

*Snow White*





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Once upon a time there lived a good and noble King who presided over a prosperous kingdom. His Queen was the fairest maiden in all the world, not because of her beauty alone, but because her heart was warm and full of love. She made him very happy, indeed, and never was he more joyful than when their daughter was born. They named her Bianca though, over the years, they came to call her Snow White, for so fair was her milky skin and so gentle her manner that she was the very embodiment of winter's first blessed snowfall.

The royal family lived contentedly for several years but, while Snow White was still young, her mother became ill and, as the autumn leaves began to change and the air grew chill, the beloved Queen died. After that day the happiness in that land faded, little by little, until it was grown cold beyond reckoning. Snow White tried to console her father, but the King had lost such a light in his life that he was scarcely the same again. In a few short years his hair, once as thick and dark as his lovely daughter's, became gray and then as white as snow. His strength was waning as was his hope for the future. The one thing that remained to him was the love he held for his daughter and his desire to provide for her.

She was quiet and introspective, always absorbed with some great struggle that her father could not solve for her. She would spend hours on the balcony of her bedchamber, looking out upon the nearly silent kingdom that had, in her childhood, been the source of such noise and merriment. She had no one to talk to but her father and he resolved to find her a companion she could share her time and her heart with. He sent word to his friend, who ruled a neighboring kingdom, and shared his problem. This king had a charming young son named Vernal who was about Snow White's age.

The two rulers determined that the prince and princess should meet and Vernal was invited to the castle to meet his future bride. As they had hoped, the two young royals were enamored with each other and Vernal would come often to Snow White's balcony to charm her with songs and poetry. But though Snow White seemed very much in love with the young prince, the King still sensed something that was missing. The girl still needed a mother to care for her and to share the things that only a mother can share with her daughter.

It happened that within a year of Vernal and Snow White's first meeting, a host of dignitaries from the land of Brangomar arrived in the kingdom and the King received them in the comfort of his castle. Among these personages was a young woman of immense grace and beauty, more delicate than frosted glass. Her name was Bruma and she was niece to the emperor of Brangomar. After his late wife, the King considered Bruma to be the fairest woman in the world and felt she would be a wonderful mentor for his daughter. It was not long before they were married and Bruma became queen of the land; hailed for her beauty and wisdom and for rescuing the good King from a life of

solitude for one day, all knew, Snow White would have to leave him to live with her prince.

But, contrary to all hope and expectation, his marriage to exquisite Bruma did not ease the poor King's loneliness. Instead Snow White witnessed her father descend into a slow lethargy of spirit until his heart had become cold, even toward she whom he loved more than anything. He would neither speak nor keep company with any but the Queen and took to sealing himself within his chambers. Only the comfort of Vernal's embraces could console Snow White as she watched her beloved father wither away until, like her mother, he passed on from that world. But unlike the late Queen, the King's death was altogether silent and bereft of hope or love of any kind. Only Snow White and Vernal mourned his passing for, over the years, the people of that kingdom had become hard and unfeeling as cold steel and his death was as the changing of the season for them.

Queen Bruma, herself, could shed no tears for her husband for she could feel neither joy nor sorrow, and had felt nothing for many years. Though she was possessing of a beauty radiant beyond imagining, hers was a cold light that had no warmth to it at all. None could say when or how but once, long ago, her young heart had been broken and she hadn't the skill or the strength of spirit to mend it. Perhaps none had. It was shattered and it still bore many cracks and fissures into which the frost crept until it became a heart of ice; unmoved and adamant in its indifference to the suffering of others.

The only thing that she truly cared about was her own beauty, which never caused her much concern for she was impossibly fair. The King was correct in thinking that she was the fairest maiden in the land and she had been ever since the former Queen's death. This, Bruma knew for certain, for she had an enchanted mirror given to her by the Black Fairy Carabosse. It came from the magical treasure stores of Wak-Wak and could divulge secret knowledge to its owner. It knew all and never lied when asked a question. Every morning since the death of the former Queen, Bruma had looked into its glassy surface and asked, "Magic mirror tell me true, who is fairest? Tell me who."

And every morning, the mirror would respond, "Milky skin and jet black hair, Bruma is the one most fair." This kept the queen content throughout her marriage to the King and after his death. But as the years went by, and Snow White became older, her own beauty swiftly blossomed until she had grown into the very image of her mother.

One morning Queen Bruma peered into the mirror and said, "Magic mirror tell me true, who is fairest? Tell me who."

To this, the mirror responded. "Milky skin and jet black hair, truly thou art wondrous fair. But the fates defy thy will for someone else is fairer still."

"Who," demanded the Queen. "could be fairer than I?"

"Milky skin and jet black hair, Snow White is the one most fair. Her heart is warm and full of zeal and makes her beauty true and real. Thine eyes are bright, thy cheeks are red, but thine heart is cold and dead."

Now a rage she had never before felt was sparked within Bruma and she determined that none could be fairer than she. She had never felt any ill will toward her stepdaughter before but she now resolved to destroy the girl. "And," the Queen decided. "if a warm heart is all I lack, then I must have hers." She contrived a plan to get rid of

Snow White and called for Braygard, her loyal Huntsman. Braygard was a hard man, like the Queen and all her servants, and cared for nothing but his pet falcon Ilex whose eyes were sharp and could lead his master through the safest paths of the Dark Woods.

“Huntsman, I want you to take my stepdaughter Snow White deep into the Dark Woods, down paths that she might never find her way back from. There, you will kill her and return to me with her heart.” Braygard was no assassin and thought it an odd request, but his loyalty to Bruma was such that he did not question her wishes. He summoned Ilex to him and appeared before Snow White.

“Princess,” he said with a bow. “I have been ordered to escort you through the forest on a journey to the kingdom of the Dwarves.”

“Why must I go there?” she asked apprehensively.

“The Queen wishes to send you as emissary to speak with their king. The Dwarves control much wealth and resource and your stepmother considers them an important ally.” Though she was confused by this, she was in no position to refuse a royal order. Besides, she had always wanted to see the Dwarf Kingdom, since her parents had told her so many wondrous stories of the gems and precious stones that glittered in the tunnels and mines of that underground realm. She donned a white fur-lined cloak, for it was cold and the land was covered in a blanket of snow, and she pulled the hood up over her dark head and set out with the Huntsman and his falcon guide.

It was mid-morning when they reached the edge of the Dark Wood and Snow White felt a growing dread rising up within her. The trees were tall and twisted and, though the sun was glowing bright behind a hazy gray sky, the forest seemed to suddenly swallow up all light as they stepped across its border. She attuned her ears to the steady sound of her footsteps crunching through the snow in an attempt to drown out the strange chirps and howls that were issuing from every corner of the shadowy wood.

She began to wonder now why her stepmother had chosen to send her, of all people, through this place. Surely an armed procession would be better suited for such a journey. Though she trusted in the Huntsman’s skills she still worried that his wits alone might not be enough to guide them safely to the other side of the forest. Everyone knew it was an evil place, filled with peril at every twist and turn. Had they not Ilex’s keen eyes to scout for them, they might never find their way out.

They were deep within its dark reaches now and barely any light could even reach them from above the thick treetops. “I think we’re lost,” Snow White said, peering from side to side, looking for a path of some kind. Behind her, Braygard the Huntsman raised his hunting dagger and prepared to take the girl’s life. But she turned suddenly toward him; her cool blue eyes full of fear and her precious face trembling. She was no threat to the Queen. She was just a poor innocent girl. Why, then, had Bruma commanded him to kill such a gentle creature?

Braygard staggered backward and let the dagger fall from his hand. He was a hard man but he was no murderer. He told Snow White of what the Queen had ordered him to do and her eyes went wide; her whole body shaking. To think that her own stepmother could do such a thing shook her to her very core.

“I’ll not harm you, Princess,” Braygard assured her. “but you must go now and escape. Your stepmother is a witch, and a powerful one, with strange magic at her disposal. She’ll not stop until you are dead.” He pointed into the depths of the forest. “Push on in that direction and you will come to the edge of the wood. Now go and the Queen will think you are dead and trouble you no more!” Snow White, with tears in her eyes, thanked the Huntsman profusely and bid him farewell. But as she turned down the path out of the woods, she was stopped in her tracks by a line of fierce yellow eyes. With a dire howl a pack of gray wolves stepped toward them with salivating, snarling jaws.

The werewolves of the Dark Wood were dreaded across the land, not just for their beastly ferocity but for the wicked souls that haunted them all. They delighted in killing and feasting upon human beings and were not easily slain. But Braygard had killed many of their evil kind and drew his long bow, notched with silver tipped arrows, and felled three of the monsters within moments. Snow White fell to the icy ground as a flash of gray fur sailed over her and, in seconds, the beasts were upon the Huntsman, snapping their hungry jaws at him. He recovered his silver knife from the snow and slashed at his savage attackers.

“Go, Princess!” he called to his unarmed charge while he grappled with the wolves. “Hurry!” As Ilex dug his talons into the creatures’ eyes, blinding one after another, Snow White reluctantly left the struggling Huntsman, and his falcon, and fled into the unknown reaches of the forest. She ran, pushed on by a terror she had never known before. She could still hear the unholy wails of the werewolves behind her but, all around, there came the hollering and shuddering of evil things in the darkness. The ghosts of the Dark Wood were roused now and every wicked spirit in the forest seemed to be upon the girl’s heels. The trees, gnarled and fearsome, seemed to grasp at her with claw-like branches as if they could not allow her escape under any circumstances.

She wept now as she ran; wept for the merciful Huntsman and for her own pitiful plight. She was lost and alone and after what seemed hours, finally overcome with exhaustion and stung by the frost, she leaned herself against an old tree and fell to the ground. Her vision was hazy and she felt lightheaded, barely able to lift her face from the snow although the cold burned her delicate skin so. But through the icy curtain of snowflakes clinging to her eyelashes she could see that it was not so dark where she now was.

The sunlight had broken through the trees and fell upon a wide glade where she could see a little cottage in the distance. She hadn’t much strength but she knew she would surely die there unless she forced herself to shelter. Her hands stung fiercely as she pushed herself up from the snow and moved toward the house with haggard, crooked steps. The cottage was made of large, round stones and was covered by a thatched straw roof. Its construction was simple, yet there was an incredible complexity in the detail of the woodwork surrounding the door and windows. The frames were etched with intricate designs and were inlaid with rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and other precious jewels that sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight. A stone chimney rose up from the roof, calmly puffing gray smoke into the air.

She leaned upon the front door and it swung open, not abruptly but gently, easing her inside as if it knew of her predicament and took pity on her. She staggered into the little house and felt the warmth of a healthy fire on the hearth. She shut the door behind her and, spying a bowl of fresh fruit on the table, couldn't help but indulge herself. The rosy apples were so delicious, she thought. It had been so long since she had eaten an apple. Since the cold came there hadn't been apples in her kingdom. She lumbered into another room and saw seven little beds lined up along the wall with names carved into the headboards. They read Andu, Fandu, Mungo, Bungo, Durbin, Dormin, and Olwin. She didn't know what they meant, nor could she lend them a single thought.

All she knew was that the apple she had was perhaps the most wonderful thing she had ever eaten and now she was very tired. She fell upon the first bed she could find and closed her eyes as her thoughts lulled her into a deep and much needed slumber. Her mother used to make her apple tarts when she was young. That was before she died. Apple tarts were her favorite, and her father's, too. They all loved apple tarts. That was before the frost came. There are no more apples where she comes from. That was before Bruma came. That was long ago.

In the days after Snow White entered the forest, the kingdom fell ever deeper into the clutches of despair until every person within it was as unfeeling as their Queen. Bruma called for many of her servants from Brangomar and soon the castle was filled with her iron-clad soldiers, whose faces were hidden behind savage black facemasks, along with their terrible general. Agrilon was a brute of gigantic stature and carried an iron mace and a broadsword. His cruelty was legendary and his strength was only matched by his loyalty to Queen Bruma. Under his command, Snow White's once peaceful kingdom became an empire of pikes and studded shields.

In the square beneath the castle walls there were erected obsidian statues of the Black Fairy Carabosse and the wizard Von Rothbart; of Myrtha Queen of the Villis, and of Nexo the Death Fairy and Kingu the demon captain of Wak-Wak. It was a memorial to all those whose wickedness and villainy inspired Bruma's tightfisted reign over this land.

Braygard the Huntsman returned to Bruma's castle and, with Ilex perched upon his shoulder, presented the Queen with a little trinket box. "I have done as you command, O Queen, and the girl's heart is within this box." Bruma was so pleased with her servant that she assured him a rich reward for his loyalty and went, at once to her mirror. She was so eager to hear the words for which she had yearned.

"Magic mirror, tell me true. Who is fairest? Tell me who."

The depths of the enchanted glass swirled in a maelstrom of color and the eyes of the Spirit of the Mirror appeared before her; pale and ghastly. Came the dreadful voice of the Spirit, "Milky skin and jet black hair, truly thou art wondrous fair. But past the forest, over hill, someone else is fairer still."

"Who," demanded the Queen. "could be fairer than I now? Snow White is dead and there are none fairer than she was."

“Milky skin and jet black hair, Snow White is the one most fair. The girl still lives, beyond thy reach; her chest still heaves, her heart still beats. She eludes thy fatal art, for in thine hands is a werewolf’s heart!”

Bruma opened the box and glowered lividly at the black and bloody heart within the box. It was a thing too full of malice to have belonged to her innocent stepdaughter. She turned toward Braygard with a stare that cut him like a frozen blade. She had felt the sting of betrayal before but she had since learned to sting in return. “You would dare to defy me? What have you, in all this world, if not loyalty to me? If you haven’t that, you haven’t anything and are worth no more to the world than a patch of ice lying in the sun!”

With that she cast an enchantment upon the poor Huntsman, turning him into a figure of solid ice. She then set him out upon the balcony of her chamber to slowly melt in the sunlight, as a warning to all those who might not heed her wishes. She called the orphaned falcon, Ilex, to her and made a familiar of it. “You will be my eyes, my pet, and go where I cannot. Fly far and wide, my little one, and find the place where Snow White hides.” She released the falcon into the air and consulted her magical tomes for a way she might put an end to the girl at last.

One day Prince Vernal arrived at the castle and came before the Queen, requesting to see Snow White. A look of despair washed over Bruma’s face as she told him of the poor princess’ fate. “I sent my darling stepdaughter to the Kingdom of the Dwarves as an emissary of goodwill and with her went my faithful Huntsman to guide her through the forest. Sadly, only the Huntsman’s falcon returned to me. I can only gather that they have both perished in the Dark Woods, or else the creature would not have abandoned its master.” She laid her cold white hand upon Vernal’s warm face to which he recoiled in fear. “I am truly sorry, Vernal, but it has been three weeks since they set out and I have heard nothing of them. Even Ilex, here, cannot find hide nor hair of them, though he searches night and day.”

“She cannot be dead,” the Prince objected. “I know your Huntsman, Braygard. None know the Dark Woods better than he and he would never allow any harm to befall Snow White, let alone himself!”

“You must forget about the girl,” Bruma pleaded. “If you will agree to rule at my side you shall want for nothing.” She probed the depths of his heart with her lovely and beguiling eyes but, deep within, he felt the chilling touch of her gaze and could not be deceived by her beauty.

“I cannot forget her and, if she still draws breath, I shall find her.” He mounted his steed, galloping out of the city and headlong into the dark and fearsome forest in search of his beloved princess. The Queen was greatly vexed by Vernal’s refusal and she raged madly over it.

“Go!” she commanded Ilex with a wicked mania. “Follow the Prince and see that he finds his precious Snow White. And when you have found her, return and reveal to me the girl’s hiding place! Now go!” The falcon soared into the sky, following the trail of Vernal’s horse.

A veil of snow was kicked up in the wake of the Prince’s fanatical charge through the forest; his sleek mount leaping over rocks and fallen logs without tiring or hesitating.

Though the sounds of dire creatures menaced them from all around, Vernal would neither turn away nor slow his pace. Even the dreaded werewolves of the Dark Woods could not match his horse's pace while at a full gallop, so he had no reason to fear them.

The light of day grew dim as he pressed onward into the innermost depths of the winding and twisting forest. Soon twilight was upon him and the shadows had become long and deep indeed. He halted his steed as his path was met with a wall of black thorns that had completely overgrown all the paths ahead. He drew his sword and began hacking at them from horseback but what little light had been available to him a short time ago had all but vanished and he could now scarcely see the blade clutched in his hand. A furious passion had driven him thus far but the flame of his determination had died and abandoned him to darkness, utterly lost in this nightmarish maze of creeping branches.

He set himself upon the cold and snowy ground and, with some difficulty, started a campfire for he had been left with little choice but to pass the night in that bleak and fearful place. After having eaten, he and his beast rested for a while by the meager warmth of the fire and Vernal did his utmost to ignore the horrific noises that beset him from all directions. He kept only Snow White in his mind and the hope that she was still alive somewhere steeled him against all terror. But the fear that he might never find her in that labyrinthine forest was ever fighting its way into his thoughts.

Reluctantly he attempted to pass some hours in sleep, though he was loath to shut his eyes for even a moment. The journey had worn him so that he could put it off no longer and finally slipped into a doze. He was roused several hours later by a cool light and, gripping his sword instinctively, rose to his feet to defend himself.

"Do not be afraid, Vernal," a woman's voice said. The words reverberated gently as if spoken through a tube of glass. "You seek the Princess Bianca who is called Snow White."

"Yes," he answered, still searching for the source of the light and the identity of the voice. "Is she alive?"

"She is," came the answer cheerfully.

"Where is she?"

"She is very safe, in the care of friends, and I shall lead you to her but we must leave now." Vernal nodded, though he knew not to whom. "Then mount your horse and follow where I lead." With that, the light moved through the woods and all the obstacles that had previously barred the Prince's way shriveled up and vanished. As he followed this blue and brilliant light he found that the ways all around had become illuminated and he could see all the hideous denizens of the Dark Woods shrinking from his path in fear. Their red and yellow eyes quivered and they crept back into whatever black holes they might still find that the light had not laid bare.

After a time Vernal could see the gloomy roof of the forest waning, little by little, and the light of the early morning sky was now showing itself. The light ceased and the Prince found himself in a quiet and peaceful glade where the woods had yielded at last. There was a little stream, frozen over, and a cottage just beyond with a silently puffing stone chimney.

"Your love rests within," the voice informed him.



“Who are you and why have you seen fit to aid me like this?”

The light shrank and condensed until it took the shape of a young lady, pale-skinned and very fair-haired, in a dress of blue and white with frost clinging to the edges. Her face was soft and her cheeks were marked with iridescent blue flecks that sparkled in the waxing dawn. “I am the Winter Fairy,” she said with a warm smile that belied her icy nature. “I have been looking after your dear Princess in her exile and have seen to it that she is protected.”

“You said she was with friends. Is that your home, yonder?”

“No,” she said with a laugh. “The dwarves of Mount Urgwyn are skillful craftsmen and dedicated miners. Seven of their kind returned home, some weeks ago, only to be met with the most unlikely of surprises awaiting them. Snow White had been through a truly trying ordeal and Andu, Fandu, Mungo, Bungo, Durbin, Dormin, and Olwin have been faithful caretakers of the young princess ever since, and she has seen fit to care for them as well. I have heard her, in the mornings, singing as she fetches water from the well to launder their clothes. I have seen her, in the afternoons, dancing as she cooks for them and bakes them tarts and pies. I have known her, in the evenings, to read to them and teach them of the many things she learned beyond the woods.”

“She is happy, then,” Vernal concluded with a slightly solemn tone.

“Happy, yes, but not content. Always she sings of you and her wish that you might find her once again.” He looked up with renewed hope. “Go to her, Vernal. You will see her soon.” The Winter Fairy pointed to the little house as the morning light shone down on it; the wooden door opening and seven of the stout and stocky dwarves stepping out. All were dressed in leather coats, with fur-lined caps, and they carried picks and shovels and lanterns for their labors within the mines beneath Mount Urgwyn. They bid farewell to the young lady at the door and bowed until their long and braided beards touched the snowy ground.

“Take care, Snow White,” said Andu tenderly. “The Winter Fairy warned you not to venture from the house for her enchantment will not keep you safe if you stray from it.”

“I shan’t stray,” she responded with an assuring smile.

“Perhaps we should not work today,” suggested Fandu with an anxious look.

“Kings and emperors depend upon the wealth and resource we extract from the mountain,” said gruff Mungo. “and we depend upon their support to protect our lands. If we don’t work, we don’t trade and, if we don’t trade, who do you suppose will come to our aid if the trolls of Gaglon attack?” Fandu was silenced by this. “I care for Snow White’s safety as much as any of you but the Winter Fairy has assured us our dear one will be well protected.”

“Mungo is right,” the Princess said, stooping down toward them. “The prosperity of your people depends upon you and I would not have you lay that responsibility aside for me. I’ll be just fine.” Hesitant as they were to leave her, the dwarves finally made for the southern road to the mines. Olwin, was the youngest and most sensitive of the bunch, though perhaps the least sensible. He was last to leave and his companions had hard work

getting him on his way. But, at last, Snow White was left on her own and retreated into the house to begin her morning routine.

Once the dwarves had left the scene, Vernal made his way to the little house and his ears caught the sweet music of Snow White's melodious voice as she went around the rooms; sweeping the floor and folding the seven sets of bedclothes that were strewn about. It seemed odd for a princess to be playing housekeeper but it pleased the girl to care for the little men and she hardly considered it work at all, so happy was she to be someplace safe and among friends.

Vernal stole up to the open window and peered inside, watching his love at her work, chatting with some of the little animals the dwarves kept as pets. There was a gray rabbit and a couple of sparrows and a baby deer and they dwelt in their own corners of the great room beside the dining area. Snow White spoke to them this morning, as she always did, of the kingdom she left behind and the prince she was betrothed to. "I wonder if he has forgotten me already," she said to the chirping sparrows. "I suppose he thinks me dead as well, but I dare not reveal myself or my stepmother would find me. I do hope he hasn't forgotten me."

"Of course I haven't," Vernal called from outside. Upon hearing his voice, Snow White rose up from her place and ran to the door. There stood her beloved prince with open arms and she fell into them with tears streaming down her rosy cheeks. As she wept she told him of Queen Bruma's plot to kill her and of how the Huntsman had saved her. "It's all right," he assured her, wiping the tears from her eyes. "No one will harm you now."

"How ever did you find me?"

"The Winter Fairy led me here and with her looking after you, you need never fear your stepmother again." A stern look came over his handsome face and he seemed seized with a dark determination.

Snow White saw this change in her lover and began to fret. "Are you not remaining here with me?"

"I must return to your kingdom, my love, and rouse the people to our support. All will know of Bruma's treachery and she will pay dearly for it!"

"No! Vernal you mustn't go! Braygard the Huntsman told me about her! She has terrible magical powers and she'll destroy you as surely as you stand!"

"If she truly thinks you dead, then you'll be safe here for a time. But as long as that witch is Queen, she will be a threat to all. I must stop her!" Snow White tried in vain to calm Vernal's temperament, but the prince's resolve could not be weakened and he called for his horse. "Fear not, my most precious Bianca. I will return in no less than three days and, when I do, you will know that you are free at last!" Then, after one final passionate embrace, he galloped back into the Dark Woods, so sure of the way back that he would cut through to the other side in less than half the time it took him the night before. But Snow White was greatly troubled and could sing no more. She could only pray that her beloved prince would be safe in his quest, though she held out little hope of that now.

Ilex appeared at the window of Queen Bruma's chamber and the falcon took his place on the perch beside her mirror. Bruma petted the creature and, having learned to understand the speech of many animals during her tutelage by the Black Fairy, the Queen learned of Snow White's abiding in the little cottage beyond the Dark Woods. "She has the protection of the dwarves and the Winter Fairy, I see. Little wonder my magic could not locate her." She turned toward her spellbook and leafed through the ancient pages. "But her protectors are not all-powerful. I will find a way to destroy her yet."

She heard much commotion from the city below and strode to her window seeking the source. There she saw Prince Vernal galloping through the gates in a mad rush, pressing onward to the square beneath the castle walls. He stopped citizens on the street and called to them in their homes to bring them gladsome tidings.

"Hear me, good people. You need despair no longer nor mourn for your lost princess. The queen, herself, is the cause of your misery and if we could but work together to overthrow her cruel reign I vow that gentle Snow White can be restored to the throne." He urged them to listen to reason and gave them cause to hope for the kingdom's bright future. To his dismay, none would listen. They had already become too bitter and unfeeling to have hope, nor did they care any longer whether their princess was alive or dead. And, even if they could be moved to blame Bruma for their troubles, they hadn't the will to resist or to fight, so they accepted their misfortune without contention. All the same, the queen did not look kindly upon Vernal's crusade and ordered the guards to seize the prince.

All at once he found himself surrounded by armored foes with long, barbed pikes. He dismounted and, with sword and shield gripped tightly, charged into the fray for he would not be taken prisoner by the witch or her slaves. The Brangomarren soldiers were strong though they were not all so skilled as Vernal was and he cut through their ranks, his broad shield turning their spears aside handily. He pressed his attack to the castle gates, but was met there by the dreaded General Agrilon whose eyes blazed beneath a horned helm. Vernal steeled himself and dashed toward his enemy with quick and fluid strokes.

Despite his fiery spirit, he underestimated the general's might and Agrilon disarmed the prince with a swing of his iron mace and caught him by the throat, lifting his helpless body high into the air. With no hope of victory and no device left to defend himself with, Vernal had no choice but to surrender and Agrilon bore him away to the dungeons. Chained within Bruma's dank prison, the prince was visited by the wicked queen and she taunted him cruelly.

"Did you find your princess, Vernal?" He dared not tell her the truth for he was unaware that she already knew of the girl's existence and even of her whereabouts.

"I did not find her," he spat. "She's safe from your evil forever."

"Is she, indeed? If, however, she had survived and dwelt somewhere hidden, I might be inclined to forget about her," she placed a chilling hand against Vernal's bruised and bloodied cheek. "if you would reconsider my proposal of marriage."

"I will never unite myself with a serpent like you and you will never harm Snow White ever again!"

The queen narrowed her eyes maliciously and turned from him. "A night in shackles may change your mind and perhaps tomorrow you will be more open to my generosity." Then she left him and returned to her chambers. She, of course, had no intention of allowing her stepdaughter to live but, while she devised a way to destroy the girl, she still would try to win Vernal's heart. She would take it by force, if necessary. After all, what good would all her powers be if she couldn't have the man of her choice?

So the next morning, she returned to the dungeon and extended the prince the same offer as the night before; he giving her the same response in return. She left him until that night and offered it again. Again he refused. Now her icy heart was seething with rage and she decided she could do nothing until Vernal and all the world knew for certain that Snow White was dead.

She opened her book of black magic and set to work at once. The Black Fairy had taught Bruma much of the dark arts but not just any spell would harm someone who was protected by a fairy, herself. Surely the Winter Fairy's blessing would keep Snow White safe from injury by both physical and magical means and, undoubtedly, the dwarves' cottage was protected by similar enchantments. But she did know of something that may be strong enough, though it would cost her nearly all the power she now possessed.

Carabosse had once taught her of a legendary object known as the Apple of Life; an enchanted fruit that could bestow vitality and health to even the most grievously ailing individual. She also taught her that, by way of black magic, one could create its fearsome opposite; an Apple of Death. It was an ancient and terrible curse that would rob Snow White of all the warmth of life and leave her frozen and dead from the inside out, and it seemed Bruma's last hope of doing away with her hated stepdaughter.

After bidding Vernal farewell a second time, all of Snow White's hours were spent in brooding and worrying for his safety. Her seven dwarf companions tried to cheer her with the lively songs and tales from their homeland but the girl just sat beside the window bathing her fair skin in the cold winter air until her face and her arms stung fiercely. And still she would remain there, thinking of her love beyond the forest.

"Do not fret," said Olwin, sitting beside her. "Vernal will return for you and all will be well again." Despite Olwin's optimism Vernal did not return. Not the next day, nor the next, nor the day after that. After three days, Snow White knew for certain that Vernal was in trouble but, still, the dwarves tried to set her mind at ease for they feared the girl would land herself in the same danger.

"Vernal has much work ahead of him," said cheerful Durbin. "He may have returned to his own kingdom for reinforcements." This thought pacified her mind for a short while but ever time was passing and they could no longer suppress their fears.

Five days had gone by and Mungo slammed his fist against the table. "He hasn't gone for reinforcements! He's been taken prisoner, I'll warrant. Or worse!" The grumpy dwarf gathered his hunting musket from the corner and strapped a belt of supplies around his waist. "I say we rescue him ourselves, even if we have to besiege the city!"

Andu tried to calm his companion, saying, "How can we seven fight an entire kingdom?"



“Eight,” Bungo corrected with a bellowing sneeze, for the interminable winter had been particularly taxing on him.

“Surely you don’t mean that Snow White will fight with us!”

“No, the Winter Fairy.” He sneezed again as he said *winter*. “Surely her magic can aid us.”

“Even still,” Andu said, adjusting his spectacles. “I’m not certain that is such a wise idea.”

Here, Fandu spoke up with a quiver. “Andu is right! A fairy and seven dwarves cannot contend with an army!” Fandu was the most fainthearted of the group and always shrank from conflict.

“Haven’t *we* got an army?” Mungo asked, rhetorically.

“You mean to go to Mount Urgwyn for aid?”

“Why not? King Rangnir hates Bruma as much as we do and, while she’s queen, there’ll be no trading with her land. A land that, might I add, was once one of our most valued allies! It’s in the best interest of every dwarf to see her removed from the throne!”

“What do you think, Dormin?” Andu asked, and all turned toward the corner. Dormin, as so often was the case, was asleep.

“Wake up!” shouted Mungo and, after being brought up to speed, Dormin had to agree that some action had to be taken. Though Andu and Fandu were still wary about leading their people to war, the other dwarves could see no other course of action open to them and they went to the Winter Fairy for her advice on how they might proceed.

“Mungo is right. You will need the help of Urgwyn’s army if you hope to overcome Bruma’s forces, but your fellow dwarves may not be so easy to convince. I will go to Urgwyn with you to plead your case to King Rangnir and, if fate is on our side, we shall have a mighty force indeed.” She came to the cottage and found Snow White sitting in silence beside the hearth, stroking her little gray rabbit in her lap. “Bianca,” the fairy said to her sweetly; the girl looking up suddenly, as if waking from a dream. “You need not fear for Vernal. The dwarves and I will save him from whatever pit Bruma has locked him away in.”

“How do you even know he’s still alive?” the princess asked hopelessly.

“I know Bruma to be mistress of all seven fatal sins and she will not trade her pride for wrath. No, she shan’t destroy him if she can keep him for herself.” The fairy placed her hand upon the girl’s silky black head and kissed her gently on the cheek. “Your prince is alive and we shall return him to you but be mindful while we are away. I do not know if Bruma has intelligence of your whereabouts, but I cannot underestimate her wicked cunning. She may send her evil servants here to capture or harm you. Remain within the house for no evil thing can penetrate my protective enchantment on this place. Even still, you must take this as an added precaution.” she handed the girl a brilliant sapphire, about the size of a walnut, which glittered blue in the dancing light of the fireplace. “Should you find yourself in trouble and must fight to survive, cast this jewel at your foe and they shall be driven far away.”

With that final warning, the Winter Fairy left Snow White and she and the dwarves began their journey to Mount Urgwyn to rouse their dwarf brothers. The young

princess was still fearful, not just for her prince, but for all her friends now. However, the Winter Fairy's parting words left her with some confidence that they could contend with her stepmother's vile machinations and that, maybe, she and Vernal would be reunited again. It wasn't much, but it was enough to lull Snow White into a gentle sleep and, in her dreams, all was right with the world.

Dark clouds gathered over Bruma's castle as she prepared the malevolent curse for poor Snow White, channeling all of her wicked powers into a poison apple; as red as blood without but, inside, it was black as the furthest corners of the universe. She gripped the apple by the stem, careful not to let her hand touch the skin as the enchantment was settling, and she placed it in a basket full of normal apples, leaving a distinctive nick in its side so she knew which was the poisoned one. Then she called Ilex to her shoulder and instructed him to lead her through the forest to Snow White, by the safest route.

As she was preparing herself for the journey with a gray traveling cloak, she was drawn to the window by the sound of turmoil in the village below. She gripped the stone sill and was incensed to find that the gates of the city were being battered inward by some massive force. The brace holding the wooden doors was split asunder and, with a storm of dust and the clattering of steel, a legion of dwarves was pouring into the kingdom.

They rode upon the backs of colossal brown and black bears, saddled and bridled like steeds, and brandished axes and muskets. They were donned from head to toe in thick armored suits and mail coats forged in the legendary furnaces beneath Mount Urganwyn. The dwarves were primarily miners and craftsmen but their ferocity in battle could not be denied, and that is why they had so few real enemies. Not many forces could stand against the host of King Rangnir.

They thundered into the square, breaking upon Bruma's servants like a wave of shining steel and studded leather, scattering their larger opponents by utilizing the element of surprise. For none had expected a full-scale war with the dwarves. Not even Bruma. With Ilex fluttering behind her she descended the tower steps and summoned General Agrilon to the castle gates.

With the dwarves' broad-headed axes flashing and beating upon the shields of the Brangomarren soldiers, Winter glided into the fray casting a spell of frost over the enemies' siege devices to allow her allies safe passage to the castle. She called to Mungo whose roaring musket had just thinned out a line of archers beneath the palace walls. "You, Andu and Olwin must come with me to the castle so we can set Vernal free!" He nodded and called for his companions. Neither Andu nor Olwin had done much fighting in their days but Andu was more than capable at flinging hand axes and Olwin had enough sense to swing a hammer when he was in danger.

Together they pushed their way up to the stone bridge and, after knocking aside a pair of pikemen, reached the tall gates. They were locked fast but a burst of freezing air from the Winter Fairy was enough to weaken them and a hard hit from a few dwarf shoulders sent them flying open. The four daring companions fought their way through the lower halls of the castle and into the dungeon; Winter freezing the guards where they stood. Vernal was a sad sight, chained as he was in that foul cell, and seemed utterly

devoid of either hope or will. But when he saw that the fairy and the dwarves had risked themselves to rescue him his spirit was lifted and, as soon as his hands were free, he asked for his blade and shield.

He was determined to make Bruma pay for every act of evil she had inflicted upon this land. "Thank you for liberating me, my friends, but how did you four manage to get past a monster like General Agrilon?"

They paused as they reached the main hall and a troubled look came over Winter and the three dwarves. Strangely they had penetrated the castle gates without even encountering Bruma's champion. Suddenly the doors were slammed shut and an iron brace was set across them. They had been trapped!

The general's booming steps echoed through the hall as the armored brute strode toward the captured heroes with the spiked tower shield strapped to one arm and his gigantic mace held high. They scattered as the mace's barbed head smashed into the red carpeted floor and caused bits of marble to fly this way and that. Barely a man and more like a descendant of Goliath, Agrilon swung his weapon in wide arcs that bellowed as they beat upon the air.

Winter used her magic to send biting frost into the gaps in his black armor while Vernal, Mungo and Olwin struck him wherever they could manage while staying clear of his long reach. Andu hurled axes from behind the line but he had soon exhausted his supply and the general's assault had scarcely even been halted. Winter pointed to the grand stairs and Vernal agreed that the time for retreat had come. They five were not enough to overcome Agrilon.

Vernal waved them on and the fairy and the dwarves followed him to the upper halls of the castle with Agrilon chasing after. Winter left sheets of ice on the steps behind her hoping the general would slip and tumble down the stairs but, so heavy were his boots as he ran, they smashed the ice with every step and his pace could not even be slowed. Vernal and his rescuers lunged over the top step and into the hall, ducking into the alcoves beside the doorway and ambushed Agrilon as he pushed his massive body through.

Sparks flew as their weapons clashed and the sides of the hall came crashing down; yielding like potter's clay against the strokes of the general's mace. Finally, the villain had beat the dwarves aside and pushed Vernal to the end of the hall. There was a wide balcony there opening up to the cold air, the hazy afternoon sky and the sounds of battle below. Agrilon's eyes blazed beneath the holes of his hideous facemask and a peal terrible laughter belted forth.

"You and your miserable allies shall suffer the same fate as all who have defied Brangomar! Do you think you are the first to be trampled by great Queen Bruma? Many have fallen to the sheer force of her will, and many more shall in the days to come!" He dove forward and, catching Vernal beneath the chin with the handle of his mace, pinned the prince against the side of the balcony. "I almost pity you brittle people and wish my queen had chosen a more formidable land to conquer."

He had nearly crushed Vernal's throat when the dwarves, having recovered their senses, struck the general behind the knees. It was enough to loosen his grip on the prince

and Vernal dropped to the ground as Winter appeared and raised a blizzard against the titanic Agrilon. He turned slowly, ice chipping and snapping as he flexed his armor, and faced his noisome attackers with a blazing hatred. With the same force and unity of purpose that had gained them entry into the castle, Vernal, Mungo, Andu, and Owin dashed headlong at the general and knocked him clear over the side of the balcony.

With that, Bruma's champion had been smashed against the ground below with a sound that inspired terror in the hearts of his servants and a mighty resolve in the downtrodden people of that kingdom. All at once, things did not seem so bleak for them and they became determined to take up whatever arms they had and aid the dwarves in striking back at the cruel Brangomarrens. Soldiers were tossed by the swipe of bear claws, like ragdolls, and Brangomarren shields were split and cast down in a furor.

With the death of Agrilon, Vernal had little to bar his way now and he and his friends pressed their way to the queen's tower, smashing into her chambers with the fire of judgment burning within them. But, when they reached the witch's sanctum, they found no one within. Bruma had long since vanished and Vernal was drawn toward her enchanted mirror for, in it, he saw the dwarves' cottage beyond the dark wood. Winter was stricken with panic. "Merciful Heavens! She knows where Bianca is hidden!"

Meanwhile, Snow White dwelt alone in the cottage and her fears were mounting. She had put her worries aside just long enough to bake some cherry tarts. "They'll be very hungry when they return," she found herself saying aloud. It was all she could do to keep her mind occupied or it would dwell on the dark and troubling circumstances that were surrounding her. "They *will* be back," she forced herself to say. "I know they will." But the tears still formed in the corners of her eyes, no matter how hard she tried to suppress them.

Suddenly, her attention was caught by the sound of piteous wailing outside the house. She ran to the window and saw, in the distance, an old merchant woman with a gray cloak and a basket of apples hooked over her bony forearm. She was surrounded by the hideous werewolves of the Dark Woods, and the snarling black-furred beasts were closing in on her with hungry jaws. Snow White knew that she had been warned not to leave the cottage, but surely the wolves had been sent by Bruma to kill her. She could not allow them to harm an innocent granddame if there was anything at all she could do to stop it.

She opened the door slowly and, though the sounds of the howling monsters nearly drove her back, Snow White steadied her nerves and, with the Winter Fairy's sapphire in her hand, hurried to the scene. She came within a stones throw of the feral creatures and hurled the jewel into their midst. With a burst of light and a sound like a clap of thunder, the werewolves were overcome with terror and fled whimpering into the depths of the forest again.

The princess helped the old woman to her feet and gathered the many spilled apples for her. "Many thanks to you, my Dear," she said to Snow White in a creaking but grateful voice. "I would have made a gristly meal for those fiends."

"What are you doing all the way out here?" the girl asked, looking fearfully about for more of Bruma's assassins.



“I got myself terribly lost and sought your cabin for shelter. The werewolves followed me to the forest edge.” She smiled warmly. “But I am truly blessed that you happened upon me when you did.” Snow White led her toward the cottage and invited her inside to get warm but the old woman took one look at the house and a brief wave of dread came over her. Regaining her composure she politely declined but sniffed the air and laughed. “Do I smell cherry tarts?”

“Yes I’ve just baked them. Would you care for some? Surely you must be hungry.”

“No, my dear. I prefer apple tarts anyway.”

“So do I,” the girl replied bashfully. “Apple was always my favorite but I haven’t any more.”

“Then perhaps I was fated to meet with you today for I bring nothing but apples.” She lifted the basket to Snow White and said, “Take them as a reward for saving my life.”

“Oh but I couldn’t,” the princess stated. “They are your livelihood. I couldn’t take them without paying and I haven’t any money.”

“My livelihood is life, my Dear, and I wouldn’t have that if not for you.” She offered again. “At least taste one.” Here she drew a single apple from the basket and held it out to the young girl.

Snow White maintained that she needed no reward for her act but the old woman’s begging and the perfect sheen of the apple had begun to entice her. She feared she might insult her by refusing her wares and it *did* look so delicious. It made her dream of her mother’s apple tarts all over again and finally, to the old merchant’s delight, Snow White accepted the apple. It was as red as blood and its skin was firm, crisp and without a single blemish or flaw with the exception of a tiny nick on one side.

Smiling at the woman and savoring the sweet taste, the girl bit deeply into the apple. And it was sweet. It was sweeter and juicier and more exquisite than anything Snow White had ever tasted in her life and she felt sure the apples would make wonderful tarts. These thoughts were all running through her mind, even as she felt her breath shortening and the insides of her chest growing cold. She exhaled and found that her breath was chilled like the gust of a late December wind. Pulling the apple away from her sticky red lips she saw that it was black and rotten inside and she let it fall from her hand, where it immediately turned to ash upon the ground.

Her gaze was covering over in hoarfrost but, through the icy haze, she could see the old woman’s once kind face glowing with evil delight. Then Snow White’s fair skin and her hair and every inch of her body went cold from the inside out and the girl fell hard against the floor of the cottage and was dead silent and still as the grave. The merchant woman cackled triumphantly and gloated over the frozen and lifeless body of her enemy at long last.

“Come, Ilex!” the crone called and the falcon fluttered over to her arm. “Finally, Bianca is dead and I am the fairest in the land. Or,” she added, glancing over to the girl’s corpse. “I shall be once my disguise wears off. Would that I could dispel it now, for this form makes me feel within as weak and weary as I look without, but it required the last of

my power to secure my victory. Until I return home, I shall have to make due,” she said to the falcon as they made their way toward the edge of the Dark Woods. “It was worth any price to dispose of that upstart brat.”

Her steps were sluggish and her breath came in wheezes and gasps for, as she had known, her body was now ancient and she hadn't the strength or magical might she had before her transformation. But with Ilex guiding her down the safe ways through the forest and all the malicious denizens daring not to harm her, Bruma knew she would make it safely to her castle in time to recover her power.

She had been trekking through the wood for a while when she found she no longer recognized her surroundings. “Ilex?” she called to her flying guide. “I do not remember coming this way.” She took another weary step and heard a deep and frightful crack. Peering down, she realized that she was standing on the surface of a frozen river. It was narrow, for the trees were close around it, but it was deep. The cracks stretched and widened with every slight movement she made and she fumed with rage. “Ilex! Ilex!” But the falcon sat, motionless, upon a high branch and watched the witch struggling until, at last, the ice gave way and Bruma fell into the depths of the icy waters. With her body so weak and frail, the mighty sorceress queen could not save herself from the clutches of the river and Ilex watched her disappear from the world forever. Satisfied that his master had been avenged, the falcon took to the air and left the Dark Woods behind.

About this time, Vernal had mounted his horse and, with the Winter Fairy and the bear-mounted dwarves close by, charged into the very same forest. Hooves and claws pounded the earth as they traversed the woods with valiant determination. They knew that their beloved princess was in danger and nothing would stand in their way now. The sight of their rage and the view of their weapons drove the werewolves and ghosts and wosies clear from their path and so, unmolested by any evil, the host reached the edge of the forest and the clearing where the dwarves had made their home. And in the open doorway of the cottage lay the body of Snow White.

They rushed to her side, shaking and rousing the girl, but they could all see that they were too late. Her skin was cold, her breath still and there was no life in her face at all. Her once warm and loving heart had been turned to ice and she was dead to all the world. Despite all their efforts and all that they had sacrificed to defeat Bruma, in the end, it was they who had been defeated. They brought her into the cottage and laid her upon a bed and mourned her for many days. Even Durbin, who always wore a radiant smile, could find no happiness in anything after such a tragedy.

Her beauty did not fade in those days after, but nor did her condition improve. It was undoubtedly a curse from the house of Carabosse but not even the Winter Fairy had the power to reverse magic of that kind. Her wicked sister had taught Bruma well and the poor fairy knew of no way to save her innocent Bianca. So the dwarves sent word to their kin and requested for a glass coffin to be crafted to house the lovely princess's body and into it were etched their people's most sacred blessings.

When the casket was completed and brought to the cottage, Vernal tenderly placed his Love into it and the dwarves bore her through the Dark Woods and back to her homeland. All the Brangomarrens had been defeated and Snow White's people had

successfully taken their home back with the help of the dwarves. But they knew it was a bittersweet victory when they beheld their princess' coffin displayed on the steps of the palace and they did something they had not done since Bruma had come; they wept. They wept until they had no tears left and then wept anew.

And none wept longer or more profoundly than Prince Vernal and his friends, the seven dwarves and the Winter Fairy. Ilex could not weep but, as the falcon's piercing yellow eyes fell upon the girl in the glass coffin, he wished he could. When, at last, their mourning had to come to an end for the good of the kingdom it was decided that Snow White would be placed in a tomb deep within the castle for her beauty was too precious to be destroyed by fire or covered up by the earth.

On the morning of her entombment Vernal opened the coffin, wishing to bid his most beloved a final farewell. He could not abide the thought of saying goodbye to she who was his sunshine and the light of his life but the bleakness of life, he knew, was sometimes cruel and unfair. Sometimes the innocent paid for the crimes of the wicked and all else were left to weep for their passing. He stooped down with wet eyes and placed his lips upon hers; one final tender kiss before the silence of eternity swallowed them both.

Bruma and her maleficent tutor, Carabosse, knew that the powers of darkness were mighty and far-reaching but even they knew that it was not supreme. Though it could conquer great and terrible hosts and bring the strongest to their knees it was not the greatest power in the universe. For, as Vernal left his mark upon sweet Bianca's lips his love entered into her and the frost and terror and death was driven away. The ice that held her little heart prisoner melted and her brilliant blue eyes opened with a start. Vernal drew back suddenly as Snow White sat up and coughed out the last of Bruma's icy curse and breathed fresh air once again.

All around knew that it was a miracle that had saved their princess but Winter knew that it was simply the power of true love. The followers of her black sister could cut and they could sting and they could beat but no evil device or contrivance could stand against true love for it was the purest and most steadfast force in all creation.

Vernal lifted Snow White from the casket and, together with the dwarves and the fairy and the falcon, faced their now joyous kingdom. The age of Bruma had come to an end and the statues of the evil queen and of Carabosse and Von Rothbart and all the foul monuments were pulled down and, in their place, were risen images of Snow White and Vernal and their courageous allies. A grand celebration was held in the village square as, at long last, winter melted away and spring began to appear from beyond all hope.

The snow vanished and the buds burst into color upon the trees. The rosy and life-giving apples reappeared in the orchards and all in the kingdom returned to health and vibrancy. The moss and lichens were cleared from the old King and Queen's graves and the horror of Bruma and her slaves was banished from memory. Once again, the kingdom formed a strong alliance with the dwarves of Mount Urganir and their King Rangnir, and never were two lands closer.

And upon the balcony of what was once Bruma's chamber stood Snow White and Vernal as husband and wife. The seven dwarves Andu, Fandu, Mungo, Bungo, Durbin,

Dormin, and Olwin became their trusted ministers and Ilex their most adored pet. Always the Winter Fairy watched over Bianca and her kingdom, which experienced an era of prosperity and gladness it had never before seen. And as for the princess, herself, time worked itself upon her but could not mar her beauty for, as her prince or her friends or anyone who knew her could tell you, she truly was the fairest in the land.

THE END