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A giant from the Far Mountains

By the time the king had been gone a month, things had changed significantly in the castle and the land beyond. It was astounding how much could be done in so short a time when you put your mind to it. The king, although bluff enough by nature and deed, had never given much thought to his subjects who lived beyond the castle walls. They loved him, they always had, and they paid their taxes which allowed him to go on his wars. In turn he made sure they had enough food to be the right side of starving, but not too much that they would become greedy and consider rebellion. The king took them for granted, in a way that only one born to a throne really can. They got on with their business and he got on with his and they cheered when he passed on his horse and that was generally enough.

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There were no statues or portraits of him in public places. He hadn't seen the need. Having narrowly escaped the flames in the land of her birth, the queen, more than most understood the power of public perception. She did not have their love or their natural fealty, but she knew how to get their fear and respect.

She wanted the people to feel she was watching them at all times. The busts and paintings in every hall and market took care of that, along with, for a brief time at least, a network of spies who ensured she knew enough to make the people believe that she could see all of their secrets. She dealt a very visible and unpleasant justice to a few merchants who had been less than honest with their taxes, and the rumours of the queen's sharp eye and iron grip subsequently spread like fire through the kingdom. Her spies added a few stories of dark magic and soon all cheered loudly when she passed but none would meet her eyes.

People were so easy.

Life in the castle had changed as well, especially for Snow White. The stable boys had been ordered to only saddle the gentle mares should she wish to ride, and she'd been instructed – under pain of punishment falling on her maids – to dress according

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to her station at all times. The queen had ordered a selection of dresses to be sent from her own kingdom for her step-daughter. They came with stiffer corsets and stronger binding than they made here, and if she wore them for a month or two she'd realise what a blessing her normal dresses were. Perhaps then she wouldn't fight wearing them so much. Maybe then she'd see there was no point in fighting any of it.

On top of this, Snow White was no longer allowed to find refuge in the servants' quarters, and although she still roamed the forest – even the queen could not imprison her in the castle – and visited her beloved dwarves out by the mines, her visits were less frequent and always reported. A little magic here, a curse here and there, was all it took to gain the loyalty of the forest folk. Her great-grandmother had taught her well.

No one would dare defy the queen's orders, however much they hated seeing their beloved princess so unhappy. And she was *desperately* unhappy but that, after all, the queen reminded herself, was the point. Why would Snow White agree to a marriage if she was happy at home? The queen wanted her gone. She *needed* her gone. And if there was one thing she'd learned in her lifetime it was that nothing was ever achieved without a little pain.

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She swept out into the busy courtyard her black dress, glittering with precious black rubies that dwarves had died to find, at odds with the brightly coloured ribbons and bunting that were being hung from the walls and posts. Doves cooed in boxes. Merchants dragged carts filled with all manner of foods and the finest wines towards the heavy doors that led to the store rooms and kitchens. The preparations were well under way. Even though she prided herself on quelling her emotions, Lilith felt a small tingle of excitement run through her veins. By the following evening her plans would have come to fruition.

It was the queen's twenty-fourth birthday and she was having the most magnificent ball. All the finest ladies and gentlemen of the city would be there and she had invited handsome princes and noblemen from all of the allied kingdoms as well. Her jaw tightened. Snow White would be, as the saying went, like a pig in shit amongst them.

She snapped unnecessary orders and then retreated inside. She kept her head high, ignoring the sharp glances from the women scrubbing the floor. The corridor was one hundred feet long and the two ageing women had reached approximately half-way. Their knees would be raw and bruised and no doubt their lower bodies would ache and cramp

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for the rest of the day when they were done. She'd learned as a child in her great-grandmother's cottage that scrubbing floors could be back-breaking work. She reached the far end and then paused and turned.

'Not good enough,' she said. 'Start again.' This time they did look up, eyes wide in their tired, sagging faces. The queen tightened her lips, accentuating the sharp angles of her delicate beauty, each one like a knife's blade. 'Right from the door.'

She watched as the two women hauled themselves to their feet, picked up their buckets and brushes and hobbled, broken, back to where they had started hours before. They didn't argue and Lilith allowed herself a small smile. The old queen and her daughter had the people's love. She would have their fear. It was a hardier emotion. As she turned away she felt a small twinge in her chest and wondered idly if it was a small part of her own heart turning black and hardening. Good, she thought. The sooner the better.



'Come on,' Snow White said as she wiped her tears of laughter away. 'Let's try again.' She took a sip from the beer tankard, sighed, hitched out another laugh, and then passed the mug along to the

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first of the dwarves who were picking themselves up on the grass.

'It's never going to work,' Dreamy said. 'And I'm not sure the beer is helping.' He was sitting beside the princess on the wooden table, having taken and caused enough bruises during the previous attempts to get himself removed from the proceedings for all their safety.

'Beer helps everything.' She winked. 'It will relax them.' She clapped and laughed. 'Try again. Grouchy, you on the bottom. I think you're the hardest!'

There were exclamations of protest as each of the dwarves wanted to be the strongest in Snow White's eyes, even though they knew in their hearts that she loved them all equally. Grouchy, squinting in the warm sunshine, steadied himself and then Feisty clambered onto his shoulders. When he was steady the next climbed the rickety ladder to perch on his shoulders.

'Keep going! It's amazing!' Snow White said, smiling. 'We can do this! You can do this!'

'It'll go wrong at the top. It's the coat. It unbalances them.' Dreamy took a swallow of beer from the mug.

'Hmmm,' Snow White frowned, looking at Bolshy, drowning in the overcoat designed to cover them all

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and with his shoulders padded out with quilted coat hangers to make him ridiculously broad. 'You might have a point. Maybe Grouchy needs to be at the top.'

A few moments, and another tumble to the grass later and she was proved right. Luckily although the dwarves weren't good at balancing, they were good at landing. The mines weren't safe and tunnels often gave way, dropping them great heights to the rocks below. If they didn't know how to land, they didn't live long. The grass might as well have been cushions for what they were used to and so after more giggles, more beer and a dusting down, they began again, this time with Grouchy draped in the coat and going up last.

'Are you sure this is a good idea?' Dreamy asked. He'd been wondering it for a while, but had been caught up in the fun of it with the rest of them, and when Snow White was enthusiastic about something it was hard not to get swept along. But now that he was sitting out and watching, doubts niggled at him.

'What do you mean? It'll be funny.'

'I'm sure it *could* be funny,' he said, slightly hesitant. 'But I'm not sure your step-mother has a sense of humour.'

'That's where you're wrong.' Snow White smiled and squeezed his knee. 'She used to have one. When

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she first got here. I remember we used to laugh a lot. She laughed yesterday.' She looked away from him. 'She's just lost her reasons to have fun, that's all. Maybe that's what being married does to you.' Snow took the mug from Dreamy. 'I'm getting it now. She just doesn't like being married very much. And that must make someone quite unhappy.'

'She's not unhappy,' Dreamy muttered. 'She's plain mean.'

'Well, maybe unhappiness makes people mean.' Her eyes sparkled as she looked at the tower of small men which looked like it might actually stay together for more than thirty seconds. 'But my father's gone to war again, for a long time this time, I think, so we need to make her smile. It's her birthday, she'll love it.'

'You think too well of people, Snow White.'

'Someone's got to, Dreamy.'

The precarious tower took a few hesitant steps towards her.

'Yes!' Snow White leapt from the table and almost jumped with glee. 'We've got it! You've done it!' She looked over her shoulder at Dreamy, her grin enticing and wicked. 'This is going to be amazing!'



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It was a magnificent affair. The chandeliers sparkled and filled the vast space with light. Musicians in every corner created a magical symphony in perfect time with each other although so far apart. Masked servants circled the room with platters of the most exquisite canapés and wines each served at their perfect temperature. Every invited guest was in attendance, and the gowns worn by the ladies transformed even the plainest of them.

The queen surveyed the room from her throne. It was a sea of pastel colours, as was the tradition of such events. She'd chosen to wear red, the same colour on her lips. Even those who hated her, and their number was growing fast, had to admire her beauty. Her blonde hair hung long and straight down her back, the colour of the far off winter lands. And her heart, she'd heard them whispering, was just as hard.

She smiled but she did not join them, although she commanded the music and watched the timeless dance between the sexes begin. A glance that lingered too long. A smile behind a fan. Eyes that peeked up playfully from a bow. It was always the same. She wondered how many ever ended happily ever after? Her mother had wanted that. It hadn't lasted.

After the first round of dancing came the entertainment as her guests ate and drank some more.

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There were the tumblers, the piper and his dancing rats, the fire eaters and the dancers, and soon the music would begin again. The queen clenched her teeth. The ball was in full swing and Snow White had yet to appear. She snapped her fingers. A footman scurried over and bowed.

‘Send someone to the princess’s rooms. Tell her she must come at once. I will not have her keeping my guests waiting longer.’ Enough was enough. There was lateness and then there was arrogance. ‘This delay is clearly the fault of her maids.’ Lilith smiled. ‘Make sure the princess knows that I shall punish them for embarrassing her if she does not arrive within five minutes.’ She gestured for music, sat as far back in her throne as the stiff upright chair would allow and focused on her annoyance rather than how easily the threats came from her these days, or on the knowledge that she would follow through on them if she had to.

The footman, however, had barely turned to leave when the trumpet sounded and the doors at the far end opened wide. The orchestras stopped, trickling away to nothing as the performers forgot their notes and their bows hung in mid-air above the strings. Even the queen was breathless for a second at the sight of Snow White’s beauty. Gasps punctuated the

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stillness. Snow White stepped through the doors and paused at the top of the three marble steps that led down to the ballroom. She wore a pure white dress, strapless and fitted, so different to the full-skirted style that the ladies of the court preferred, and it was decorated with small purple jewels. The same gems sparkled in her dark hair, swept high and tousled on her head, and they served to highlight the violet of her eyes.

All attention on her, she smiled and curtsied, a more sensuous movement than all the years of training had ever given Lilith. The queen dragged her eyes away from the beautiful girl and got to her feet, scanning the ballroom. Every prince was staring, their pretty dancing partners completely forgotten, as if they were simply shadows. Snow White could have her pick of them, that was clear. A shard of envy pierced her hardening heart, and her face ached with the effort of maintaining her smile. Still. That didn't matter. Snow White would be gone, out of the kingdom forever, and then maybe she would be able to relax.

'I'm so sorry I'm late,' Snow said, addressing the room. If Lilith was ice then Snow White was warm honey, and the mischievous twinkle as she smiled only enhanced her beauty. 'But I was waiting for my

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companion.’ She held out one hand and curtsied again as a man, thus far out of sight, came through the open doorway and joined her on the steps.

The queen, always so controlled, could not contain her gasp. He stood eight feet or more tall and wore a bright purple suit with a silver trim, the colour almost an exact match to the gems adorning the princess. A painted mask covered most of his face.

‘May I introduce Agard, Prince of the Far Mountains, home of the Giants.’ She smiled again and took the enormous man’s hand, leading him into the party. Dresses rustled as men and women pulled away from them creating a path, not entirely out of politeness. The queen wasn’t the only one who was shocked. No one had been near the Far Mountains for as long as she’d been alive, and probably not in the generation before either. How could Snow possibly have ... ?

‘We’ve been communicating by dove since I found one injured in the forest with a message attached to its leg and restored it to health. The prince wanted to reach out to distant people, and he found me.’

The strange couple moved further and further into the room, taking remarkably short steps given the man’s height, the queen noticed. Was he compensating for Snow White? How could he possibly have

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got into the castle without one of her spies telling her? And how could she have possibly fallen in love with this giant, as it seemed clear she had?

Her eyes fixed on their progress, Lilith tried to relax. It didn't matter which man Snow White chose. In fact, this creature might be a blessing in disguise. The king would surely disapprove of their union – what monstrous children would they create, for one thing? – and it was unlikely that Snow White would ever be allowed to return from the Far Mountains. The girl was embarrassing herself, but she was also doing all of Lilith's work for her. She needn't have wasted time and money inviting all the princes to a grand ball. Perhaps she should have just called for a circus or a freak show and given her step-daughter more to choose from.

As they approached, she walked forward to meet them and then curtseyed deeply at the giant's feet. Snow's curtsey might have been sensuous but the queen's was elegant and flawless, her back remaining perfectly straight. She made the gesture seem so effortless, but hours of training and tears had gone into it when she was four years old. The backs of her knees had been bruised and bleeding from the thwacks of the ruler her instructress used to inflict if she didn't do it perfectly. Her father, the king, would

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not accept less than a perfect princess for a daughter. She had become one for him, despite herself. Even if magic ran in her veins as well as royal blood. It was a man's world and she had learned to play the game. What else could a woman with beauty and brains do?

'Your highness,' the queen said. 'Welcome to our home. We are honoured to be the first of the kingdoms to receive a visit from the people of the Far Mountains, and I hope it shall not be your last. We have heard so much of your strength and generosity of spirit.' Her words were clear and humble although most of what she'd heard of the giants was that they were clumsy, stupid and greedy and spent most of their time fighting each other. Legend said that whenever rocks fell in the low lands, a giant in the Far Mountains was stamping his feet because he couldn't get his own way. But she was a queen and she would behave like one.

'Thank you, your Majesty.' The giant's voice was gruff but not as resonant as she expected. But then what did she really know of them? Nothing. Their guest began to lean forward to bow. The movement started well and then suddenly he wobbled, losing his balance and tilting dangerously sideways. The queen stepped backwards as two courtiers rushed forward and took the giant's hands to stabilise him.

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It was only then the queen noticed how small the hand was. How could a giant ... ?

Before she could finish her thought, the giant's middle section began to erupt. Buttons flew from the purple suit. Somewhere amongst the guests an idiot girl shrieked and another fainted. From within the giant came several exclamations before the body finally collapsed into a small pile of moving pieces.

For a moment there was silence and then Snow White burst into warm laughter. 'I knew they couldn't balance for long, but I was hoping for a first dance at least.' She turned to the assembled guests. 'A giant from the Far Mountains? Oh, come, come. You really fell for that? Anyway, my companions are far more impressive than any giant.'

The bundle of dwarves slowly pulled themselves to their feet. Lilith stepped backwards, icy cold anger running through her pumping heart. She had curtsied to them, these strange rough mining men. She had addressed them as royals, and worse than all of that was that they had tricked her.

The little men lined up alongside Snow White and bowed. The gathered guests laughed and applauded as did Snow herself. They blushed and muttered to each other, but their bashful joy at being part of this humiliating game was obvious. Snow White leaned

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down and kissed their heads and two of the little faces turned almost the colour of their princess's jewels.

Snow stood alongside the queen and faced the guests. 'It is so lovely to see so many visitors from other kingdoms here,' she nodded and smiled at several of the princes. 'Some of you I have not seen since childhood when I would beat you all to the top of the trees.' Again, there was a round of laughter. Black crept into the corner of Lilith's vision as she raged inside. This was uncalled for. Women did not make speeches at balls. Even she hadn't and the purpose of the occasion was *her* birthday. Kings and princes made speeches. That was the protocol in all the allied kingdoms. What was Snow White doing? Why were all the guests so enamoured of her that they didn't care? Why was it all so *easy* for her?

'I am so very fond of you all,' Snow White continued, apparently unaware of the waves of hatred coming from the slim figure in red beside her. 'But if you have come here to seek my hand in marriage, then let me put you at ease so we can all just enjoy this wonderful party. I have no desire to be betrothed to any of you. You will not find marriage with me.' She raised a dark eyebrow. 'Although perhaps you might with some of the lovely ladies you're already dancing with.' Around the room couples blushed and

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moved closer together. Lilith felt sick, the few morsels of food she'd eaten curdling in her stomach. The princess was making a fool of her. Was she supposed to just smile through this embarrassment? Was she doing it on purpose ... some act of revenge in front of princes from all the kingdoms?

'You are all handsome and charming men,' Snow White continued. 'But I will only ever surrender myself to true love.' She glanced at the queen and smiled, and from behind her own smile all Lilith wanted to do was choke the triumphant expression from the girl's face.

'Until then,' Snow finished, 'I shall make do with the company of my friends.' She looked down once again at the dwarves who bowed in unison, first to Snow White, then to the queen and then to the guests, who gave another round of spontaneous applause.

The musicians returned their bows to their instruments and the air was filled with music. The party began again, but this time there was a belle for their ball; the wonderful, unique Snow White. She led the dancing with the princes and the dwarves, so unlike the icy queen who oversaw the revelry from her throne. Within fifteen minutes Lilith, for all her great beauty, had been forgotten and she gladly

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slipped away, forcing herself to maintain a steady pace instead of bursting into a run as soon as she was through the doors.

The corridor echoed with laughter that chased her until she was sure she was the cause of it. They were all laughing at her. Of course they were. She fled through the castle, a whirlwind of blazing fury, until at last there was only the silence of her forgotten library and the dry books which were as unloved as she was. Her pace slowed but still books fell from the shelves as she passed, her rage and hurt slamming them to the ground.

Finally, there was the comfort of the room beyond. Her room. Her things. Her power was here. Her honesty was here. This was who she was. The candles and lamps lit as she glanced at them. Her magic was always stronger in anger and high emotion. Her mother's magic had been weak, she hadn't exercised it. Lilith had no intention of that happening to hers. She would no longer be ashamed of it.

She poured warm red wine from the silver decanter that never emptied, and drank the first glass quickly. Her hand was still trembling when she poured the second. Her eyes were glittering diamonds in the candlelight. How could they have humiliated her like that? How could she have let them? Her insides

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twisted; a ball of snakes trapped by the fires of her emotions. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She wanted to shout at the girl and shake her until she understood that the world *expected* things of her.

Behind glass, her crystal ball glowed red and green and then a rainbow of colours. With her glass refilled she sat in her chair and stared at it, letting the colours entrance and calm her. She drank quickly until her vision was hazy and her angry thoughts could no longer keep their sharp edges, and then she put the goblet down. She allowed herself to be lost in the colours and her memories of the past. Of happier times. Of being free.

'Why did you leave?'

The words, cutting the silence, made her jump and she turned to see the door open and Snow White, in all her beautiful finery, standing at the threshold. In her anger she hadn't locked herself in. She cursed under her breath.

'It's your birthday ball. You should be there.'

The queen rose to her feet, happy to find her legs steady. It took more than a heady wine to take her steel.

'You humiliated me,' she hissed. 'And at my own birthday. I suppose you thought that was funny.'

'It was supposed to be a joke,' Snow White said,

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her eyes wide with innocence and hurt. 'I thought you'd like it. I thought you'd *get* it.'

Lilith wondered how much practice went into that look. The king and the courtiers might be fooled by it, but the queen would not be.

'So, now you're calling me stupid? A little girl like you who wants to play with dwarves thinks she can laugh at me?' Where the candlelight accentuated each of Snow's soft curves and full features, the queen knew it hardened her sharp cheekbones and cast shadows under her eyes. She wondered how she must look. Still the great beauty of the North, or a harpy? She found she did not much care. 'Or do you really want to marry one? Maybe you'd like to marry all seven of your friends? It could be arranged. They'd tire you out soon enough.'

'Why do you have to be so horrible?' Snow White reeled slightly, and stepped backwards. 'What happened to you? Why must you always be so mean?'

Lilith opened her mouth to laugh and then Snow White's gaze shifted from her to something behind them in the dark shadows of the room. The familiar creak of the cabinet. The queen's eyes widened.

'She is so beautiful. Snow White, the fairest in all the lands.'

'What is that?' Snow said, curiosity replacing her

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hurt. 'Have you got someone in here with you? Their voice is ... strange.'

'It's nothing.' The queen flashed a look behind her, seeing the mirror glint slightly in the dark. 'Nothing for you to—'

'None can compare, none shall ever compare, to Snow White.'

'Is that a talking cupboard?' Snow White tried to push past, but Lilith blocked her way. 'One of your crazy magic things the servants talk about?'

'I said it was—' The queen shoved her backwards.

'Such a beauty. Such a heart. So easy to love. Snow White. Unbearably beautiful, isn't she?'

The cabinet slammed shut and silent with the ferocity of the queen's glare.

'It was talking about me,' Snow White said. Her eyes came back to the queen's. *'The fairest in the land. You have a cupboard that talks about me?'* She laughed suddenly, a short, shocked burst of emotion. 'What is *wrong* with you?'

'Shut up,' the queen said. 'Shut up and get out.'

'You *are* jealous of me,' Snow said. 'Not of my father loving me, but of everyone else. It's not that hard, you know, to have people like you. You just have to be *nice*.'

'I said get out!' She spat the words at the girl, her

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fists balled. 'You know nothing. You're stupid and blind and I hate you.'

Snow White's jaw clenched. 'Well, your cabinet doesn't. Maybe I should take it back to the party instead.'

The queen could see the mockery clearly in the princess's eyes. She took a deep breath and drew herself up tall. 'You'll regret this. All of it. I promise you.'

'Look, why can't we—'

'Go back to the party. Enjoy it. Tomorrow your dwarves are banished from the palace grounds. On pain of death.'

'You can't—'

The slamming door cut off the rest of Snow White's shocked sentence, and this time the queen remembered to pull the bolt across. Her breathing filled the room but this time it was slow and calm. A chill bloomed inside her. She looked back at the crystal ball. A black mist swirled inside it. So be it, the queen thought grimly. So be it.

