

# **Rosebuds**

**By**

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It began with a bear and a dwarf, as all the best stories do.

I was running after the dwarf. My skirt was mud-smeared and torn. My hair was a mad tangle streaming behind me. I was flushed in the face, huffing and puffing like some farmer's wife in the fields.

Silvy ran a few steps behind me. I knew without looking that her hair was still tidy, her skirt pristine, her pale complexion unchanged, though she was running almost as fast as I was.

That tells you all you need to know about either of us.

At least the dwarf was in worse shape than me. Already today he had been half-drowned, scratched and pelted by an army of forest creatures. And who had saved him from those violent animals? Me, every time.

I wasn't convinced that he needed saving, but Silvia begged me to help the poor little man. My sister's moral compass has always been sharper than mine, so I tend to follow her direction in such matters.

Poor little man, my elbow. After I had rescued him from the homicidal fish, the manic squirrels and the psychotic eagle (without a word of thanks, I might add), the dwarf's precious sack had fallen to the ground, spilling its contents into the dirt and revealing its secrets.

I'm not surprised the forest creatures were so vengeful - the sack contained stolen nests and eggs, precious moss from the river, handfuls of the last winter nut hoard. In amongst that lot were several mean, pathetic little treasures from our village - a ribbon locket here, a fountain pen there. I recognised half the items - they had all gone missing over the winter, sparking suspicion between neighbours and friends.

So the dwarf snatched up his sack and ran for it, and I ran after him. My mother's wedding pin had been one of the first baubles stolen, and I was determined to find out if the little crook had it somewhere in his sack.

The dwarf was wheezing now, his sack of stolen things bouncing up and down between his shoulder blades. He threw a panicked look over his shoulder at me, then dove through a clump of bushes, branches snagging at his trousers as he scrambled into the clearing beyond. I threw myself after him. My dress was ruined, after all. What were a few more rips and stains?

I did not reach the dwarf in time. Someone else got there first. A huge, broad-shouldered, magnificent bear thundered across the clearing, towering over the little sneakthief.

I stopped, mesmerised by the sight. Silvy came up beside me, not even breathing hard from her exertions. "Oh," she said in a loving voice. "It's our bear."

To understand about the bear, you have to know that Silvy and I have the most wonderful mother in the world. She is kind and good and everything that I am not. Best of all, she never makes her difficult red-haired daughter feel like she is any less special than the pale and perfect fair-haired one.

My sister was named after the fine white Silvia rose that costs my mother a fortune at the market. I was named for the wild Rosamund rose that snarled in

uninvited from the forest, entwining itself through my mother's garden until she was forced to love it. I learned from an early age that most people prefer white roses to red.

It was our mother who invited the bear into our lives, when a thick layer of winter snow covered the rosebushes in the garden. He came to our kitchen door with a mournful look in his big brown eyes, and she let him in to sit by the fire. He stayed with us all winter, lapping soup from a bowl on the floor and gazing at the three of us as if we were his saviours.

And if he gazed at Silvy a little more than he gazed at me, I tried not to mind. That has always been the way of things.

It *was* our bear in the clearing now, and there was a terrible look in his eyes. As he advanced on the quivering dwarf, he roared - such a deep and threatening roar that I found it hard to stay on my feet. Oh, he was magnificent.

The dwarf shuddered, and toppled. He fell back on the grass, his sack falling limply from his shoulders and an awful, frozen grimace plastered over his face. I knew without getting any closer that he was dead.

This was the bear who had sighed as I recited Shakespeare to him, the bear who had watched my sister as if she was a rare and precious flower, the bear who politely moved his paws this way and that to be out of the way of my mother's broom.

He had just frightened someone to death.

"Rosy," gasped my sister, her fingers tightening on my torn sleeve.

The bear screamed, throwing back his head as if some terrible pain had overtaken him. The fur peeled from his skin as if it were a suit of clothes. His whole

enormous frame convulsed and shrank. He threw himself to the ground, crying and sobbing, and it was not the voice of a bear any longer.

He was a man. A huddled, naked man. As he unfolded and came to his feet, I saw that he was familiar in every way except his form. There were the broad shoulders, the deep brown eyes, the strong paws (now hands). There was that humble, almost shy expression. He was devastatingly handsome. My wicked, night-time thoughts about our friend the bear no longer seemed quite so perverse.

A light shone from my sister's eyes as she stared upon this marvellous, naked man. A similar light shone from his eyes as he looked upon her.

I watched it happen. By the time she had crossed the clearing towards him, and taken the shawl from her shoulders to shield his nakedness, they were in love. Sometimes it happens that way. My sister adores romantic novels, and I had always known that the first kind-faced stranger who came her way (boys from the village simply don't count) was doomed to an endless life of happy matrimony with her.

I just hadn't expected him to be the kind of man who could frighten a dwarf to death with a single roar.

They were speaking to each other now, and I forced myself to listen. Between the usual cooing endearments that are compulsory upon such occasions, we learned that his name was Bran, and he was an actual prince.

Let's be honest, now. Who didn't see that coming?

I checked on the dwarf. "He's dead."

Prince Bran tore his eyes briefly away from my sister to see for himself. "His death broke the spell," he said. "At the beginning of winter, I came looking for the thief who had robbed our castle on the far side of the forest. He used his wicked magic to transform me into a bear."

“That was poor planning on his part,” I said. “He should have turned you into a bunny rabbit. I’ve never seen a bunny rabbit scare anyone to death.”

Prince Bran was no longer listening to me. He was too busy holding Silvy’s hand, and asking her to marry him.

She bit her lip, just a little. “Rosy. What should I do?”

“Don’t look at me,” I said. “This is something you decide for yourself.”

Silvy’s romantic novel-reading came to the fore. She knows what a poor girl does when a rich man asks her to marry him.

Within a minute she had agreed, the prince had kissed her and they were walking arm and arm through the forest. I stayed to pile stones over the body of the dwarf, so that his body would not be eaten by the forest creatures. It seemed the thing to do.

“What about Rosy?” I heard my precious sister ask her betrothed. “She doesn’t have anyone to marry.”

“She can have my brother,” he said. “It’s about time he settled down, and Rosy will be good for him. Your mother can come and live with us.”

“It’s all so wonderful,” Silvia cooed.

My sister expected happily ever after, but I had no such illusions. I finished my makeshift cairn, and went after them. Silvy might not realise it, but she was going to need me.

For a start, it wasn’t what I’d call a castle. I know, I know. Girls who live in cottages shouldn’t throw stones. It *was* a rambling manor house, far larger and more impressive than we were used to. The turrets and battlements were fake, though,

added on later than the rest of the stonework, and there was a tower in the centre that didn't match at all. It looked a bit lopsided.

The garden was made up of neat squares of grass and rows of prim, starchy flowers. I couldn't for the life of me see where my mother could put her marvellous rambly roses, even supposing the poor things would survive being uprooted. But there was no time to think of that. My sister and I were about to meet the Queen.

A loud squawk was the first thing we heard as Prince Bran pushed the front door open. He was wearing Silvia's shawl as a kilt, so as not to shock his dear old mother. He certainly shocked the maid. A tray of silverware came tumbling down the wide staircase, and a brassy brunette lass in an apron skirt came scrambling after it. She threw herself straight into the Prince's arms, if you can believe it, wrapping her legs around his waist like a trollop - more so since he was wearing nothing but the woollen shawl around his nether regions.

"Oh sir," she gasped, bouncing up and down. "We have missed you. They said you were taken by bears!"

"Not exactly," laughed Prince Bran, settling her back on the floor. "It's good to see you, Mary. Where is my mother?"

There was a step on the stairs. Silvia looked up and went paler than I had ever seen her before. I followed her gaze.

The woman resembled an alabaster statue. She must have been fifty, but her skin was still tight around her face. Her eyes were like blue glass, hard and cold. She wore the most exquisite dress I had ever seen - all corsetry and narrow skirts, with a boned hem that had gone out of fashion twenty years ago. As she descended the stairs, she carried herself like a queen, and it took me several minutes to pull myself together and remember that she actually was one.

“Bran,” she said, presenting her cheek so he could pretend to kiss it. “Where have you been?”

“You’re not going to believe this, but I was turned into a bear,” he told her.

“Nonsense. You’ve been off at those gambling halls all winter, just like your father used to.” The Queen granted Silvia and me a cursory glance. “I don’t know what you’ve brought home with you, but I advise you to send the miserable creatures away.”

Silvy swayed. I moved in quickly and gripped her arm. “If you dare faint on me I will leave you alone with these people.” The threat was enough to make her stand upright.

The Prince took hold of his mother’s elbow and steered her to one side. “Mother, while you listen to me, try to remember that you will cease to rule this country in less than a year when I come of age. I was transformed into a bear by one of those evil dwarves that have been robbing this kingdom blind. I might not have survived the winter without the assistance of these girls and their good mother. What’s more, the fair-haired girl is the one I intend to marry.”

The Queen sniffed, looking past his shoulder to reassess Silvy. “I suppose she’s pretty enough. Who is the other, her maid?”

“Rosamund is Silvia’s sister,” said Prince Bran. “I thought perhaps she might marry Kell.”

The Queen laughed sarcastically. “Two dowerless marriages? Marvellous. I’m sure we all look forward to you taking the throne, you’ve such a head for business.” She tossed her head. “Honestly darling, I refuse to talk about it. Don’t expect me to dine with you and your guests. I’m really very cross with you.”

She swept away. Even her backside looked haughty.

“How long were you away?” I asked Bran in a quiet voice.

“Four months,” he said, trying not to laugh.

I smirked at him. “Good thing you didn’t leave it any longer. That could have been a *really* unpleasant scene.”

Silvia burst into tears. Instantly I had my arms around her, the laughter forgotten.

Bran reached out and brushed Silvy’s chin, the only part of her face that was not dripping wet. “Don’t weep, dearest. Let me find you some rooms and pretty dresses and a nice lunch. You can even have the princess suite in the Tower if you like.”

“No thanks,” I said for us both, remembering the unnatural lean of that particular Tower. “Just some plain old rooms as far from your mother as possible, and we’ll be fine.”

I had already decided that I was getting Silvy out of there, as soon as possible.

Bran must have had some idea of what I was planning, because after lunch (a quiet affair in our rooms without the presence of his mother, thankfully) he took us straight to the library. As soon as I saw it, I knew I could not leave the castle. Not for a year or two, at any rate. I had never seen so many books in my life, never even imagined that so many books existed.

What a cheap trick.

“Let me show you the poetry nook,” said Bran, hooking his arm in Silvy’s and guiding her away. I let them go, guessing this would be one of the few chances they had to be alone. I had some exploring to do.

The shelves were all made of polished wood and the books were proper leather-bound tomes with gilt edging and thick paper, no cheap knock-offs. I found myself in the history section, reading titles like ‘A Social Study of Transylvania,’ and ‘The War of the Begonias: an illustrated guide.’ Then I discovered the adventure section and filled my arms with novels by authors with dashing, heroic names.

I found a window seat and curled up with my hoard, drawing the curtain behind me to give Bran and Silvy the illusion of privacy, and losing myself in a sea of crisp white pages.

An hour or two later, my curtain was ripped aside. “What are you doing here?” a young man demanded in a very unfriendly voice.

I hesitated. “My name is...”

“Oh, I know who you are,” he spat. “Mother told me all about the drabs my brother brought home with him. Where is your gold-digging sister?”

So this was Kell, the one Bran had confidently declared would be my bridegroom. I was almost relieved to discover that he was brattish and arrogant -- if he had been anything like his brother, I might have ended up agreeing to the double wedding scenario. As it was, I owed him a favour for reminding me why this was all such a terrible idea.

I tried to leave with dignity, but his arm was slung across the width of the alcove. “Please let me past,” I said.

“You won’t get away with it,” said Kell. “You and that blonde hussy will be packed off home by morning if my mother has anything to say about it.”

I glared at him. “Can you guarantee that? I’d be so grateful if you would.”

He dropped his arm, and I shoved past him in a very unladylike fashion to go in search of my sister.

The rooms Bran had chosen for us were pretty enough, but fancier than we were accustomed to. Silvy and I had a bedroom each and a connecting sitting room with a blazing fire that made the room far too hot during the day. Personally, I didn't see the point of a fire without a stovetop slung across it for cooking, but I suppose the ways of a castle aren't designed to make sense to a girl from a cottage.

Silvia was curled up in a white velvet chair, sighing over a small book of poetry. She wore a pink gown I had never seen before, with a full skirt embroidered all over with tiny roses, and the most fashionable sleeves I had ever seen in my life.

I stared at her. "Where did you get that?"

"Bran sent a maid to take my measurements. She found this and a few other dresses that will do for now, but she's going to make me all new ones. My trousseau, Bran says." She blushed faintly.

I couldn't stop staring. Was this my sister? Was she really this naive? "Silvy, you do *know* no one wants us here, don't you?"

She shifted her shoulders a little. "Bran wants us."

"His mother doesn't. Nor his brother."

"Oh, Rosy, don't you like Kell?"

"I didn't get a chance to like him, since he so obviously loathes the air that you and I breathe."

Silvia sighed. "Bran said he might be difficult. I'm sorry, Rosy, are you dreadfully disappointed?"

I took a few deep breaths, forcing myself not to start screaming. "Silvia, I'm not the one angling to marry a prince here. Tell me the truth. Do you really love Bran?"

Silvia looked shocked. “How can you doubt me?”

“Because you’ve only been in love for about four hours. How can you be sure it’s the real thing?”

Silvia laughed. “Oh, Rosy, it must be longer than that. It feels like forever.”

I looked at her carefully. “Were you in love with him when he was a bear?” It wasn’t completely unlikely. I myself had been half in love with him as a bear, although the man-version was distinctly more annoying.

She hesitated, then fluttered her eyelashes a little. “I think, perhaps I might have been,” she said modestly.

Great. I flopped in the second velvet armchair, a deep pink one. “His mother’s going to be mean to you. His brother, too. You hate it when people are mean to you.”

“I don’t care,” she said. “I won’t give him up, Rosy. I’m going to marry him.”

I sank my head into the deep plush of the armchair. “So what are we going to do?”

Silvia smiled, an unexpected gleam sparkling in her eyes. “We could take a look at those other dresses. Find something pretty for you to wear?”

I looked down at my grubby day dress and sighed. “I suppose it couldn’t make things worse.”

The dwarves did not assault the castle until the following morning.

The Queen had declined to join us for breakfast, preferring to take tea and toast in her room where she could sulk properly. Kell had entered the breakfast parlour long enough to load up a plate with curried fish, eggy rice and several beef steaks (rich people have a very strange concept of breakfast), then made a rude noise in our general direction and took his repast elsewhere to eat it.

This left me and my bacon and eggs sitting at a table with the cooing lovebirds, who fed each other strawberries and other dainty morsels inbetween endearments.

Not awkward at all.

“Oh,” Bran said, while Silvy was reaching for another strawberry. “I sent for your mother this morning.”

“I’m so glad,” said Silvy. “I long to see her - can you believe it’s only been a day?”

I looked hard at Bran, willing myself to believe that “sent for your mother” meant he had actually sent a carriage for her, and a really long letter explaining the current situation.

I had a horrible feeling that it actually meant a messenger carrying a curt imperative that my mother drop her daily chores and hasten across the forest (on foot, alone, with her bad back) if she ever wished to see her daughters again.

Why had I agreed to come to this dratted castle? Why hadn’t I insisted that Silvy and I go home, and that Bran come courting her like a proper suitor? It didn’t matter how well we were dressed, we would never be anything more than the two peasant girls the prince had found in the forest.

The door to the breakfast parlour burst open.

Kell stood there, tense with rage. “You mentioned something about killing a dwarf in the forest yesterday, brother?” he said, the sarcasm fairly dripping off him. “I think you’ll find he had a few pals who have something to say about that.”

Upstairs, somewhere near the lopsided tower, we heard an explosion that made the castle shake.

Dwarves are known for their mining abilities, for their skill in digging gold and silver and jewels out of seemingly barren earth. In our part of the world, though, there are other treasures lurking beneath the surface, waiting to be mined. Strange, sorcerous materials that just cry out to used.

The dwarves are known for crafting those strange materials into canny and clever devices. This is why you never want to get on the bad side of a dwarf.

By the time Bran, Silvy and I made it to the roof, the castle was under attack. The Queen, clad in perfectly-corseted armour, directed a platoon of sentries, footmen and kitchen maids in defence of the less-than-sturdy walls. Many of the defenders threw pots of hot custard or warm oil (somehow it was never boiling by the time they brought it up from the kitchens) over the parapet, while others brandished garden implements and other improvised weapons.

A glass ball sailed over our heads, and shattered on the tiles beyond. A hissing, spitting pink spell emerged from the broken glass, but a quick-thinking maid extinguished it with a bucket of soapy water.

“If you’re going to stay, make yourselves useful,” the Queen shouted at us, just as another glass ball sailed straight at her. She smashed it away from her with a swing of an elderly cricket bat, and sprayed the released spell with an industrial-sized perfume bottle. It coughed, and fell dead to the ground.

“You two should go below,” said Bran, buckling on the breastplate he had grabbed from the umbrella stand on the way up. “I can’t guarantee your safety.”

Silvia gave him a look of steel. “If the chamber maids can defend the castle, I’m sure I can.”

I have never been so proud of her. Worried, but proud. I picked up a croquet mallet from the pile of spare weapons at the base of the spiral tower. “Let’s do this.”

There was no diplomacy. The Queen sent several heralds down to parley with the enraged dwarves, but she put a stop to that after the third one was transformed into a butternut pumpkin.

Silvy and I spent hours on the battlements, smacking glass balls out of the sky. If you did it hard enough, the spell would fall down on to the dwarves below. Between the two of us, we were responsible for six dwarves being transformed into small furry creatures, seven falling into an enchanted sleep, nine turning on their comrades in fits of uncontrollable fury, and one being so overcome by a magic-induced lust that he attempted to rape several other dwarves, and was finally left humping the tree that they had tied him to.

Near midday, I swung too hard at a missile of the non-magical variety and lost my croquet mallet over the side. I was so tired and aching that I could hardly stand, but I staggered back to the weapons pile to find something else. Kell was there. He was exhausted too, a long scratch bleeding down the side of his face. He was staring at my sister.

She was worth staring at. Silvia stood on the battlements, her fair hair flying in the the breeze, a tennis racquet brandished in one hand. Her pale, perfect cheeks were sunburned.

“She’s magnificent, isn’t she?” said Kell in a slightly strangled voice.

I tried not to take offence, though I had been defending the castle with every bit the enthusiasm and stamina that Silvy had. People always expect me to cope with difficult situations and hard work, while they expect Silvy to faint, act distressed, and need to be looked after. I was guilty of it myself, at times.

I gave Kell a hard look. “So you’re admitting that your brother’s chosen bride isn’t as useless as you thought she was? How gracious of you.” I snatched up a rolling pin, and headed back into the action.

I was distracted, and didn’t see the glass ball in time to stop it smashing against the stiff daffodil-coloured skirts of my princess dress. I flailed at the sizzling green spell with my rolling pin, but it latched on to my ankle with a squeal of triumph.

Breathing hard, I waited. After half a minute, I was fairly sure that I wasn’t a pumpkin, or an ostrich, or a puppy. Something worse, then. My skin was hot all over, and I could feel my veins twitching.

Some of the spells made you crazy - turned you into a berserker who tore violently at your own friends and allies. I had to get away from everyone until I knew what horror had been visited upon me.

I turned back to the weapons pile, but Kell was gone. My eyes were watering madly, but I still saw the door to the crooked, lopsided spiral tower. I stumbled forward, and wrenched at the door handle.

Inside, the tower was cool and dark. I was shivering, but my skin still felt scratchy and hot. I collapsed on to the steps. I was dying, obviously. I would never see my mother again. I thought of her struggling through the forest in her second best boots, a sensible lunch packed in her basket, hope in her eyes.

Boiling tears dribbled down my face. I was so selfish. The castle was under siege, Silvy was in danger, and all I cared about was that I missed my mother.

I scrabbled at the bodice of the princess dress, desperate to be free of it. I half unlaced the bodice, but could do no more. It wasn’t helping, anyway. My breathing was wild and uncontrolled, and sweat rolled off my skin. What difference did a layer of brocade make? I was going to die of the heat anyway.

Somewhere, a door opened and closed. A voice spoke. "Rosy?"

Bran. I forced myself to open my eyes and look at him. I wanted to warn him to stay away from me, but the words dried in my throat.

He had seen the glass slivers clinging to my skirt. "What kind of spell was it?"

I shook my head. "Don't - know."

But I did know. How could I not? The very sight of him had quickened my pulse, set my feverish skin singing. Damn it all to hell and back. It was the tree-humping spell. And I was alone with my sister's betrothed.

My hands, almost of their own volition, caught him by the breastplate and pulled him towards me. His eyes were bright and strange. Would I find glass shards clinging to his clothes too? I didn't care one way or the other. My fingers found the lacings of his breastplate, even as my mouth found his and dragged him down to my level.

He was kissing me now, his body responding to mine, and I knew that he had been caught by a lust spell too. What were the odds?

There was room for guilt in this scenario, but I pushed it into a tiny corner of myself, somewhere near my elbow. Part of me knew that spell or no spell, I had wanted this. I had wanted him as a bear, had wanted him as a man - had wanted, more than anything, for one single person to notice me more than they noticed my sister.

The spell sang along my skin as I freed him of his breastplate, and scrabbled at his trews. He was lifting my skirts and ripping at my underthings, grinding himself against me as he sought his way within.

The steps grated hard against my back, and it hurt in other ways too; ways I didn't want to think about. But the heat was driving me wild, and I bucked and groaned against him as if it was anything but my first time.

At one point, there was a moment of stillness as if something wonderful had been achieved, and then we were mad creatures again, tearing at each other in our desperation to be rid of the spell.

If you've read enough cheap melodramas, you know how this ends. At the height of my madness, as I clawed his back to drive him deeper inside me, I looked over his shoulder and saw my sister Silvia standing in the doorway to the tower, colour flaming in both her cheeks.

I pounded on Bran's shoulders with my fists, and he turned to see her too. But by then, she was gone.

"Silvia!" I shouted, even as I scrambled out from under the hot, wet body of her betrothed and flung myself out through the tower door.

For a moment I couldn't see her. I could see Kell and the servants still fighting the dwarf spells, and the Queen shouting at the troops.

The air was thick with glass shards and spells. Two of the footmen were fighting as if they wanted to kill each other, and two more were kissing against the chimneys like the world depended on it.

I saw her then, a pale figure in a pink dress, teetering on the edge of the parapet. For one awful moment I wasn't sure if she was defending the castle or preparing to jump. As I opened my mouth to scream that I was sorry, that I loved her, that it hadn't been my fault, I saw a glass sphere shatter hard against her golden hair.

The spell inside was silver and sharp edged - I had never seen one like that before. It engulfed her, trapping her inside a glittering mesh and yanking her back over the edge.

“Silvy!” I screamed in a voice so sharp that it felt like it came from outside my skin. I ran to the parapet, reaching it just as Kell did. A moment later, still breathing hard and rearranging his breastplate, Bran joined us both.

Silvia was still falling. The silvery mesh lowered her slowly to the grass below, and the dwarves snatched her body out of the air. Many of them did an ugly little war dance, and shrieked expletive-riddled taunts up at us.

Then one of them cast a glass sphere at the grass, opening up a huge wound of fresh-turned earth, and every single dwarf leaped into the hole and was gone. They took Silvy with them, still struggling in her magical net.

Bran and I stood there for one long moment, staring in mutual horror at the hole in the earth that had swallowed our beloved girl. It was Kell who broke the silence. “Well? Are we going to rescue her or not?”

Of course we were. Of course, of course. I wasn’t going to leave something this important to the men. I would rescue my sister and see her safely home to our mother.

Only - rescue or no rescue, I didn’t see how I could ever possibly look her in the eye again.

I need not go into detail about how angry the Queen was that both her sons were abandoning the castle to rescue my sister from the dwarves. We could still hear her shrieking from the battlements as the three of us leaped into the gaping hole that had torn up a large portion of the front lawn.

The tunnel was deep and wide, arching down into the soft earth in a slow spiral. Our feet sank into the dirt as we hurried down and along in the wake of a hundred tiny footprints.

I don't know what I was expecting at the bottom of that tunnel, but the lake took me by surprise. We came out into an enormous cavern, at the shore of a lake so huge and dark that we could not see the end of it.

"I'll go around this way to see if there's a route through," said Bran, having reclaimed his customary note of leadership. "Kell, go around to the left. Meet back here in ten minutes."

As easily as that, I was alone. I took a step or two towards the glistening, black waters of the lake. I slipped my shoes off - ridiculous, impractical slippers of yellow satin-thin leather - and let the water curl around my toes.

Glancing around to be sure that neither of the princes were within sight, I leaned down into the water and cupped it in my hands, rinsing hastily between my legs.

There was blood and other stickiness on my fingers as I washed myself clean. A sudden urge to cry, or to vomit, rose up in my throat, and I scrubbed my hands so hard I almost lost the skin from my palms.

The water of the underground lake was cool and tempting. For a moment, I wondered if it might be possible to lose myself in its depths before Bran or Kell returned. Then I shook those thoughts clear of my head, angry at myself. I had to save Silvia first. The lake could wait.

"I know what you did," said a voice, cutting through the splash and the silence.

I whirled around, my skirts soaking, to see Kell sneering at me.

"Do you think we don't all know what kind of slut you are?" he said.

"I was under a spell," I said angrily, stepping out of the water. "Feel the glass shards in my hem if you don't believe me."

“Can you tell me that you didn’t want to steal your sister’s man?”

I opened my mouth to deny it, but my tongue choked on the words. It was true. I was the worst sister in the world. Part of me had not only enjoyed possessing Bran for those stolen moments, but had relished the fact that I got there first - for once, I had snatched something before it was offered to my sister.

“Up here!” Bran called to us. “There’s a passage through, and a hundred dwarvish footprints leading the way.”

Kell turned without a word and headed around the lake towards his brother.

I followed, my wet skirts swishing at my ankles.

This tunnel went on a long way, and was so low in most places that we had to crouch and crawl. A steady whirring sound of machinery surrounded us, but it was only once we emerged from the end of the tunnel that we realised what it was.

This cavern was just as enormous as the first one, only instead of lake it was full of... well, you always think that dwarvish devices are going to be small and canny, like the glass missiles they had besieged the castle with. This particular dwarvish device was the size of a city. Every part of it whirred and clanked and hummed and rattled. A steady stream of junk and treasures - gold, jewellery, weapons, cutlery, broken glass and china, torn books, grass clippings - poured from the ceiling into a large vat that munched it into unrecognisable slag.

The slag oozed down metal pipes and along clockwork conveyor belts before being channelled into other machines - one that spat out glass spell balls, another that produced small and gleaming wands, and a third that produced bowls of a grey, strange-smelling substance that might in some universe be considered porridge.

“Gods and demons,” breathed Bran. “What is this place?”

I sympathised with Kell's withering look. I was beginning to suspect that my sister's betrothed was an idiot.

"Where is everyone?" I asked, hoping it sounded like less of a nitwit question than Bran's. "Surely there should be dwarves... I don't know, tending this lot."

"Not a lot of point to automation if they have to be here," said Kell, reaching out and lifting a glass ball from a packing case it had just landed in. "But I take your point."

Somewhere in the distance, a scream rang out.

"Silvia!" said Bran, darting towards the sound.

I helped myself to three glass balls and a dwarvish wand before following him. The glass was still warm to the touch.

When I caught up to them, the brothers Prince were arguing at the mouths of two tunnels. "The scream came from this one," Bran said angrily.

"All the more reason to approach from the other," growled Kell. "They'll be expecting us, you fool."

"You'll have to get used to obeying me one day," said Bran in a dark voice, and threw himself into the tunnel he had chosen.

Kell hesitated, then took the other.

Neither of them had looked at me for an instant. I considered my options, and followed Kell.

"Tired of my brother's bravery already?" he said when he heard me coming after him.

"Let's just say I'm losing faith in his tactical decisions," I replied.

We emerged from our tunnel on to a shaky layer of scaffolding. The roar of voices was at first overwhelming - when I recovered my senses I realised we were in

a cavern many times huger than either of the previous ones, and that this one was full of dwarves.

They hung from the walls on scaffolding and slings - they filled platform after platform, many of them chattering or shouting angrily amongst themselves. It was like a council meeting at the village hall, only a hundred times busier.

In the midst of it all, my sister Silvia hung miserably from the ceiling, wrapped in that same silvery metal net. She was wide-eyed and startled, as if she had just awoken from a dead faint to find herself in this bizarre place, surrounded by angry dwarves.

No one had seen Kell and I yet. "What do we do?" I asked him.

"Wait for my brother to do something stupid, and then clean up the mess he leaves behind," he muttered.

A roar broke into the chatter and chaos of the dwarves - a male, human roar with more than a hint of bear in it. Prince Bran exploded out of a tunnel higher up in the chamber, in full view of everyone. He saw Silvy's predicament, and his face went bright red. "Let her go, you mutant devils!" he screamed, brandishing his sword in the air.

Beside me, I heard the quiet slap of Kell hitting his own face with his palm.

A dwarf who might have been some kind of leader - or possibly just the one with the best decision-making abilities - gestured with one hand, and a second silvery net fell from the cavern ceiling to entangle Bran's limbs. It fought him to the ground as if it were alive, pinning his limbs together.

"Foolish man thing," snarled another dwarf, possibly a woman. "Do you really think all this was about capturing *her*?"

"Oh, Bran!" wailed Silvia, but everyone pretty much ignored her.

“Her only use to us is as a witness to your crimes,” said the first dwarf, with some satisfaction. “You shall be tried for the murder of Viggi Sigurd Friggland III, and she will give us the evidence we need to prove your guilt.”

“No!” I yelled up to them. “That’s not right!”

I thought I heard Kell mutter something along the lines of, “oh, cobnuts, she’s as bad as he is,” but I ignored him.

The dwarves peered down at me with some interest. “And what do you have to say in this matter?” asked the one who was probably a woman.

“Silvia wasn’t there when Vig... Sig... when your brother dwarf died!” I yelled. “Or, at least, she wasn’t as close as I was. If you let her go, I’ll be your witness.”

“Interesting,” muttered many of the dwarves.

“Don’t trust her,” muttered some more.

The ‘head’ dwarf looked from me to Silvy and back again. Silvy looked cowed and fearful, and more than a little confused. “Fair enough,” the dwarf said, finally. “Let down the blonde one, and bring up the redhead!”

Several dwarves pulled levers and winches, and Silvia was slowly lowered in her silvery net all the way down to where Kell and I were standing. “What exactly are you planning?” he asked me under his breath as we waited for her to reach us.

“I don’t know,” I said desperately. “What do you think I should do?”

Kell looked up at his imprisoned brother, then at Silvia, and finally at me. “Tell the truth,” he said grimly. “At this point, I don’t think it can actually make things worse.”

Silvy gasped as her feet touched the platform, and the silvery net fell away from her. She hugged me hard, and then fell back as she remembered that she hated me right now. The look on her face was somewhere between awful and hilarious.

“Get her out of here,” I told Kell. “Take her home, please. And - when I say home, I mean our mother’s cottage. Not that castle of yours.”

“I understand,” he said.

“I don’t,” Silvy flared. “What’s going on, Rosy? What about Bran?” She hesitated, and her cheeks flamed red. “I mean... I don’t want anything horrible to happen to him.”

“And what about me?” I said. “Do you want anything horrible to happen to me?”

She looked stricken. “I - I don’t know. I just want to go home. Can’t we all go home?”

“Not yet,” I said, looking up at the dwarves. “But you can. Go with Kell, show him the way. I’ll be along in a little while.”

Kell took Silvia’s arm, and she allowed him to guide her back through the tunnel that had brought us here. I turned back to the enormous council chamber to see a thousand dwarves staring down at me. “So what do we do now?”

I had expected them to imprison me in another of those metallic nets. Instead, a small platform was painstakingly lowered for me, and once I had stepped on to it I was raised to the level of the higher-status dwarves - the one who sounded like a leader, the one who was probably a woman, and an engineer who held a basket of glass balls. He held it out to me, and I reluctantly placed the balls and wand I had stolen into it.

If I was getting out of here alive, it wouldn't be by fighting. I had figured out that much.

Bran was dragged to another platform near the three dwarves who seemed to be in charge. He snarled at his captors like some kind of wild animal.

"Will you submit to truth spells?" asked the engineer dwarf.

"I don't care what hexes you put on me," growled the Crown Prince. "I have nothing to hide."

"Why do you need a witness if you have truth spells?" I asked.

The three dwarves looked at me as if I was crazy. "For the paperwork," said one of them. Sure enough, many of the dwarves around us were taking detailed notes, tapping sentences into complex devices.

"Cross referencing," said another.

"Legal ramifications," said a third.

"All right," I agreed, in the hopes that they would stop explaining. A glass ball promptly smashed against my chest. A green flicker of a spell emerged, spitting and giggling, and latched itself on to my larynx.

A second spell was likewise released over Bran.

"State your names," said a dwarf.

"Rosamund of Rose Cottage," I said.

"Prince Branweather Floribund," said Bran from within his net.

Several dwarves snickered at this. I couldn't blame them, really.

"Miss Rosamund," said the dwarf who was probably a woman. "Did you see the death of Viggi Sigurd Friggland III?"

“I saw the death of a dwarf,” I said. “But if you mean the one who stole the trinkets from our village, and who was left buried under a cairn of stones in the forest, then yes, we’re probably talking about the same one.”

“And how did Viggi Sigurd Friggland III come to die?”

“Prince Bran scared him to death.” Part of me wanted to stop talking right there, but the truth spell got hold of my throat and threw out a few more details. “That is - well, it was all Viggi Whatsit’s fault, though, wasn’t it? If he hadn’t turned Bran into a bear then Bran wouldn’t have been able to scare him to death. So he brought it on himself, really.” I wanted to explain my joke about how it would have been better to turn Bran into a bunny rabbit, but the truth spell mercifully allowed me to repress it.

The possibly female dwarf turned to Bran. “And how did Viggi Sigurd Friggland III come to turn you into a bear?”

“I found him in a cave,” Bran said in a sulky voice. Like me, the truth spell was drawing more out of him than he obviously intended to say - it had stripped away the veneer of charm that he usually layered over every conversation. “Stupid little mutant. He’d been stealing from our castle, and I caught him red handed. I yelled at him and made him give me his sack, and he was so goddamn useless that he dropped it. One of those glass balls rolled out and broke on my foot. Next thing I know, I was a bear.”

I was staring at him. “What? Is that really what happened?”

“Amazing what comes out under truth spell,” said the dwarf engineer cheerfully. “Prince Bran, did you intend to do harm to Viggi Sigurd Friggland III?”

“Well, I didn’t intend to kill him,” said Bran reasonably. “I just wanted to put the wind up him, give him a good fright. Serve him right for turning me into a bear. Though I’m not weeping any tears over the shortarsed freak, let me tell you.”

“Thank you for being so honest,” said the possibly female dwarf, smirking a little. “I think that wraps things up nicely. One more question, Prince Bran. Are you the one who made a gesture towards honourable behaviour by placing a cairn of stones over our brother dwarf?”

“Um, no,” I spoke up. “I did that.”

Bran looked at me in surprise. “Did you? What on earth for?”

“I would like to propose that Prince Bran be considered guilty of ‘Causing Death by Inappropriate Action and/or Carelessness,’ with a secondary charge of ‘Unprincely Behaviour,’ my fellow dwarves,” said the possibly female dwarf.

“Seconded,” said the engineer.

I half raised my hand. “Um, while he’s under the truth spell, can I ask him a few questions?”

The dwarves looked at each other, and mostly shrugged. “If you like.”

“Rosy, what are you doing?” Bran asked in a strangled voice.

“Judging from what I’ve heard today, this is the only way I can get a straight answer without you honeying it up with that charm you do so well. So try this one: were you affected by a dwarf spell when you found me in the tower?”

He clamped his lips shut, but they flew open of their own accord. “Of course not. I never said I was.”

“And you knew what kind of spell I was under.”

He couldn’t help it - he actually smirked. “Well, that was pretty obvious.”

“You took advantage of your betrothed’s sister while she was in the throes of a lust spell?” My voice had risen into something of a shriek, but that didn’t prevent me from hearing the collective indrawn breath of a thousand dwarves.

Bran smiled that gorgeous smile of his. “Well, obviously I didn’t know Silvia was going to find out about it...”

The possibly female dwarf raised her hand. “I would like to propose that the charges against Prince Bran be promoted to ‘Very Unprincely Behaviour’ as well as ‘Causing Death by Inappropriate Action and/or Carelessness,” she said in a very firm voice. Oh, yes. Definitely a woman.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Bran demanded. “Who the hell are you little runts to decide what constitutes ‘Unprincely Behaviour’? I’m the fucking prince around here.”

“Can we consider a tertiary charge of ‘Ungentlemanly Language in a Public Arena?” suggested the dwarf engineer.

Many of the dwarves near him agreed that, yes, they probably could.

Bran turned his anger on me. “What the hell have you done to me, you stupid bitch?”

“Let’s pause for a minute and think about what exactly was done to whom,” I shot back.

There was much muttering and discussion amongst the dwarves - not only those near us, but every dwarf in the chamber. They went back and forth for ages, arguing and shaking their heads, getting into minor riots, and passing little notes up to the paperwork dwarves.

Finally, the dwarf who was probably in charge took a deep breath. “Miss Rosamund, given the circumstances, we have decided to let you be in charge of

sentencing Prince Bran. We are prepared to enforce any punishment or... transformation that you decide upon.”

Bran sounded almost cheerful. “But she can decide to forgive me and set me completely free, right?”

“If that is what she wishes,” said the probably in charge dwarf.

I thought about it. I really did. I thought about letting him go. I thought about him bursting through the cottage door, and explaining the whole thing to Silvy in such a way that he ended up as the hero. I thought about her married to him, unable to escape, and only then learning what kind of person he was. I thought about her making excuses for him for the rest of her life.

I thought about how much nicer he seemed to be when he was a bear. I thought about him showing no remorse at having caused the death of a fellow person. I thought about the very real possibility that I might be pregnant.

If Bran didn’t learn a harsh lesson about how to treat people very soon, in less than a year he would be in charge of our entire kingdom, and then we really would be in trouble.

“Let him be a rose,” I said, in a clear speaking voice.

“What?” Bran howled.

“Let him be a rose in my mother’s garden,” I said. “Let him watch and listen. And... once my sister Silvia is so deeply in love with someone else that she could never be convinced to go back to Bran, let him be a man again and make what he can of the rest of his life.”

The dwarves nodded and smiled to themselves. “Good,” said the female one. “With a mind as devious as that, you should have been a dwarf.”

Bran was staring at me, his jaw dropped so wide open that he could have fitted a whole roast chicken inside it. He mouthed words at me, and they weren't pretty. But he was already changing form, his limbs twisting in on themselves to form green, spiky branches.

When the dwarves were finished with him, he was quite beautiful. His flowers were a dark purplish colour. He would look well among the white *Silvia* and red *Rosamund* of my mother's garden, for a while at least. The engineer dwarf passed a wand over the rosebush, and it vanished.

The female dwarf took my hand, and led me along a winding rack of scaffolding to a series of freshly-ground tunnels in the wall of the cavern. "The one on the left will take you straight to your mother's garden," she said. "It's a short cut. You'll probably be home before your sister."

I thought of burying my face in my mother's apron and confessing all to her, before Silvy reached the cottage to tell her how wicked I was.

"Where do the other tunnels lead?" I asked the dwarf.

She shrugged. "Other places. Other kingdoms, I suppose."

My hand brushed the left hand tunnel, and a wave of longing overcame me. But, after a moment, I pointed at the tunnel furthest from the one that would take me home. "I think I'll try that one."

There was nothing but kindness in the dwarf's face. "What are you looking for?" she asked me. A better question, I suppose, than "what are you running away from?"

"I don't know," I told her. "Perhaps I'll find out when I get there." Me, and anyone else I might happen to have brought with me.

I crawled into the tunnel mouth and started to climb up towards the daylight, thinking about a kingdom of limitless possibilities. A kingdom without mothers or sisters or bears or castles or princes.

A kingdom where no roses grow.

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