he said, seizing the potion. He kicked the soldier away and positioned himself before the cabinet, his sword ready. He faced four opponents—I faced only three!

A bolt of lightning erupted from Glenda's outstretched hand. A pile of ashes smoked at the falconer's feet. Now he faced only three. "Most, but not all my power!" she shouted.

Parfum turned pale. Blinded by the sudden flash, two of the falconer's opponents stumbled back; he ran them through as I dispatched one of my own. "I hate it when a plan falls apart!" Parfum raged. His dagger whisked through the air, missing me by inches. His remaining two soldiers, on the other hand, knocked me flat as they retreated for the tunnel.

Parfum was not quite ready to give up. He seized the brandy bottle and flung that at the advancing falconer. Next, he grabbed up the apple Bobo had knocked from Glenda's hand. He prepared to hurl it.

But clearly his plan was ruined. With a growl, he ran to the tunnel's entrance at the old clock. There, he paused. "You can't guard that stuff forever!" he shouted. "There's no way to dispose of it! You'll hear from me again!" He flung the apple straight for the cabinet and the exposed bottles. Glenda shot out a hand, neatly intercepting it, as Parfum raced into the tunnel.

A choked gurgle came from that blackness, a crunch, the sound of swallowing. A moment later, the old troll stepped from the dark, its stomach distended, a grin on its face. With one long fingernail, it picked its teeth. "Oh, you won't be hearing from him," he assured.

The falconer helped me to my feet, and the troll shielded its eyes while I sheathed my sword. Glenda, after closing the cabinet, crept uncertainly forward. I read her expression. "You didn't know about the troll?"

"Clarence kept a lot of secrets." Her ruby lips turned upward in a frown, but plainly it wasn't the troll that bothered her. "I can't figure how they even knew about the Prince Charming."

"My fault." The falconer knelt at his queen's feet. "Leonardo and Parfum hold my sister hostage. They forced me to spy on you. Had I known they plotted the subjugation of women, I would never have cooperated. Subservience is *my* role."

The old troll gave a purr of interest, but I waved it sternly back. It responded with an injured look. "I had no place else to go," it explained unasked. "This is home. Call me a prodigal!"

Glenda sighed and beckoned her falconer to rise. "I can't punish you," she said. His shoulders sagged. "Not with your sister in danger."

"I think I have my next case," I said. "And Leonardo's own gold will fund it." I eyed the cabinet. "But can you continue to guard that stuff alone?"

Her frown deepened. "I can't dump it in the ground, can't pour it in the water supply, can't expose it to the air—it's too toxic!"

The troll performed a little tap dance and clapped its hands. "Let me help!" it offered. "Anybody who tries to open that cabinet is mine, and I'll clean up the bones, too!"

Glenda considered, then nodded. She really had little choice, and the troll had experience as a guard.

An hour later, with the falconer's belongings in a bag, we said a long good-bye at the front door. The sun was coming up, and I wanted a bath in the village before we hit the road again.

As Glenda and the troll waved behind us, the falconer whispered, "Do you think they'll work out?"

"An evil queen and an old troll under the same roof?" I answered. "What do you think?"