The Hidden Princess and the Captive Prince
by bronwe_iris

Summary

When Prince Florian met the beautiful Princess Snow White he was enchanted…and unknowingly made himself a target of her vindictive stepmother. Fleshing out some scenes from the 1930s Snow White comics released by Disney prior to the film’s release. Includes the “Prince Buckethead” sequence, as well as Prince Florian’s escape from Grimhilde’s dungeons.

Notes

I only recently learned about the comic series of Snow White that Disney had released in the weeks leading up to the 1937 release of the movie. I found the comic online and thought it was the absolute cutest thing. Snow White and her prince (I’m taking one of the more common names I’ve seen for him floating around – Florian) have such an adorable scene with the whole “Buckethead” thing. And it’s interesting to see that Queen Grimhilde had a thing for the prince in the comics, so his love for Snow White added to her jealousy of her stepdaughter.

Anywho, I was inspired by the comic, and wanted to explore the infamous “prince being captured and escaping the queen’s dungeon” scene that was meant to be in the film, but scrapped because of (from what I’ve read) difficulty animating the prince.

(The comic was uploaded by wonderful filmic-light onto their blogspot website. The page/article the comic is on is titled “1937-38 Hank Porter Comic Strip”)

The Hidden Princess and the Captive Prince
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Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category: F/M
Fandom: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Snow White - All Media Types
Relationship: Prince/Snow White (Disney)
Character: Snow White (Disney), Prince (Disney: Snow White), Queen (Snow White), Queen Grimhilde, Prince Florian, Snow White, Evil Queen
Additional Tags: there’s not really that much violence, just some gory-ish descriptions in the dungeons
Chapter 1

He hadn’t meant to ride so close to the castle grounds. When traveling, Florian usually made an effort to avoid the homes of nobility. Being recognized and persuaded to stay for at least a day or two, so his hosts could show off their hospitality or worse, try to introduce their daughters to him, was not what he wanted when taking these trips. But for some reason, on this particular excursion he found himself wandering alarmingly near the grounds of Queen Grimhilde’s castle.

He had never met the queen. His parents had some years ago, but Florian had been elsewhere at the time. His father had been polite enough while describing her, though it was clear he had not enjoyed the encounter. His mother, always more candid then her husband, was not as civil in her depiction of the queen, describing her as a patronizing woman who suffered from far too high opinion of herself. His parents’ stories did not differ much from other tales he had heard of the queen. Not many seemed to enjoy her company, despite her supposed beauty.

Apparently, there was a princess living there too. If he remembered correctly she was not Grimhilde’s birth daughter, though he lamented the poor fortune of anyone having to live with such a mother, blood or not. No one saw the Princess Snow White much, and as she had matured into her adolescent years she had completely disappeared from the public eye. There were rumors that she was dead, but no one could say for sure.

Florian’s kingdom was not exceedingly far from Grimhilde’s, but there had never been a need for him to visit. Now though, the shortest route to a town he was traveling to led right past Grimhilde’s castle.

He supposed he could have made a bigger effort to avoid it. But after all the rumors he had heard, Florian could not deny that he was curious as to whether the talk surrounding Grimhilde and the princess was true. So when he realized that he had been riding closer to the castle grounds than planned, he didn’t make an effort to change course. Maybe he would see something worthwhile.

With a pure blue sky above and the summer sun warming his back, he felt quite relaxed as he nudged his mare, Astor, along. As they neared the castle, Florian raised his gaze to study the wall barring his vision of what he assumed was the courtyard. Vines grew over the stones, snaking through cracks as they twisted over the centuries old barrier. The tops of trees inside the grounds could be seen, their branches blossoming with white and pale lilac flowers.

Florian stilled, tugging on Astor’s reins as he strained to listen. Someone was singing. Though only a faint hum at first, the notes were rising in volume, ringing up into the early afternoon.

“I’m wishing…for the one I love…to find me…”

Florian tilted his head in interest. Who was it? He had never heard such a beautiful voice before. A bright purity rang with it, melodious with cheer and laughter. It was intoxicating to listen to.

Curiosity overcame sense, and Florian dismounted Astor. The mare snorted in confusion, stamping her hoof against the grass.

“Don’t worry girl, I won’t be long,” reassured Florian. He patted Astor’s mane. “But I’ve got to find out who that is.” Turning to the wall, Florian grasped the vines and began to climb. It did not take him long to reach the top of the wall. He paused, peering cautiously into the courtyard below.

There was a well at the center of the courtyard. Surrounding it were various flowering trees, from
which loose petals drifted down to the courtyard’s stones. Near the wall Florian was on the stones led into a small garden. At the edge of the garden was a make-shift scarecrow. It was an ugly thing, made from two crossed broom handles and draped in rags. A wooden bucket had been placed over the top of the vertical handle; on its front, eyes and a smiling mouth had been painted. Florian only gave the scarecrow a passing glance, for it was the person standing in front of it that captured his attention.

A girl, maybe only a couple years younger than him, was curtsying to the scarecrow. She was the most beautiful person Florian had ever seen. Skin white as snow, ebony curls brushing the nape of her neck, and lips redder than the most perfect rose. She held herself gracefully, moving with a youthful elegance Florian was enchanted by. She wore a ragged working dress made of dull, earthy colors; the only colorful piece of clothing on her was a pale blue ribbon in her hair.

“It is charming of you, Prince Buckethead, to come all this way just to see me!” exclaimed the girl. She rose from her curtsy, giggling as she brushed a hand against the wooden rod meant to be the scarecrow’s shoulders. “Why of course – I’d be delighted to go to the ball with you. So sweet of you to ask me!” She winked at the scarecrow, then raised her hand in a dramatic gesture. “We shall lead the grand march! I’m sure Queen Grimhilde wouldn’t mind.” There was a hint of sarcasm there, though her tone held no cruelty, only a sly teasing.

Florian could not help the grin spreading across his face. He had never seen such a girl before. Life radiated from her in a happy brilliance he wanted to drown in. He had to speak to her.

The girl twirled around, dancing over to the well to gaze inside it. “My, what a gorgeous gown!” she said, beaming at her reflection. “I do hope it will be alright for the ball.” She glanced at her hands, turning them upwards to examine them. Dirt stained the pale skin, and a few blisters had formed on the edges of her palms, brought on by her daily chores. She frowned. “Perhaps I should wear gloves as well.”

While the girl gazed into the well, Florian quietly dropped into the courtyard. He hurried to the scarecrow, hiding behind it as the girl approached.

“What do you think, Prince Buckethead?” she asked the scarecrow, tilting her head inquisitively. “Shall I wear gloves to the ball? Perhaps a pair made of silk, with lace trim. That would be quite elegant, don’t you think?” She sighed, tugging at her patched skirt. “I’m sorry. I’m not very becoming for a princess. I must be quite the disappointing sight to you.”

The words had spilled from Florian before he could stop them. “Disappointing? My lady, you are enchanting!”

The girl gasped and pressed a hand to her mouth, eyes wide with shock. “Prince…Buckethead?” She blinked and shook her head at the silliness of the notion. “I must have imagined it. Perhaps I should go inside and have some water…”

“Please, don’t leave!” Florian pulled the bucket from the scarecrow, revealing himself behind it. The girl gave a cry of fear and stumbled backwards. “Oh my! I…who…”

Florian quickly realized the stupidity of his brash actions. “I’m terribly sorry,” he said quickly. He set the bucket down. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

The girl stared in shock. Then she turned and dashed towards the steps leading into the castle.

“Please, wait!” exclaimed Florian. He began to run after her but thought better of it, so as not to
further alarm her. He stopped beside the well. “I mean you no harm!”

Halfway up the steps, the girl stopped. She turned, eyeing Florian suspiciously. “How did you get in here?” she asked.

Florian blushed in embarrassment. “I climbed the wall. I just… I had heard you singing, and I…I had to see to whom such a beautiful voice belonged.”

The girl flushed at the compliment, but the distrust in her eyes did not wane.

“I suppose my tactic for introducing myself wasn’t very well thought-out,” admitted Florian with a grin. His brow furrowed in curiosity. “Who are you? Are you a maid in the castle?”

A flash of humor twinkled in the girl’s eyes, but she did not confirm nor deny the guess.

Florian frowned, studying the girl. “No, I don’t suppose you are. Something about you is distinctly noble. Or you are the most graceful maid I have ever met.” He paused, eyes widening as realization dawned on him. “You… are you Snow White? The hidden princess?”

The girl was quiet. Her gaze flickered to a balcony above them, but it was empty, and she glanced back at him uncertainly. Slowly, her features relaxed. “I did not know people called me that,” she said. “The hidden princess.”

Snow White. She certainly was different than he had imagined. “It is only because no one has seen you in so long. Some believe you to be dead.”

Snow White looked vaguely disturbed at that.

“I am glad you are not,” said Florian earnestly. He frowned. “But why do you dress so? I mean no offense, but I would expect a princess to wear something not so…” He gestured to the patched dress, looking sheepish.

“I have better dresses,” she admitted. “But my daily duties require more… suitable attire for the tasks.”

“What duties?”

“Oh,” Snow White waved her hand in the air. “Little things. Sweeping, washing the courtyard steps, hemming, dusting.”

Florian stared. “But you’re a princess! Why would you…” His words trailed off, and anger filtered into tone. “This is the queen’s doing, isn’t it?”

Snow White did not answer, but the trepidation in her eyes was confirmation enough.

Florian’s hands tightened into fists. “She is forcing you to do these things? What else has she done to you?”

“She does not harm me, if that is your concern,” said Snow White. She smiled sadly. “It matters not. I am not permitted to leave the castle grounds, so the chores give me something to do. Though I do prefer the duties that need to be done outside. The sunshine and fresh air are so welcoming after being inside the dreary chambers of the castle.”

“But I don’t understand,” pressed Florian. “Why does she do this? Surely you must know how odd this is for her to ask of you.”
Snow White shrugged. “Whatever her reasoning, she will not explain it to me. But she provides for me, so I try not to anger her with questions.” She tapped a finger against the side of her chin. “Now you must explain yourself. Who are you? A man who climbs castle walls with such frivolous motivations must be interesting indeed.” She smiled teasingly. “Or mad.”

Though still upset by Snow White’s treatment, Florian could not help grinning at the playful words. “My father certainly would think so. But I assure you, it is not a common habit of mine.” He swept his hat from his head, pressing it to his chest as he bowed. “I am Florian.”

Snow White studied him curiously. “Could you be the same Florian as the prince from our neighboring kingdom? If not, then you are an exceptionally well-dressed peasant.”

Florian cringed. He had been hoping…that what? A princess would not know the names of nearby nobility? It was an expected part of their education. He sighed, wishing he had been able to keep his royal identity secret for a bit longer, if only so she would continue to talk to him as freely as she had been. “I suppose I should have dressed less conspicuously,” he admitted with a smile. “But I would rather you not address me as prince at all. Or if you do, perhaps you would prefer to call me Prince Buckethead?”

Snow White laughed. “Perhaps not the most flattering nickname. But I suppose there is a certain charm to it.”

Florian was relieved, as Snow White did not seem to care much that he was a prince. Maybe when one who is a princess spends the days scrubbing castle steps, the novelty of royalty wears off fairly quickly. He chuckled at her joke, then glanced up at the balcony above them. He thought he had seen the curtains in the doorway flutter, as though someone had just slipped out of sight. But there was no one there now. He shrugged and returned his attention to Snow White.

Snow White had followed Florian’s gaze, and she continued to stare at the balcony with unease. She looked at Florian, the brightness in her eyes gone. “You should go.”

Florian frowned. “Why?”

Snow White twisted her hands nervously. “I…I still have much to do…the chores…and the queen…she…” The words trailed off. “Please, just go.”

Florian pressed his lips together, disturbed by the change in Snow White’s demeanor. Something was very wrong with this place. Leaving Snow White here felt like a mistake. “Are you sure?”

“Please,” repeated Snow White, the word tight with tension.

Florian ran his fingers over the brim of his hat. “Very well,” he said slowly. “If you wish me to leave, I shall. But if I were to call upon you in a less…intrusive manner, would the queen allow me to visit? Surely your chores do not take up the entirety of the day.”

Snow White seemed taken aback by the suggestion. “I…I do not think so. No, you had better go.”

Florian’s frown deepened at Snow White’s behavior. “Snow White,” he said, his voice low. “Are you in danger here?”

Snow White’s eyebrows twitched together, as though she had not considered such a notion before. “No, of course not,” she said hesitantly. “But I fear for you if my stepmother were to see you here. You must go.”

Fine. He would leave, only because she wanted him to do so. But he had every intention of
returning. “Alright,” he said. “I’ll go.” He stepped forward and reached out, taking Snow White’s hand. Gently, he pressed a kiss to it. “But I promise that we shall meet again, fair princess.”

Snow White blushed, her lips curving into a shy smile.

Florian gave her one last bow, then placed his hat on his head and sprinted back to the wall. He climbed it with ease, pausing at the top to look back at Snow White. She was still standing on the steps, and when their gazes locked she gave him a small wave. He returned the gesture and, grinning, dropped back onto the other side.

Astor neighed in surprise at his sudden appearance, though when she recognized Florian she moved forward to nuzzle her nose against his cheek. Florian chuckled, stroking her. “Oh Astor, she is the most wonderful person I’ve ever met!” He frowned. “But there is something unsettling about the whole affair between her and her stepmother. I must see Snow White again. Certainly the queen would allow a neighboring prince to visit…but will she permit me to see Snow White?” He ran a finger over his chin as he thought. “Perhaps I should tell father about this. He might have a better chance at persuading the queen than me.”

The sound of heavy footsteps caught Florian’s attention, and he spun around to see five castle guards approaching him.

“Afternoon,” greeted Florian. Unease pricked the edges of his nerves, and he stepped closer to Astor to take hold of her bridle. “May I be of assistance to you?”

“The queen has ordered your arrest,” the leading guard said shortly. He drew his sword and pointed it at Florian.

Florian stiffened. “Pardon me?”

The guard’s hard expression did not change. “Come quietly, and we will not harm you.”

“What charges have I been accused of?”

“Trespassing and assaulting the princess.”

Florian’s mouth dropped open. “Assaulting the…?” he sputtered. “That is a lie!”

“You wish to defy the queen?” threatened the guard.

“She is not my queen,” snarled Florian.

The remaining guards drew their swords.

“Do not make us use unnecessary force,” the leader warned.

Florian glanced at Astor’s saddle, from which hung his sheathed sword. He only had his dagger on him, and he doubted he’d reach it in time before being attacked by the guard closest to him. “There has been a mistake,” he said. “I am Prince Florian. Queen Grimhilde is acquainted with my parents. I am simply traveling through your kingdom.”

“Nevertheless, the queen will speak with you,” said the guard. He gestured with his sword. “Come. She will not be kept waiting.”

Florian set his jaw in frustration. It seemed that reasoning with the queen was his only option at the moment. Unhooking his hand from Astor’s bridle, he walked forward. The lead guard snatched out
his hand, grabbing Florian’s arm and spinning him about. Astor rushed forward angrily, but two of the guards lunged for her reins to hold her back. Florian’s arms were wrenched behind him, and the next moment cold shackles were snapped around his wrists.

“Hey!” exclaimed Florian. He twisted in the guard’s grip, but the guard only tightened his hands in warning. Without another word, the guards dragged him away, leaving Astor standing alone outside the castle walls.
Chapter 2

The dungeons were built into the lowest levels of the castle. The stairs leading down into them seemed to go on endlessly, burrowing deep beneath the ground’s surface. A wet chill clung to Florian as he was roughly led along the dark corridors, the feeble flames of torches hung on the walls providing barely enough light to see by.

It was eerily quiet. All that echoed along the damp stone walls was the faint scuffling of rats, and the steady drip of water leaking onto the floor.

They turned a corner, and a gust of musty air brushed against them as they entered a large chamber. Along the nearest wall was a row of cells, empty save for the filthy bones of partially decomposed skeletons. On the opposite side of the room a table had been pushed into the shadows, the instruments left on its surface hard to distinguish in the dimness. Though it was not hard to guess their purpose. Feeling vaguely sick, Florian made an effort not to look too closely. A river ran down a canal in the center of the room, entering through a large gate and running off down a seemingly never-ending corridor on the far end of the room. It was obviously for sewage, the stench of the liquid stifling in its intensity. Tied to the closer side of the canal was a small rowboat.

The guard gripping Florian’s bound arms dragged him over to one of the cells – thankfully empty of decomposing skeletons – and wrenched open the unlocked door. A second guard followed them inside, keeping a close watch as Florian’s hands were uncuffed – only to be encased once again, this time to shackles connected to chains linked to the wall. His ankles were secured as well, the chains barely long enough to allow him to stand or sit on a stone bench behind him.

“Is this really necessary?” snapped Florian. “Are the cell bars not sufficient enough?”

The guards ignored him. Once they were sure Florian was properly restrained, they exited the cell and locked it.

“Enjoy your stay, Your Highness,” said one of the guards. Florian raised an eyebrow at the sarcasm lacing his title. The guard smirked. “A bit of advice? Do as the queen commands. Maybe then she’ll finally let someone leave this place.”

Then the guards were gone, their footsteps disappearing into the murky darkness of the dungeon.

Florian sighed and lowered himself to the bench. The chains dangling from his wrists clinked dully as he propped his elbows on his knees, burying his face in his hands.

This certainly wasn’t what he had been expecting when he had climbed over that castle wall. Perhaps it had been a bit reckless and…not of the best manners to do so – his mother certainly wouldn’t have approved – but how could he have not? Hearing Snow White’s beautiful, cheerful voice…it was like something out of a dream. He had to meet her.

And how happy he was that he did. Even now, sitting in a damp cell, the thought of her flustered gestures and teasing grin warmed him, and he couldn’t help but smile at the memory. He wondered where she was. His smile quickly dropped, and worry seeped into him. Would Snow White suffer punishment as well because of his actions? Would speaking to a trespassing stranger be enough to invoke the wrath of a queen Florian was quickly suspecting to be much crueler than rumors assumed?

The click of heels on the stone floor echoed down the corridor, breaking Florian’s thoughts. He
rose his head and straightened, watching with narrowed eyes as shadows danced along the floor outside his cell, announcing someone’s arrival.

“Prince Florian, how wonderful it is to finally meet you.”

Queen Grimhilde came to a stop in front of Florian’s cell. Florian blinked in surprise; she certainly was beautiful. Her ivory skin seemed to glow in the dimness, and dark eyes glinted against the flickering light of the torches. Her beauty was sharp and elegant, yet it felt tainted by something Florian could not quite explain.

He frowned. “Your Majesty,” he greeted coldly. “Is this how you accommodate all of your visitors?”

Grimhilde smiled, though there was no warmth in the expression. “Only if warranted.” She pulled out a small ring of keys. Her movements graceful, she unlocked the cell door and stepped inside. “I could not help but notice that you had taken quite a liking to my stepdaughter.”

Florian remembered the balcony curtain he had seen fluttering while he had talked with Snow White. He cursed inwardly, annoyed with himself for being so careless.

Pocking the keys, Grimhilde moved closer to Florian. “It disturbed me, as she is a very impressionable girl, and I dread what thoughts may fester in her mind if she encounters the wrong sort of people.”

“How kind of you to worry,” Florian said sarcastically. “I assume the rags she was wearing was also a gift of affection from you.”

Grimhilde’s smile took on a more sinister edge. “You have an unfortunate lack of manners for a prince.” She grabbed Florian’s chin, wrenching his face upwards so he was forced to look into her eyes. “But I am a forgiving queen, and I am willing to forget your insults and crimes.”

Florian opened his mouth to argue, but Grimhilde continued before he could speak.

“On the condition that you agree to marry me.”

Florian froze. Shock pulsated through him, and he stared up at Grimhilde. “What?” he finally breathed.

Grimhilde tightened her grip on Florian, her nails digging uncomfortably into his skin. “You came here to seek a bride of beauty, did you not?”

“No, I –”

“And am I not beautiful enough for a king’s son to wed?”

Florian could not believe what he was hearing. “You can’t –”

“I am,” snarled Grimhilde. “I am fairer than that halfwit princess in rags, and more regal than any noblewomen you could hope to find. I desire a husband fit for a queen of unimaginable beauty, and here you have come.” She tilted her head in warning. “Only a fool would refuse me.”

Florian’s mind flickered back to decomposing skeletons neighboring his cell. “It seems many fools have refused you before,” he said. “Their bones are proof. If they would rather die than accept you, do you truly believe I would? Especially now that I have witnessed the treatment of your stepdaughter? I see that the truth of Queen Grimhilde is worse than the stories.” He gritted his
teeth. “I will not have you.”

Fury contorted Grimhlide’s face. With a cry of rage, she released her hold on Florian and slapped him across the face. Her nails scrapped his cheek, and Florian hissed as he felt his skin tear beneath the blow.

“Imprudent boy!” she shrieked. She grabbed a handful of Florian’s hair and yanked his head back so that his throat lay exposed to her. Florian’s hand twitched upward reflexively, but Grimhilde caught the shackle encircling his wrist. “I have half a mind to slit your throat right now and let your blood stain the stones of this cell.”

Florian glared at her. “How many other men have you murdered for your petty pride and vanity?” he ground out, his voice dark with anger.

Grimhilde smirked. “Enough to not invoke any regret doing the same to you.” She tightened her grip on his hair, and Florian could not help a pained grunt. Grimhilde leaned down to whisper in his ear. “As for your precious Snow White, she will be dead soon enough. When I have her heart, I shall bring you her head, and leave it here with you as you starve to death. Will that suffice your desire to see her again?”

Enraged, Florian struggled against the chains. But they held, as did Grimhilde’s grip on him. “She has done nothing to wrong you!” he seethed.

Grimhilde pressed a cold kiss to Florian’s wounded cheek, then straightened. “Do not fret, dear prince,” she said smugly. She violently shoved Florian backwards, releasing his hair and wrist. “You shall see Snow White again.”

Florian threw himself at the queen, but Grimhilde had stepped clear of the length of his chains, and all he could do was yank against them in vain. Grimhilde laughed, the shrill, cruel sound reverberating off the cell walls. She slammed the cell door shut and locked it, striding back up the corridor, her laughter trailing after her like a phantom’s shadow.

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Queen Grimhilde did not return and Florian was left alone in his cell, where he had no one but the rats to keep him company. Hours were spent trying to loosen the shackles binding him to the wall, or find something to pick the lock with. But exhaustion finally overcame him, and he collapsed to the bench in defeat.

He had no way to tell time, for there were no windows in the dungeon. Hours passed slowly, and Florian wondered how long he had been down there. Judging by the number of meager meals a guard would bring, it had been several days. Weeks perhaps, but Florian sincerely hoped not. For the longer he sat in the dim cell, the stronger his worry for Snow White became. Yet his demands to see the queen or the princess were ignored by the guard every time he came, and Florian was left with nothing but more questions.

He kicked at the meal plate by his feet in disgust. Why was he even being fed? Grimhilde had threatened to simply let him starve to death after…Florian gritted his teeth as the queen’s threats towards Snow White echoed in his mind.

He frowned. If the queen truly had been planning on harming Snow White and showing the results to him, perhaps he was being fed because Snow White was not to be found. Maybe the princess had escaped. If she was missing, then the queen would likely want to keep Florian alive until Snow White was captured. Hope flared in Florian at the thought of Snow White being beyond the
queen’s grasp.

“Please be alright,” he whispered.

The distant sound of a large door being opened caught his attention, and he snapped his head up. His meal – if the pathetic mush could be called a meal – had already been brought for the day. Who could possibly be coming?

_The queen._ Florian shifted nervously, hoping desperately that the visit was not for her to gloat in triumph at overcoming Snow White.

But the footsteps approaching the cell were not the strong, proud footsteps of the queen. They were halting, uneven, like a peddler shuffling weakly along as he begged for food. Suspicious, Florian squinted into the darkness as a figure stepped in front of his cell bars.

The feeble light of the wall torches fell upon the figure, and Florian could not help recoiling at the unexpected sight. It was an old woman, bent and mangled from age’s touch. Her spotted, pale skin sagged on her cheekbones, and her eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets. A hood had been pulled over her head but strands of gray, tangled hair dangled out from beneath the cloth.

The hag cackled, showcasing a set of uneven row of yellowed teeth. “Nothing to say, Prince Florian? After our last meeting, I was expecting another tactless comment.”

Florian frowned. “Last meeting?” He grimaced as he spoke. His throat was so sore; he had been given little water during his imprisonment, and what had been provided was disgustingly filthy.

“Do you not recognize me?” chortled the hag. “I know it has been quite a few days, but I did not expect your mind to dull so quickly.”

Florian’s jaw gaped. “Queen Grimhilde?” he whispered in horror.

The deformed queen smiled grotesquely.

Florian wanted to laugh at the ridiculous idea, but could not bring himself to do so. “You cannot be.” A chill ran down Florian’s back. “Unless…you know the art of witchcraft.” His eyes widened. “There has been talk of its presence in your kingdom, but no one would have thought you capable…”

“Of wielding such power?”

“Such darkness,” amended Florian, eyeing her warily. “It is evil work.”

Condescending pride flickered in the queen’s eyes, now cloudy with age. “If you believe that, you are more foolish than I already thought you to be. My knowledge allows me to reach goals otherwise unattainable. It gives me an advantage over simple folk like you and my ridiculous stepdaughter.”

“Snow White?” Florian leaned forward, fury in his eyes. “Where is she? If you have harmed her…”

Grimhilde laughed, the sound brittle and grating. “You shall do what? I see no future for you beyond this cell. As for Snow White…” Grimhilde reached into the sleeve of her robe and pulled out a red shining apple.

Florian had never seen an apple so perfect. The sight of it made his mouth water, and he was
overcome with a sudden desire to take a bite from it. He edged forward, uncaring how the shackles dug into his skin as he leaned towards the fruit.

Grimhilde watched Florian with a satisfied pleasure. “I see I have no need to tell you that this is a special apple. But alas, it is not for you.” She turned the apple over, studying it. Then she hid it in her robes once again. Florian blinked, feeling somewhat dazed as the apple slipped out of sight. Grimhilde smirked. “It is a gift for Snow White. She ran away and has been in hiding, but it was only a matter of time before I found her.”

Florian shook his head in fear. Please no.

“She dwells with seven dwarfs in a cottage in the woods. There I will go, and there I will give her my present. One bite, and she will fall into a Sleeping Death.”

“You cannot…” breathed Florian. “Please, she does not deserve your wrath. If you need someone to enact your retribution on, chose me. I was the one who trespassed onto your castle grounds; Snow White urged me to leave. Do whatever you wish to me. But Snow White…please…”

Grimhilde chuckled darkly. “You had your chance, boy. You will pay for your insults with your life. Snow White will pay for her crimes with hers.”

“She has committed no crime!”

Anger flashed across Grimhilde’s wrinkled face. “She has done enough.” She tilted her head, eyeing Florian. “As for you, I have changed my mind. Letting you rot here was an enticing idea, but there will surely be consequences if I do not dispose of you quickly.” She ambled to the end of the row of cells. Protruding from the wall was a large wooden lever. Grimhilde grasped the lever and yanked it down. There was a dull clunk from behind the wall, and the sound of chains being moved.

Florian tugged at his chains, straining to see the queen’s decrepit form. “What are you doing?”

Grimhilde shuffled back into Florian’s view. She spared him only a glance as she made her way towards the canal, where the rowboat waited towards her. “Snow White will drown in eternal sleep, but you, dear prince, will drown in the pits of this castle’s dungeons. A fitting end to one so valiant and yet so foolhardy!” A cackle emanated from Grimhilde as she climbed into the rowboat.

There was the sound of rushing water. Grimhilde pushed the rowboat out into the sewage river, allowing the current to speed her along as she rowed. Then, through the gate the river flowed from, a wave of water rushed in. It gave Grimhilde’s boat the final push needed to send her out of the dungeon and from Florian’s view. Once she was gone, there was the sound of a gate being lowered into the river, cutting the water off from leaving the chamber. Water continued to rush into the dungeon. With no exit for it to flow through, it instead poured over the edges of the canal, soaking the floors of the chamber and cells.

Panic shot through Florian, and he scrambled to his feet. He knew calling for the guards would do nothing. Even if they heard him, it was doubtless they would come; certainly the queen had instructed them not to interfere. Yet he had to try. “Help! Someone, help!” Florian desperately yanked at the chains, but they held fast.

He could not die here. Not while Snow White was in danger, unknowing of her stepmother’s new form. He could not. He gave a shout of frustration, pulling at his bounds. Unrelenting, the shackles cut into his bruised wrists and ankles, drawing blood.
The water level was up to his ankles and rising rapidly. Florian glanced about frantically, but could see nothing that might help him pick the locks. There had to be something.

A flashing movement of white caught Florian’s attention, and he turned to see a pair of doves land on the table across the chamber. Florian froze, watching the doves poke at the various tools there. How did they get in here? One of the doves plucked something from the table with its beak. It and its companion soared into the air and flew across the chamber, diving through Florian’s cell bars.

Florian stared at the doves in surprise, watching as they hovered in front of him with frantic flaps of their wings. In the one dove’s beak was a long, slightly bent piece of metal. It was thin in diameter, small enough to fit inside a lock. Understanding, relief, and confusion at the doves’ presence surged up within Florian, but he did not have time to question it. The water was past his knees now.

He held out his hand, and the dove dropped the tiny rod into his waiting palm. Florian brought the rod up to his wrist, thankful that the chains gave him enough length to do so. He shoved it into the lock, moving it about.

He was not exactly skilled at picking locks. In fact, neither of his parents knew he could do so. He had learned it from a kitchen boy he had befriended when he was younger. He had asked where the boy had learned the talent, but his friend had been rather vague about it. Florian hadn’t bothered to press. Not surprisingly, there wasn’t much use of the talent for Florian, but he had practiced it when bored. Picking locks on trunks and doors, just to see if he could. He hadn’t done so in a while. Now he prayed that he could remember how.

“Come on…come on…” he muttered. The water was up to his waist.

There was a faint click, and the shackle on his left wrist snapped open.

“Yes!” Florian passed the rod to his left hand and began working on the other shackle. Above him, the doves circled him frantically, cooing loudly. “I know, I know!” Part of him almost laughed at the ridiculousness of him speaking to doves, but that seemed like an unimportant thing to worry over at the moment.

The right shackle opened, falling into the water with a splash.

Florian ducked into the water. The rushing current pushed and pulled at him, and he used the chain attached to his left ankle to tug himself closer to the lock. Quickly he worked at picking the shackle, cursing the guards for chaining all four of his limbs. Wouldn’t his arms have sufficed?

It was much harder to do the task underwater. His lungs burned, and he knew he’d need air soon. The third lock opened, and Florian pushed himself from the floor. He surged upright, gasping as he broke through the surface.

The water was dangerously high now. It was at his shoulders, and there was no sign it was slowing. The doves flew by his head, their wings brushing against his hair.

“Go, go!” shouted Florian. Still the doves hesitated. “Go!”

The doves gave a final distressed coo, then veered through the cell bars and towards freedom. Florian took a deep breath and dove back into the water.

He pulled himself towards the final shackle securing him to the cell wall. He held out the rod, aiming it at the lock. A sudden rush of water slammed into him, and the rod was wrenched from his hand, tumbling into the current.
Florian let out a gurgled cry, lunging after the rod. He swam in a panic, watching as the rod swirled towards the cell’s bars. Desperately he swiped out his arm…and closed his fist over the rod.

Relief flooded through Florian, then was quickly burned away by the pain in his lungs. Retrieving the rod had wasted precious air, and he knew he didn’t have much time left. Florian twisted around and shoved the rod into the final lock. He turned it frantically, and the lock fell open.

He was not free yet. A fuzzy dimness was growing at the edges of his vision, accompanied by the heightening pain in his chest. He swam to the cell door and reached through the bars, jamming the rod into the door’s lock. It opened within a matter of seconds. Seconds that were all too crucial for him.

Dazed by the lack of air, Florian could barely push himself through the water towards the lever Grimhilde had pulled. An aching weakness was seeping into his limbs, making even the slightest movement difficult.

He closed his hands around the lever. Grimacing with effort, he pulled up. The lever moved slowly – or was it him moving slowly? – but it finally clunked into place. There was the sound of chains moving and mechanisms turning.

Gradually, the water began to recede.

Florian was too exhausted to feel relief. The water level reached his head, and the moment it lowered beneath his mouth he gasped and choked, spitting out the filthy liquid and gulping in the stale air of the dungeon. The pain in his lungs lessened, and he felt his grip on the lever loosen. Too weak to do anything else, he allowed himself to drift away from the cell wall, floating with the water as it decreased.

He vaguely felt his body touch the wet, cold surface of the chamber floor as the final remnants of the water drained away.

*Snow White…*

Her name echoed dimly in his mind. But the darkness was so much more powerful, and before he could even utter it, his consciousness faded.
If I remember correctly, Snow White lies in the coffin for *months* before the prince wakes her. But in my story, since he knows of Grimhilde’s plot, and has animal buddies to help out, his travel time is *much* shorter. It seemed like both Snow White and the queen got to the dwarfs’ cottage within a day or so, so that’s the travel time I’m going with.

Something soft was brushing his chin. There was a distinctive cooing sound, then a gentle tap of something hard against his jaw. Florian groaned, shifting on the damp chamber floor. His eyes fluttered open and he jerked back, startled.

Standing on his chest and staring him directly in the eyes was one of the doves. The dove cocked its head to the side and gave another coo, tapping its beak against Florian’s chin. There was the rustle of feathers next to Florian’s ear, and he turned his head to see the second dove pacing on the floor. Seeing Florian moving, the dove hopped closer and flapped its wings urgently.

Florian slowly pushed himself into a sitting position. He bent forward, pressing the heel of his hand against his forehead to stifle the headache drumming there. Raising his gaze, he glanced about the chamber.

He was alone. The river was back to its regular level, but a heavy wetness still clung to the air, making it strenuous to breathe. The table on the other side of the canal was overturned, its contents strewn about the chamber. In the cells, the many of the decomposing skeletons had washed away, though some bones still lay scattered about. Florian grimaced, feeling sick.

Snow White! Grimhilde’s threat snapped back into Florian’s thoughts. Fresh panic surged in him, and he pushed himself to his feet, staggering as he sought his balance. The two doves flew free of him, hovering frantically.

He had to find Snow White before Grimhilde did. How long had it been since he had passed out? Florian reached up, running a hand through his tangled hair. It was still slightly damp, as were his clothes. Normally, he would find relief in that, assuming that he had been unconscious for only a short time. But with the constant dampness of the dungeon, it was hard to tell. He could have been lying there for hours for all he knew. He growled in frustration, kicking at a molding torch handle on the ground.

Florian glanced at the two doves, who cooed urgently as they swerved towards the canal. He hesitated, looking instead at the corridor leading back to the staircase that ascended into the castle. Perhaps he could somehow make it through the castle undetected by the guards, and escape through the courtyard. He frowned. The possibility of being re-captured seemed too high.

Yet the idea of having to swim in the sewage river was not appealing. The doves flew closer to the arching tunnel Grimhilde had ridden the rowboat down. Florian assumed it led beyond the castle grounds – a perfectly undetectable escape route. But Grimhilde had taken the only rowboat, and Florian knew he was far too exhausted to swim the entire way. He looked back to the table on the other side of the canal. Perhaps he could use the surface of the table as a raft. It wasn’t his best
idea, but it would have to do.

Florian hurried to the river. The water’s surface was only a foot below the edge of the canal, and it seemed to be moving at a much calmer pace than before. Florian narrowed his eyes, trying to see the bottom of the canal. Unsurprisingly, it was far too murky to do so.

Above him, the doves cooed again.

“Yes, yes, I know,” said Florian apologetically. Lowering himself to the floor, he eased into the water and swam to the other side. The current was not strong, so he had no trouble, though by the time he hauled himself onto the wet stones, he felt thoroughly disgusting.

“I’m not sure Snow White will want to meet me again in this state,” he muttered to himself. He rushed to the table and grabbed an axe on the ground a few feet away. Using the tool, he hacked away the legs of the table and cut down the surface to a smaller, more manageable size for him to maneuver. He glanced about, wishing there was a more useful weapon he could take with. But there was nothing he could carry practically, and he resolved to leave the axe on the ground as he dragged the makeshift raft to the sewage river.

Sliding into the water, Florian scrambled partway onto the raft so that his torso and head lay on the wooden surface. With the doves flying ahead, Florian propelled himself down the river, following the path Grimhilde had taken as he floated from the dungeon.

The tunnel seemed to go on endlessly. The light from the chamber torches faded behind him, and soon he was completely engulfed by darkness. Florian was left to blindly push his raft through the water, hoping that there were no branches in the tunnel that he might get lost down. Time dragged on as he moved, and often he was forced to simply lie there on the raft, catching his breath and gathering his strength as the current pushed him to freedom.

He must have passed out again, from the lack of sufficient food and water over the past few days, for when awareness came back to him he found himself blinking up at a star-speckled night sky. He was still lying on the raft, but it had run ashore amongst a tangle of weeds and cattails. The two doves were on his chest once again, plucking impatiently at his clothes.

“Alright…Alright…” he croaked. Slowly, he sat up. He glanced about in confusion, until his gaze focused on the shadowed outline of the castle looming above him. It sat on top of a cliff; at the bottom of it he could vaguely make out the opening of a small tunnel, out of which the sewage river drained into the main river running beside the rocky expanse. Florian shook his head in wonder, amazed he had made it out of the castle in his dazed state.

The river lazily curved past him, trailing off into the expansive woods beyond the castle grounds. Florian felt his heart sink. How was he supposed to find the dwarfs’ cottage? The forest was massive, and the queen hadn’t exactly been detailed when she had mentioned Snow White’s hiding place.

The doves circled Florian’s head once before flying to the edge of the trees. They hovered, turning back to look at him. Florian stared at them hopefully.

“Are you…can you show me where Snow White is?” A few hours ago he would have felt he was going mad for asking doves such a question. But now he was desperate…and strangely convinced that these birds knew exactly where he needed to go.

The doves cooed, circling urgently. There was the sound of heavy steps squelching in the riverbank mud, and Florian spun around.
“Astor!” he exclaimed in relief.

Astor anxiously trotted over the mess of plant growth to her master’s side. She nudged her nose against his head and he laughed softly, stroking it.

“Good girl,” he murmured. He stumbled to the bags hanging from the saddle and yanked the water skin free. He gulped down the water, closing his eyes blissfully as his sore throat was soothed. Feeling more focused, he patted Astor’s mane. “Come on, girl. We cannot delay any longer.” He hesitated as he grasped the saddle, unsure he had the strength to mount his horse. But thoughts of Snow White revived some fervor in him, and he shakily swung up onto Astor’s back.

He gently patted Astor’s side with his foot, prompting her forward. The doves swooped around Astor and Florian, then flew into the trees. Gripping Astor’s reins tightly, Florian urged her to follow the birds into the forest.

Florian and Astor followed the doves for many long hours. The night dragged on, the only light provided that of the moon filtering through the overhanging tree branches. As he rode, Florian felt a growing sense of dread in his stomach. Something had gone terribly wrong, he was sure of it.

Dawn eventually broke, and morning aged into the early afternoon. Florian was weary down to his very bones, but he did not slow, knowing that time was precious. They traveled for the rest of the day, rested briefly at night, then continued on. As the second morning waned, Florian was led through a wall of trees into a small meadow.

There was a coffin made of glass in the middle of the meadow. Sunlight reflected off it, making its surface glimmer in the golden hue of the place. Kneeling before it were seven dwarfs, their heads bowed in the deepest grief. A few animals surrounded the dwarfs and coffin, still and reverent. One glance at the coffin was all Florian needed to confirm his fears.

Snow White lay inside, pale with death.

Disbelieving grief stirred within Florian as he pulled Astor to a stop. She couldn’t be dead. Not after everything he had done to get here. Fate could not be so cruel to them.

The sounds of his intrusion alerted the dwarfs, and many of them turned to face him. Tears stained their faces, their eyes red from weeping. Sorrow clutched Florian’s throat, making it difficult for him to swallow. He dismounted Astor and carefully walked towards the dwarfs.

“You are the prince she spoke of,” said one of the dwarfs. He wore spectacles, and had a face lined with a quiet wisdom.

Florian’s heart ached. She had told them about him. “Yes,” he whispered. “I’m sorry. I tried to come, but the queen…” Fear throbbed in his chest. “Where is the queen?”

“Dead,” said another dwarf. He wore a red cap, and a scowl flickered through his sadness at the mention of the queen.

Florian waited for further explanation, but none of the dwarfs bothered to give him any. His gaze wandered back to Snow White.

“Please,” he said softly. “Please, may I see her? May I say goodbye?”

The dwarfs looked at each other. The one in the spectacles nodded, and the dwarfs obligingly
parted, creating a pathway to the glass coffin.

Nodding his thanks, Florian walked forward. Two dwarfs accompanied him, and as he knelt before it they grasped the edges of the coffin lid, lifting it and setting it on the ground. With the barrier removed between Florian and Snow White, she seemed lovelier as ever. It was as though Death had forgotten to steal away her beauty when he took her breath. Or perhaps Death simply could not bear to do so.

She was so still. The vibrance in her face was gone, the carefree giddiness in her smile no longer to be seen. The fact that the world would no longer have such a bright soul in it seemed like an unforgivable crime. Florian could not leave without expressing his love for her.

Love? Did he love her? Yes. The answer rang clearly in his head, and he could not deny the truth of it. It seemed like a foolish idea, for love to grow so quickly. But Florian could not describe his feelings for her in any other way.

He conveyed his sentiment in a way that was simple, yet pure in its intention. Gently, he pressed his lips to hers. They were cold and lifeless, so unlike how Snow White had been when Florian had first seen her. He pulled away with a sob. Keeping his arm on the coffin, Florian bowed his head, tears welling in his eyes as he shared the misery of the woods around him.

Behind Florian, some of the dwarfs were weeping softly. The guilt in him intensified at the sound. If only he had come in time…

He felt something shift next to his arm on the coffin. Florian jerked his head up and stared in shock as Snow White began to stir.

It was impossible. How could she…?

Florian’s thoughts flew back to what Grimhilde had said when she presented the apple to him. A Sleeping Death. Not death itself. In his exhaustion, he had forgotten that single key word.

Exhilaration and overwhelming relief rose in Florian, and he could not stop the smile spreading across his face. Snow White’s arm stretched upwards in the manner of one waking from a satisfying nap. Behind them, Florian could hear the soft gasps of the dwarfs.

Snow White’s eyes fluttered open. They flickered about in a daze as she gathered her surroundings, then finally focused on Florian. Confusion passed over her expression, but it was quickly doused by happy recognition.

“Florian…” she breathed. “You…how…”

Florian gently stroked Snow White’s cheek. “Hello, princess,” he whispered. “I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner. I was delayed.”

Snow White smiled at him. “You came, that’s what matters.” She raised her hand to brush Florian’s jaw. “My Prince Buckethead.” She gave a gentle laugh.

Florian made a sound that was both a laugh and sob. Grinning broadly, he swept his arms beneath Snow White’s back and knees, lifting her from her coffin. He turned, and the dwarfs burst into jubilant shouts, throwing their hats into the air and jumping up and down in glee.

“Snow White! Snow White! You’re alive! You’re alright!” they cried, rushing forward to greet her.

Florian set Snow White down, and she hurried forward to embrace her friends. Kisses were
exchanged between them all, and Florian watched happily, warmth running through him as the smile he had missed so much curved Snow White’s lips once again.

Finally, she turned towards him. She held out her hand, beckoning, and Florian came to her side, taking her hand in his.

“This is Florian,” she said to the dwarfs. “I’ve been wanting you to meet him for some time now.”

The dwarfs eagerly greeted Florian, shaking his hand and giving him affectionate pats. Florian did his best to greet them all in return, but there were so many of them, and in their excitement it was difficult to get a word in. Snow White laughed as she watched the interaction, finally pulling Florian free of the swarming dwarfs.

“Now, now, don’t suffocate him!” she chided with a grin. Her nose crinkled teasingly as she studied Florian’s torn and stained clothes. “He already is a little worse for wear.”

Florian blushed in embarrassment. In everything that had happened, he had forgotten his appearance. “I had meant to clean up before,” he tried to explain. “But there were complications…”

Snow White smiled. “I understand,” she said. Concern knitted her brow as she eyed the scratches on his cheek.

Florian smiled reassuringly and gently tilted her chin up to draw her attention away from the near-healed wound. “Snow White.” He took both her hands in his. “Please, come with me to my castle. I’ll take care of you, I’ll protect you. You can meet my parents too – they’ll love you.” He glanced at the dwarfs, who were looking rather coy as they exchanged looks with each other. He held back a sigh; he hadn’t been planning on asking her this with an audience. But he had already begun, so he had to finish. “Only if it is your wish,” he added quickly. “But I love you…and…”

“Are you asking me to marry you?” interrupted Snow White. She looked rather amused as she watched him stutter through his string of words.

Florian grinned nervously. “Yes.”

“Well then,” said Snow White cheerfully. She raised herself on her toes and pecked a quick kiss on Florian’s lips. “I will.”

The dwarfs exploded once again into cheers and laughter. Florian laughed with them, and picked Snow White up in his arms, no longer feeling the weariness of his journey here. He carried her to Astor and helped her settle into the saddle.

“Goodbye!” exclaimed Snow White to the dwarfs. She waved at them happily at Florian led Astor away from the meadow. “Goodbye, my darlings! We’ll visit very soon!”

The dwarfs waved happily, shouting their goodbyes and good wishes upon the couple. And so Florian and Snow White traveled to his castle, where they lived in great happiness for the rest of their days.

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