Falls the Scarlet Petal

by bloodyromantic
Night hung in heavy curtains over the high green hills of Marmoreal, but the windows of the castle blazed with light and the halls rang with revelry and gossip. This was to be the first ball held since Frabjous Day, and rumor had it that the Queen's older sister would be in attendance.

In the quarters of Ilosovic Stayne and Casipha Rhoswen, two ladies-in-waiting performed the final arrangements to their finery, awaiting the summons to accompany the Queen to the great ballroom, where the event would officially begin.

“Does this ball seem to be possibly in poor taste?” Rosalba said softly as she finished tying a blue satin ribbon around her friend's neck, leaving the ends to hang freely down Casipha's back.

Casipha shook her head. “I don't know. I think Mirana wanted to give her sister some kind of recognition before she, well, dies.”

Stayne cut in as he entered the room. “Knowing Iracebeth as I do, I imagine she considers this ball as being held in her honor, and as her due. I shouldn't worry about her reaction.”

Ilosovic was elegant in the tailcoat Casipha had persuaded him to wear, something she had warned him in the past that she would do, clothed primarily in his customary black accented with a deep blue silk ascot that brought out the sapphire hue of his remaining eye.

“I never thought I ought to tell you,” Casipha said, “but I always thought you looked magnificent in red. I'm most pleased to find that you look just as magnificent in blue.”

“It's good that you feel that way, because I hope never to find myself wearing red again,” Ilosovic said.

“And you're wearing the eyepatch,” Casipha said softly. She had made that herself, embroidering the velvet spade with blue silk and attaching it to the leather beneath.

“Oh course,” Ilosovic smiled, taking her hands in his.

Casipha herself was attired in a white silk polonaise over an underdress of the same blue as Stayne's ascot—a dramatic departure for court dress, which until now had always been white or pale colors—her sleeves trimmed in deep flounces of lace and blue ribbons, a scattering of sapphire clips sparkling in her court wig.

Ilosovic put a hand at either side of her waist. “I know you don't care to be tightly corseted, and I appreciate that—but you should know that you look absolutely beautiful like this.”

“I'll leave word, then, that if I faint on the dance floor, you're to be the one to take care of me,” she winked. “But I do like that you appreciate my efforts.”

They shared a meaningful glance, and Casipha felt the familiar tightening at her core at his touch. Realizing that Rosalba might be feeling a touch extraneous at the moment, she pulled away and helped her friend fluff out the skirts of her own silvery gray gown.

The sounding of a bugle gave notice that the court was to gather, so Casipha gave her consort a
kiss (gently, so as not to transfer her dark lip stain to his face), and the two women took their leave
of him.

Outside the great ballroom, male and female courtiers took their places behind their Queen, who
looked resplendent herself in a profusion of ruffles of white silk and satin. The double doors were
thrown open, and the court proceeded into the room.

Loud applause rang from the guests in the ballroom at the sight of their ruler and her court, and as
the procession passed through the crowd, the Queen's subjects bowed and curtseyed to her with
pleasure, something they never tired of after Frabjous Day.

Queen Mirana took her place in an extravagantly decorated chair at the far end of the hall, flanked
by several guards, and her courtiers gathered around her and made conversation until she
dismissed them with a smile to go and enjoy themselves. She seemed content enough, smiling as
she watched her subjects and conversing with them as they stopped to greet her.

Casiphia made her way through the noisy throng until she found Stayne at one of the food tables.

“How can you possibly still be hungry?” she said, tilting her head.

“What?”

“Don't think I don't know that you were prowling about the kitchens all afternoon, trading on the
fact that the staff is too intimidated by you to run you off.”

“If no one stops you from taking it, it isn't stealing,” he said.

“You do have a sweet tooth, don't you?” She wiped a bit of jam from the corner of his mouth and
then licked it off her finger.

“I do,” he said, leaning over to bring his mouth to hers and taste raspberry on her tongue.

Casiphia took a tiny cake and began to nibble it carefully, leaning forward to prevent sticky
crumbs from falling on her gown, while looking about to see who was attending the ball.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee were at the far end of the table, arguing with each other concerning
whether cake or pie was the better dessert.

“Oh my, the Duchess is here. With a pig,” Casiphia said. “Or a pig for now, at any rate.”

“He's likely better behaved as a pig than as a child,” Stayne muttered.

“Oh, be fair,” Casiphia chided. “Of course he's irritable; she beats him when he sneezes.
“There are the lion and the unicorn,” she went on. “I hope the guard are paying attention to them,
we don't need another battle between those two tonight. And look, even the Walrus and the
Carpenter are here. But not the oysters. I'm sure they were afraid they'd be eaten,” she giggled.

Their conversation was cut short when the room fell silent, and then began to buzz with quiet
excitement. Entering the ballroom, accompanied by two well-armed guards, was Iracebeth, the
former Red Queen and despised enemy of Underland, as well as Queen Mirana's older sister. Few
had seen her since her return from exile and subsequent sequestering in her own wing at the castle,
where Mirana had physicians monitoring the growth in Iracebeth's brain and resulting behaviors.

Even thick cosmetics, heavily applied, could not disguise the ravages that illness had taken upon
Iracebeth, and it was clear to see that her head was even larger than it had been the last time she
had been seen in public. Still, she was dressed in full regalia, red and gold (though no longer with
heart emblems), and she held herself stiffly upright, refusing to show any shame or fear to her former subjects.

Halfway across the ballroom, guests moved cautiously away from Tarrant Hightopp as he stared daggers at the former queen, his eyes black as raven's wings.
Encounter

I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself.

~Oscar Wilde

Two of Mirana’s guards, standing quietly in the back of the ballroom, drew themselves to attention with their hands upon their swords.

But before their action was required, Nivens McTwisp hurried over from his chair near Mirana and Thackery appeared from apparently nowhere (perhaps he had just come into the ballroom to make sure the food was being served to his specifications), and the two gripped Tarrant by the tails of his emerald green tailcoat to drag him far away from Iracebeth. They had been keeping watch over their friend, and luckily were more alert to his emotional state than was he.

Casiphia glanced sideways at Stayne, who was watching the proceedings with interest. “Be nice,” she said.

“I said not a thing,” he defended himself as Nivens and Thackery delivered Tarrant to the side of the room and stationed themselves on either side of the Hatter.

Tarrant threw himself down in one of the gilt chairs that lined the wall, crossing one leg over the other to balance an ankle upon the opposite knee.

“His socks still don't match,” Stayne observed.

“And they never will,” Casiphia said. “Choose your battles, my love.”

Catching sight of them at the side of the room, the Hatter popped up from his chair and strode towards them. He bowed to Casiphia and asked, “Milady, may I have this next dance?”

Looking sideways to see if Stayne were about to object, and if so, how vociferously, she took Tarrant's hand and stood. “Go ask Rosalba to dance,” she suggested to Ilosovic, then let Tarrant lead her to the dance floor.

Although she was a good bit taller than the Hatter, they were a graceful couple, and Tarrant twirled her elegantly about the marble floor for about half of the waltz the small orchestra was playing. Stayne watched them intently over the top of Rosalba’s pale head, at least when he wasn't looking over at Iracebeth with equal scrutiny.

And then, as Casiphia had expected, she learned the real reason for Tarrant’s invitation.

“Milady, what is the relationship now between our Queen and her sister?”

“I would say that is one of family loyalty and pity,” she began, holding up the hand that had been resting on the Hatter's shoulder. “And no, I do not believe that pity is gaining the upper hand. Mirana is not likely to forget the destruction Iracebeth caused to Underland, and it’s certain that there are many around to remind her if she should.”

“What about Stayne?” Tarrant spat. “What if he still feels some loyalty to Iracebeth? What might he do after she dies, to avenge her or out of some ambition of his own?”

“I know I cannot truly convince you of his intent, but upon my honor, I believe he has renounced
all ties to Iracebeth. He has never tried to see her at this castle unless he was ordered to do so, and from what he has told me repeatedly, he would never choose to return to the way things were.”

Tarrant sniffed and looked skeptical, but fell silent as he and Casiphia concluded their dance. With a kiss of her hand, he released her, and she returned to the side of the room and was soon joined by Ilosovic.

At his suggestion, they abandoned the bustle of the ballroom and adjourned outside onto a terrace for quiet conversation. There she told him of her exchange with the Hatter and listened with a gentle hand upon his arm as he reiterated his distaste at the idea of being involved with Iracebeth in any way, ever again.

“Now I need something to drink,” he said. “Would you rather go back inside or will you wait for me here?”

“I will wait here,” she said. “It’s a lovely night and so peaceful.” So there she stayed, leaning against the railing, breathing in the cool sweet air and watching a few fireflies that seemed unaware that summer was well on its way to fall.

And thus she was startled unpleasantly when she heard the sound of someone clearing her throat, and looked around to find Iracebeth standing at the French doors, standing stiffly upright in her cloth-of-gold gown, despite the evident weight of her enlarged head upon her neck.

“Casiphia Rhoswen,” the former queen said.

“Yes?”

“I am given to understand that you are the one who arranged for myself and Ilosovic Stayne to be brought out of exile,” she said, in a tone more imperious than one might expect for such a topic and such a setting, and with little trace of her characteristic lisp.

“Er, yes,” Casiphia said, struggling for composure. “So you, er, know about. That. Us.”

“My dear, you should be well aware by now how unlikely it is that one can keep a secret In a castle, even from one who is locked away from the rest of the residents.

“I realize you asked that favor of Mirana for the sake of my knave and I understand that.” Iracebeth moved next to Casiphia and leaned on the railing beside her. “But why did you include me in your request?”

“Because...because I felt that your exile had been decreed from emotion and not from justice,” Casiphia said. “I was raised to act in fairness whenever possible, and when I saw that you were not being treated fairly, I felt it necessary to act.”

“You arranged for the roses to be brought to my chambers when I returned, am I correct?”

“Yes, that too.”

“And again, may I ask why?”

“Simply as a kindness,” Casiphia said, at a loss for further explanation.


“I have a request to make of you,” she went on.
Nonplussed, Casiphia gestured to Iracebeth to continue.

“I want you to take care of Ilosovic,” she said. “I wasn't able to do that for him. But perhaps you can.”

“Of course, milady,” Casiphia said, surprised. “I would do no less.”

“Then that is all I need to know,” Iracebeth said, turning on her heel and sweeping back into the ballroom, where her guards fell back into position beside her and accompanied her to her seat. Casiphia stood staring after her until she was distracted by Stayne's footsteps as he ran to her.

“What did she try to do to you?”

“No, it's all right,” Casiphia said. “She knows all about you and me—I suppose I should have expected that rumors would reach even her quarters—but she didn't seem angry. Maybe a bit sad, but I'm not even certain of that.

“Although she did ask me to look after you.”

“She did, did she? Now that does come as a surprise.”

“I told her I would, of course.” Casiphia laid a hand on his arm. “Mostly I'm grateful that she didn't fling herself upon me and force me to shoot her. I had visions of ending up in the dungeons till all that could be sorted out, and I didn't care for those thoughts one bit.”

“My love, if you end up in the dungeons for any reason, I will rescue you and we will run away somewhere far away, together,” Ilosovic said.

“Mmm,” Casiphia sighed, then fell silent for a moment with a small smile on her lips. “I'm sorry, I went far away for a moment, but now I'm back.”

Stayne threw back his head and laughed, then kissed the top of her head and took her arm, leading her back into the ballroom. As a server passed by with a tray of wine, Casiphia took two glasses, handing one to Ilosovic and draining the other. Then she retrieved Stayne's and drained it as well, leaving both empty glasses on a nearby table.

“Surely Mirana has something you could take that would calm you without leaving you sick in the morning,” he said to her.

“I'm fine now,” she told him. “I think. Dance with me now, if you would.”

The complicated steps of a quadrille were sufficient to distract her mind from recent happenings, and the closeness of her love a comfort. She distracted herself for the rest of the evening with social chatter and dancing, and succeeded to a large extent in enjoying the ball, but she had to concede it was a relief when the evening was over and she and Ilosovic could finally retire to their quarters.

Ilosovic had been mulling over his own thoughts throughout the night as well, Casiphia soon learned.
In many ways doth the full heart reveal
The presence of the love it would conceal.
~Samuel Taylor Coleridge

“What an evening that was.” Casiphia kicked her shoes halfway across the bedroom, grateful to finally have them off after so much standing and dancing. Next she de-wigged herself, hairpins scattering on the ground around her, and began peeling off layers of evening dress and underthings. With Stayne there to unlace her stays, she had no need or desire to summon a ladies' maid to help her undress, and she was certain she could do a faster job herself anyway.

Hair finally down and cosmetics removed, she reached for the nightdress hanging over the back of a chair, but was interrupted by Ilosovic. “You don't need that,” he said, and she looked to see that he was already in bed, evidently completely undressed.

“Come to bed,” he said, and she did, and found herself rapidly tossed onto her back and pressed against the softness of the featherbed, her lover astride her with with a look on his face as fervent as any she had ever seen.

He leaned over her, black curls brushing against her shoulders. “Now that we don't have to keep secrets, I'm going to make you call my name so loudly everyone in the castle hears it.”

“Because it will come as such a surprise to all of them,” she managed to get out as she felt his teeth on the soft flesh under her ear, and wrapped her arms around him and dug her fingernails into the flesh of his back as if she were a cat holding on to dinner.

Truly it was if they both were both predator and prey, all but attacking each other with passion and surrendering eagerly to the other's touch. He held her so tightly she knew he must be leaving bruises, and his bites to her breasts and neck and thighs were so sharp as to be painful, but in a way to which she didn't object and which in fact inflamed her all the more.

In turn she held him to her with all the strength of her limbs, running her fingernails down his back repeatedly, biting at his neck and anywhere else she could reach without moving away from his touch.

She would have brought him additional pleasure, but it seemed there was no time for exploration, only raw emotion and mounting physical need. When he entered her, which although soon after they had begun seemed a long time indeed to Casiphia, she felt as though there was nothing she could want more than the feel of him inside her, and indeed she did cry out his name.

When she crested, everything around her, sight and sound, was obliterated in the wave of sensation that crashed over her. Judging from the roar Ilosovic gave as he buried his head in her shoulder, his climax was equally profound. He lay atop her for a bit as she ran her hands through his now-damp hair, and he gave each of her now exquisitely sensitive nipples one last quick bite before he rolled to the side of the bed. Casiphia bent over him so they could share one more deep and intimate kiss. Then she laid her head on his shoulder as he held her close to his body, and in seconds they were both asleep.

* * * * *

Morning announced itself with a wide beam of sunshine pouring onto the bed, as somehow the bed curtains had never gotten drawn the night before. Casiphia stretched languidly as she awoke,
noticing Ilosovic also waking and watching her with his one blue eye.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Verily,” she said, snuggling back onto the bed after flipping back the coverlet so they could bask in the sunshine. Thus they lay for several minutes, until Casiphia sat up in surprise.

“Well, my goodness, look at this,” she said, tracing a line of small bruises along the curve of her inner thigh. “Whatever have you done to me?”

“Something rather like this, would be my guess.” Seeing the bruises on his chest, Casiphia's jaw dropped. “Oh. My!”

“And these,” he said, showing her the scratch marks still red upon his back.

“I should trim my nails,” she said, aghast.

“No, you most certainly should not,” he grinned. “But you might want to wear your hair down today.”

Casiphia picked up a hand mirror from her nightstand, and examined the bruise at the side of her neck and the lips that seemed a bit swollen. “Ah well,” she teased. “You didn't want secrets from the castle; I can't imagine that we'll have any now.”

“Come here,” he said, holding out his hand, and she did so, nestling into the space between his shoulder and neck.

“You aren't put off by this, are you? Have you objections?”

“The entire experience was—tremendous,” she said, giving him a look designed to alleviate all such worries.

“It's good to know I can give you reasons to stay with me,” he said.

“I hope that's not really a concern,” she said, “because that would be absurd. I love you, I am happy with you, and I have every intention of staying with you, like it or not, regardless of any new delights you might have for me in the future.

“Not that I mean to discourage you from those,” she added hastily.

“Certainly not,” he reassured her. “Your reactions are too enjoyable for that.”

She couldn't help but blush at that, and he traced a line of small kisses down her neck and the side of her breast until she pleaded the need for recovery time. He was merciful and moved his arm around her waist, holding her tight.

They stayed that way until the sunbeams had moved from the bed, and then washed and dressed with care to hide bruises, an action that kept Casiphia giggling, to Stayne's amusement, perhaps due to adrenaline lingering in her body. She tied a few ribbons into her hair, so that leaving it down looked intentional, and made certain Ilosovic buttoned his collar up to the neck.

Afterwards, whether or not the entire castle had heard either of them cry out during the night, they were never to know, because its denizens were gracious enough to maintain some decorum about it and said nothing to their faces.
Preparations

*Life is a long lesson in humility.*
~James M. Barrie

Luncheon in their quarters seemed like a wise choice after the assorted strenuous events of the night before, and Casiphia and Ilosovic expected the knock at their door to be a page arriving with a tray. To their surprise, there stood Queen Mirana.

“Your Majesty, please come in,” Ilosovic said as Casiphia rose to her feet in surprise.

“Thank you,” Mirana said with her customary graciousness, but also with a bit of a more complicated emotion.

Without prelude, she began. “Iracebeth is in one of her tempers today. She has broken quite a number of ornamental objects and thrown several chairs at the staff. Also she has raged at length about me and the two of you, as well as persons that I think she has invented in her own head.

“I feared as much, after her good behavior yesterday. That always seems to come with a price. She can seem so thoughtful and aware, and then she's the same ill-tempered child she's been her whole life, if not more so.”

Silently Stayne drew his ever-present sword and handed it to Casiphia.

“Sometimes humor is all we have,” she said to Mirana, who gave them a startled look. Casiphia handed the sword back over to Stayne and added, “I don't like his sword anyway; it's too heavy. Henrietta and I will be just fine.”

“Casiphia, I try to forget that you carry a gun these days—much less that you named it—but you simply will not let me,” Mirana said with a delicate shudder.

“I should think you would feel more secure in that knowledge,” Casiphia said with a faint smile.

“Well, I can hardly blame you for relying on weaponry,” Mirana sighed. “I still can't decide if I have done the right thing bringing Racie here, or if the physicians have done the best they can for her despite their feelings about her reign, or what will happen next. Honestly, I often rue the day my elder sister was born, and then I feel guilty for having such thoughts.”

Casiphia took Mirana's hand and squeezed it gently. “We are all doing the best we can,” she said. “It isn't as though there is a rule book written for such things. Iracebeth is as safe as you can keep her from herself and the rest of us, and we will do what we can to look after ourselves.”

Mirana rose. “I don't suppose I've brought you any information you did not at least have a suspicion of. But I want to keep you informed, and you in particular, Casiphia, because Iracebeth's feelings towards you seem to fluctuate hourly. I was so pleased to hear about the conversation you two had, and I want to believe there is a part of her that still means what she said to you, but I don't want to take chances.”

“I will not leave her side,” Ilosovic promised.

“I doubted you would,” Mirana smiled. “But it reassures me to hear it.”

With that she left the room, leaving the knight and the lady to mull over the tangle of thoughts and emotions Iracebeth always inspired in them, and wait for a lunch that neither of them particularly wanted after their conversation with the queen.
That evening Stayne immersed himself in a hot bath, while Casiphia immersed herself in a bottle of wine she had filched from the cellar when no one was looking.

She drank her way through most of it before Ilosovic was finished with his soak, stumbled across the room, and toppled into bed. Ilosovic didn't know why she was so soundly asleep, but pulled the coverlet over her, climbed in beside her, and fell asleep himself with an arm draped across her waist.

Casiphia was mostly asleep the next morning when she felt someone shaking her.

"Wha'?" she mumbled. "Go 'way."

"My love, if I could, I would let you sleep all day," came Stayne's voice. "But Mirana has summoned us to another Iracebeth meeting."

Blearily Casiphia sat up, and Ilosovic handed her a simple gown. After she pulled that on, he unbraided her hair, brushed it out, and arranged it about her shoulders, then helped her to her feet.

"I owe you some kind of favor for this, don't I?" she mumbled.

"We can discuss remuneration later," he said. "Here, step into your shoes, and let us be on our way."

As they entered the audience room where Mirana, Nivens McTwisp, and several uniformed guards who had once been part of the Red Queen's retinue were already seated at a large table, Mirana could not help but notice Casiphia's bloodshot eyes and the way she shied from the light streaming in the windows.

"Casiphia, what's wrong?" she asked.


"Oh, child," Mirana said, getting to her feet and leaving the room, to return in a few minutes with a tall glass of white liquid. "Drink this—it will make you feel better."

Casiphia obediently did so, choking down the bitter draft. (Mirana's potions did not tend to be concocted with flavor in mind.) And sure enough, within a few minutes she began to feel more alert and far less queasy.

"Your highness, I am so terribly sorry to come to this meeting in such a state," Casiphia said, looking at the ground.

"Ah, Casiphia, my sister has driven people to far worse than a night of too much wine," she said, looking sternly at Stayne, who had the decency to look abashed.

"I've asked you here because Iracebeth's last days are surely upon us. The tumor is beginning to affect her breathing as well as her behavior, and there is no way to remove it without causing further damage. We need to discuss arrangements and make our last visits.

"Ilosovic, I must request that you see her. I suspect there are subjects you two need to discuss, and that no matter how you feel about it now, you will always regret it if you do attempt to make your last peace with her."
Stayne’s expression indicated that he did not agree with this statement in the slightest, but he nodded towards Mirana and kept silent.

“Casiphia, I don't know what to recommend to you because I don't know what state you might find her in.”

“I think I would prefer to avoid her and leave our last contact as the talk we had at the ball. I'd rather leave that as her last memory of me, if indeed she does remember it.”

“Very well,” Mirana said, making a note on a piece of parchment in front of her. “I would also like the two of you, and you also, Nivens, to be at her funeral.”

The three murmured their assent, though Nivens looked a bit horrified at this request.

“Guards, I leave it up to you whether you wish to say a farewell to your former mistress. I will not hold it against you if you decline.”

The guards nodded, and one muttered through his helmet, “I rather suspect we will decline.”

Mirana made another note, and then turned to Stayne and Casiphia. “I have one further request to make of you two. I want to take your horses and go for a good long ride. Take a couple of guards with you to make sure you’re safe, but I can tell you both need some fresh air and something to look at besides marble walls.”

“Thank you, Mirana,” Casiphia smiled.

“Your majesty,” Stayne said, getting to his feet with a bow.

Once outside the room they glanced at each other, and then Casiphia headed for the stables at a run, Ilosovic not far behind, a handful of courtiers and staff looking startled in their wake.
The next afternoon Ilosovic went down to the stables to visit with his and Casiphia's horses, returning to find his lady talking with Mallymknun and preparing to affix one blade of a pair of embroidery scissors to the dormouse's belt.

“You'll want to get this sharpened,” Casiphia told Mally. “And then it should make you a good weapon, much stronger than a hatpin.”

“You're giving her a weapon that she could use to inflict real damage upon me,” Stayne asked.

“Iracebeth is making everyone nervous,” Casiphia explained. “Mally would like to feel better defended. It's hardly an unreasonable request.”

Ilosovic looked unconvinced.

“Very well, Mally, I will give you this on one condition.” Casiphia held the blade above her head while she spoke. “You must not use it against Ilosovic Stayne.”

“You do drive a hard bargain,” the dormouse grumbled. “Very well, then.” She seized the blade from Casiphia's hand, sheathed it in her tiny leather scabbard, and hopped from Casiphia's desk to the floor.

“Bludy begh hid had better not mess with me or Hatter or any of the rest of my friends,” she muttered as Casiphia let her out the door.

“So now you're the purveyor of weaponry to the castle?” Stayne said sourly, leaning against the wall next to his lady.

”You can be rather unpleasant when you're anxious about something, were you aware of that?”

Stayne slid down the wall to the floor and leaned his head back. “I apologize. Though I can't promise I won't do it again, so perhaps we should keep all those who might consider me an enemy at bay.”

“Fair enough,” Casiphia said, sitting down next to him and resting her head against his arm. “Although I do not think Mally really belongs in that category. Acerbic though she may be, I think it would not be a secret if she disliked you to that extent.”

“Mhm,” Ilosovic said, noncommittal.

“When are you supposed to speak with Iracebeth?” Casiphia asked him softly.

“Within the hour, assuming she stays lucid,” Ilosovic said, picking at a loose thread on his black shirt sleeve.

“That means your tribulation is already almost over.”

“That's one way to look at it. Then there is the trial of coming face to face with someone who betrayed my trust in her, led me to betray myself, nearly ruined my life and myself...”
“Then here is your chance to tell her that. You have not had that opportunity before, surely, and I
suspect you will feel more at ease afterwards. Here, turn around and let me rub your back while
we wait. You are hunching your shoulders, you are so tense.”

She rose to her knees and set to kneading out the knots in his shoulders and back, taking a few
chances to run her fingers through his curls while she was at the task, finishing by laying her
cheek against his neck and closing her eyes. He reached back for one of her hands, and they sat
that way until the knock came at the door to summon him to his audience.

“I don’t suppose you would care to accompany me to the meeting?” Ilosovic said, not expecting or
intending that she would take the suggestion seriously.

But she looked into the distance for a moment, pensive, and then said, “I will. I will go with you.
It may be a terrible idea, but I can provide moral support from the back of the room, or be ready to
leap upon her if she insults you beyond bearing.”

“And what if I can’t hold myself back from attacking her?” he said with a hint of a smile.

“Don't make me shoot you,” Casiphia said. “I would try not to hit anything necessary, but I can't
promise always to have perfect aim.”

“Ah, milady,” he said, standing and giving her his hand to help her up. “It is good to have you
watching my back.”

* * * * *

The wing where Iracebeth resided was far away from the heart of the castle, and the halls were
quiet and dim aside from one gas light burning brightly outside her chamber. Two guards flanked
the door, one turning the heavy silver handle to let them inside.

The room they entered was a large bedchamber with a sitting area off to one side, dark and
apparently disused. At the back of the room, next to a heavily curtained window, was a large bed
beside a bureau with a few lit candles, and, swathed in white sheets, a tiny figure. As Casiphia
approached the bed with Ilosovic, she thought to herself how diminished the former queen
seemed, and how large and robust she herself suddenly felt.

The figure in the bed stirred, and a nursemaid appeared to help Iracebeth sit up. Her brilliant red
hair was in tangled knots about her shoulders, and her neck seemed too thin and frail to hold up
the head that was indeed larger than ever. Iracebeth blinked as though the dim candlelight in the
room were enough to hurt her eyes, as perhaps it was, and took note of Stayne and his lady.

“Ilosovic Stayne,” she croaked, then cleared her throat. “My knave and his new lady.”

“Should I...” Casiphia whispered to Stayne, but Iracebeth heard her and made a gesture—still
imperious, even now—for her to stay.

“Iracebeth,” Stayne said, folding his arms and looking down at the woman who had so shaped his
life.

“Here we are again,” Iracebeth said in a soft lisp. “But under such changed circumstances. I am
not sure that anything in my life has been what I wanted it to be, but your friendship perhaps came
the closest. I know you were not always pleased to be at my side, but you stayed with me
nonetheless, and you did a great deal more for me than those simpering fools I called courtiers.

“I’m certain that I have loved you in a way you have never loved me, and I suspect I may have
treated you badly on occasion because of it.”
Ilosovic strove mightily not to roll his remaining eye heavenward, and for the most part succeeded. Casiphia, for her part, looked saddened.

“Regardless of all of that, Ilosovic, I shall soon be gone and I shall trouble you no longer. I merely wanted to say my fairfarren to the man who stood more steadfastly beside me than my own family or husband did. We had a tremendous adventure, did we not? I regret that it came to an end so soon.”

Iracebeth motioned to Casiphia to come closer, which she did with some trepidation. Stayne touched her back reassuringly as she did so.

“You and I have spoken,” the deposed queen began. “I haven't much to add, save to beseech you to stay close to Mirana and help prevent her from taking her little magics too far. She can be a very odd one, I'm sure you know, and a good court will be a great help to her. I imagine one would have been a great help to me,” she mused.

Turning again to Casiphia, she said, “If I cannot have him, I am glad to at least make the acquaintance of the one who does. Now, would you give Ilosovic and me a moment of privacy?”

Casiphia looked to Stayne, who nodded tiredly, and retired to the sitting area of the room, brushing dust off a wing chair before dropping into it. From there she could hear soft voices, growing in emotion, but no distinct words. Her mind was wandering to other realms when Ilosovic strode to her, looking grim, pulled her to her feet, and said, “Let us leave now.”

Once outside the bedchamber, Casiphia asked him, “What was that last exchange about, if you don't mind my asking?”

“She asked me to kill her. All the times I thought about killing her, and as close as I came on Frabjous Day, and now she wants me to kill her. I can't tell the difference between vengeance and kindness in this case, so it's not a decision I can make.”

“It is not a decision you should make in any case,” Casiphia told him sternly. “You know the rules of conduct here, and you know how Mirana would feel if you killed her now, after everything that has transpired over the past year.”

Stayne crossed the hall to a marble bench and there collapsed, holding his head in his hands. Casiphia noticed that they were shaking.

“Come, my love,” she said softly, and drew him to his feet and to a door that led outside to a quiet garden. There she brushed away a few crisp golden leaves and bade him lie down on the warm soft grass, where he could feel the warm of the earth beneath him despite the change of seasons and the tiny hint of coolness in the air. The afternoon was still and quiet, the sun drawing downwards, and the tree overhead just beginning to shed its coppery leaves.

She undressed herself and then her lover, and there slowly, softly, made love to him. She gently kissed every scar and bruise and ran her hands gently over his body as he lay with his eye closed, sun warm on his face. When, with a kiss, she took him inside her, he slid inside smoothly and she made sure they were both fully present for every stroke and caress.

They moved so deliberately that when climax came for them both, it grew as naturally and effortlessly as a wave grows as it approaches the shore—as smooth, and fully as inexorable. Casiphia felt tears spring to her eyes as the sensation faded away, emotion following fast behind physical fulfillment, her heart so full of emotion there were no words for it. Quickly she laid her head on Ilosovic's chest so that he would not see, expecting that he would immediately be
concerned, but he felt the tears on his skin and drew her chin up so that her eyes met his. And there she could see that he understood and even shared her sentiments, and no explanations were called for.

There they lay with limbs entwined, silence broken only with occasional murmurings of words of love and reassurance, until the sun grew too low and shadows began to bring coolness into their refuge.

“A quiet dinner alone tonight?” she asked. “I'm sure Mirana will understand.”

“I'm constantly surprised how well you understand,” Ilosovic told her. “You realize you know me better already than Iracebeth ever could,” he said.

“This does not surprise me,” she replied dryly. “But I am honored to be your confidante and your love.”

They returned to the castle almost in a daze, perhaps the closest they had ever felt to each other, deeply aware of the mix of the bitter and the sweet in their lives.
The next several days were difficult for everyone at the White Castle, whether one felt pity for the former Red Queen or were anxious for her to be dead and gone (or possessed a deeply uncomfortable combination of the two). The castle seemed under a shadow no matter how many extra gaslights and candles were lit, and a hush fell over every corridor.

Ilosovic Stayne and Casiphia Rhoswen did as they were wont to do in times of distress, drawing closer to each other and hiding away from everyone else, as if pretending that they populated a world of only two. They sat on their terrace reading books and taking pleasure in the last of the summer's roses. They went for long walks through the castle gardens, took their tea in their quarters, lay silently on their bed holding each other, the other's company providing comfort nothing else could.

“I wonder if I will have more or fewer enemies after she dies,” Stayne mused one morning as they leaned on the terrace railing, looking out at the changing leaves in the distance.

“It was widely considered that if you were to overthrow Iracebeth, you would be a more acceptable ruler than she. Harsh, perhaps, but fair,” Casiphia said.

“How do you know this?”

“Courtiers know more than people realize,” she said. “That's one reason we are valuable.”

“You are valuable for many more reasons than that,” Ilosovic said. “Don't forget it.”

Casiphia slipped an arm around his waist and leaned her head against his upper arm. “Tell me truthfully, love, how are you doing?”

Ilosovic was silent for a moment before he answered. “Truthfully, I do not know yet. I must admit that I am glad Iracebeth will soon be no more a part of my life, but it seems a terrible way to feel when we were partners of a sort for so many years. We were close once, and that is nothing something I can forget or disregard.

“But the feeling of relief that comes over me when I think that I will finally, truly, be free of her...that is overwhelming. To hasten that along—I try not to think of it, but I admit I am eager for that day.

“So I suppose, to answer your question, I don't expect to have a breakdown or go into mourning for months on end, but I remain confused and uncertain, and that is not comfortable in the least for me.”

“I think I understand that,” Casiphia said. “Just know that I will be at your side and I will help in any way I can, and this I promise from the heart.”

“That is what helps. Your presence and your love. Your strength and fierceness and humor.”

Casiphia reddened. “Now I am becoming uncomfortable. Let us find something else to do lest I be forced to throw something at you to distract you.”

Ilosovic laughed. “Milady. Let us indeed. Perhaps we can begin with tea, if you promise to use the
cups for their intended purpose rather than flinging them at my head. You wouldn't want to take
work from Thackery, now, would you?”

* * * * *

The very next morning, sonorous bells tolled to announce the death of Iracebeth, former Queen of
Hearts, and servants moved instantly to drape the castle with black hangings. Whatever had
transpired between the two sisters, or between Iracebeth and all whom she had terrorized,
Iracebeth was royalty, and custom was to be observed.

To his bemusement, Stayne was making his way down a corridor in the courtiers' wing when a
parlor maid called out to him. “Sir, if ye would, might ye help me with hanging banners above
some of the higher doorways and window frames?” He did so, of course—it would have been
unseemly to refuse—and that brought into high relief how very much his life had changed and
how quickly.

Funeral preparations were conducted quickly and out of sight, and word circulated that all who
wished were welcome to attend the service the next day. Casiphia naturally found herself needed
in her capacity as lady-in-waiting, helping Queen Mirana direct her staff as to where to go and
what to do, helping organize visitors as the queen's subjects began clamoring at the castle
entrance, curious and eager to help, and most importantly, being there as a friend of the queen
when emotions and logistics became too much for her to handle.

“Love, I'm sorry, but I must devote my attention to court matters and my queen today,” Casiphia
said to Stayne at the doorway of the queen's audience room, perhaps an hour after her initial
summoning to her ruler's side.

“I am certainly aware of the requirements of court,” he said. “I will be near if you have need of me
—just send someone to find me.”

She sent him off with a kiss and he took himself off to the stables to enjoy the peaceful company
of the horses. To be sure, his steed Brautigan had some tart commentary that could not exactly be
defined as soothing, but Stayne was not sorry to have an old companion with whom he could
discuss events and possibilities. They later took a ride together around the castle grounds and
passed several hours that way, before Ilosovic made his way back to the courtiers' quarters to
await the return of his lady, having heard nothing from her the entire day.

“Mmm,” was all she said as he rubbed her stiff neck and shoulders, hanging her head down in
exhaustion. She refused to lie down or take a bath, fearing that she would not awaken in time for
dinner if she did so, but did allow him to take her out on the terrace to look out at the hills and
waterfalls and trees, something that did—as always—manage to soothe.

Dinner in the great hall was a quiet affair, with both queen and courtiers drained and weary after
the long and demanding day. Stayne tactfully refrained from making any comments about
Iracebeth whatsoever, and said nothing when Casiphia dropped her fork in her lap and stared at it
for a time before retrieving it. Afterwards he insisted that Casiphia turn in early, a request she did
not protest.

But that night she shot bolt upright in bed, drenched in sweat, after dreaming yet again of the
attackers who had beset her and Stayne on the way home from her parents' house some months
before. Stayne woke instantly and gripped her upper arms as she scrabbled at her thigh for the gun
holster that was not buckled to her leg, but beside her bed on her night table. “Shh, shhh,” he
hissed as he shook her awake—possibly not the best way to handle her alarm, but her nightmares
were something that scared him.
Finally she woke enough for him to reassure her, and at last fell back asleep, but Ilosovic slept fitfully if at all. Surely the night passed too quickly for him to have been continuously awake, but it certainly felt as though he had lain awake, pensive, for its entirety.
Reckoning

[Perhaps nothing ‘ud be a lesson to us if it didn’t come too late. It’s well we should feel as life’s a reckoning we can’t make twice over; there’s no real making amends in this world, any more nor you can mend a wrong subtraction by doing your addition right.

~George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), Adam Bede

The next morning arrived far earlier than anyone was ready for, and official preparations and functions again took over the lives of everyone living at the White Castle, not to mention a good number of those tangentially involved.

During the previous day of nearly interminable meetings, one of the longest had been the one to decide whether the court should wear traditional black mourning or official court white. Eventually the courtiers had decided that black was feasible, as most of them at least had mourning attire in their wardrobes from the funerals of the King and Queen of Spades. Seamstresses and seamsters were hastily recruited to take the old garments out or in as needed and to provide any missing pieces of clothing.

As Ilosovic Stayne had a wardrobe of primarily black already, he was the one person at the castle who had no need of new or refurbished clothes. The courtiers, on the other hand, were rushed into fittings as soon as they had contemplated breakfast, most not being in a frame of mind to actually eat any of it.

And so before noon a slow procession of women and men clad in black that contrasted sharply with their white court wigs processed to the Marmoreal cemetery, carefully flanking their snowy-haired queen so as not to step upon her long dark train.

Not many others were present to watch the white and red coffin being interred in the old graveyard. (“Iracebeth would have a conniption over the colors,” Ilosovic whispered to Casiphia, thus confirming the choice of the court not to wear white.) Mirana stood at the side of the grave surrounded by courtiers, one of whom stood at the outside of the group at the side of the former Knave of Hearts. A disgruntled-looking Nivens McTwisp was there, seemingly out of obligation, as he had worked for Iracebeth for many years, and the Tweedles were also present, surprisingly, only occasionally poking or shoving at each other, recalling how Iracebeth had never been particularly horrible to them, for some reason, at least not that they had noticed.

“Would anyone like to speak? Ilosovic?” said Mirana. There was naught but silence in answer. “Very well then, we shall continue with the burial.”

Four of Mirana’s guards lowered the coffin into the ground, and the queen threw in a handful of earth. Then the guards set to covering the coffin with clods of dirt. Once they were finished, the cemetery keeper would lay into place a simple marble plaque with Iracebeth’s name and dates of birth and death, a plaque which would be covered with flowering vines by mid-spring.

But spring was a long way away, and until then, a rotating guard detail would keep watch in the cemetery to ensure that no one defaced the grave, or worse.

Mirana walked slowly from the cemetery, downcast, wondering how matters had come to such a turn.

“I can never forget the horrible things my sister did, and the ruin she made of this beautiful land,” she said. “And yet I cannot but be aware that she was the last family I had, and now I am alone in the world.” Stopping suddenly, she burst into tears.
Her courtiers began to protest, but it was Rosalba who spoke out and said, “Your majesty, we have all grown up together and we have been close for so many years. We are your family, and so are the many friends you have. And we are family you can trust and rely on and who will always be here for you.”

Mirana turned a tearful face to Rosalba, who took the queen in her arms and held her while she cried, as the other courtiers gathered about in concern and murmured reassuring words, for lack of any more practical action.

One of her men-in-waiting wiped tears and smeared eye makeup from Mirana's face with a snowy linen handkerchief and took her hand until the worst of her anguish had passed. It was clear that Mirana needed the love and support of her courtiers, and they spent the rest of the day tending to her needs and doing their best to distract her from her sorrows.

That night dinner was served in the great hall as usual, but still no one had much of an appetite, even those such as Tarrant Hightopp who might have been expected to tuck into their meal with gusto. Casiphia and Ilosovic took their usual seats, but Stayne was more uncomfortable than usual, looking about him from time to time to see if anyone were casting him wary looks. But other than a few curious glances sent his way, he noticed no one paying him unusual attention. Rather, the diners spent most of their time staring at their plates and soup bowls and trying unsuccessfully to work up motivation to eat.

Afterwards Mirana adjourned to her favorite audience room and the courtiers gathered around her once again. Seeing that Casiphia was drooping more by the minute, Ilosovic dared to whisper to Mirana, “Your Majesty, would you object to excusing her for the evening?”

“Oh, by all means,” Mirana said. “I should have thought—I know Casiphia is not fully herself yet and it has been a long and I'm sure strange day for her. Yes, do take care of her, Ilosovic, and thank you for bringing that to my attention.”

With a shake of his head over how differently the two sisters of Underland had come to treat their employees, Ilosovic returned to Casiphia's side and silently offered her his arm. She gave him a tiny smile and accepted it, and the two left for their quarters. Stayne cared not who might think they were callous or perhaps being granted extra privileges, but Casiphia knew that all circumstances at that moment could be considered extenuating, and her recent life difficulties were hardly a secret.

Ilosovic took Casiphia out onto the terrace that ran along their living quarters, there to seat her on a bench in the moonlight with a cloak around her shoulders. He then slumped beside her with a sigh and put an arm around her, stroking her hair. Sometimes they talked, mostly about Iracebeth and Mirana, but it was the touch and company that provided both the most comfort.

* * * * *

The next morning a weasel in full livery knocked at the door to escort Stayne and Casiphia to Mirana's personal sitting room, where she sat at a table piled high with dog-eared papers.

“And here we are, attending to business now,” Mirana sighed. “Although admittedly my sister could have left me with a far greater mess than she did.

“Any guesses as to her last words?”

“Let me think,” Casiphia said. “'Off with her head'?”

“Indeed,” Mirana said. “If it's any consolation, I'm fairly sure she was referring to me. I'm glad I
didn’t grant her a final wish.”

“Ah, Iracebeth, always predictable,” Ilosovic grumbled.

“Funny, too, as she said that was a quality of the White Court,” Casiphia mused.

Casiphia peered at the papers in front of her. “Iracebeth's will?”

“Have a seat, please, both of you, and we will go through this together,” Mirana said. After they did so, she continued, “My sister left me her papers and books, and whatever jewels and works of art are left after the ransacking of her castle. This will take some time to put right, but at least she is giving me the opportunity.

“Casiphia, she left you the gardens at Saluzen Grum.” Casiphia looked surprised and pleased. “The distance between here and there is a complication, of course, but I'm sure we can find a staff of willing gardeners, particularly if you plan to change her design entirely.”

“Ilosovic, Iracebeth willed you the Red Castle.”

Stayne's face cycled through several emotions: shock, disbelief, wonder, finally settling on outrage.

“Whyever would she do something so absurd? Does she think I have fond memories of that place, that I would want constant reminders of her wretchedness?”

“Who else would she leave it to? I gather she thought you had some appreciation for its beauty, although she probably expected you to have a sentimental attachment to it that I see you do not.” Mirana gave a humorless little laugh.

Casiphia cut in. “First, it shows that she did have some recognition of what you did for her throughout the years, Ilosovic, even if she came to that realization late on. Secondly, what else can be done with it? It's such a beautiful building and it would be a shame to tear it down when there might be something else that could be done with it.”

“Here's a thought,” Mirana said. “It may seem far-fetched, but the castle could be remodeled into a place that all of Underland could use. I'm thinking of a library, a hotel and tavern, a ballroom for Underland-wide events. If it makes you feel any more enthusiastic, think how much Iracebeth would have hated the idea.

“And Ilosovic, at least until we figure out what else to do with you, you might act as administrator.”

Stayne choked. “Administrator? Of all the positions my experience may have prepared me for, I would think that would suit me least.”

“But consider,” Casiphia interjected. “No one else knows that castle and its contents the way you do. You can hire people to do the routine tasks, that is certainly not out of the question. And as the queen points out, this gives you something to do until we can find a position that is more appropriate for your talents and skills. As much as I enjoy having you around, I can't think that you will be entertained by that forever.

“You can decide what might be appropriate functions for the various wings and rooms, and I can spend time in the gardens sketching my own plans.”

“Remember that winter is coming,” Mirana said, “and make your plans accordingly.”
We had best get started right away,” Casiphia said. She slid Stayne a glance. “Incidentally, there is one particular storage room you might want for an office.” Ilosovic chuckled while Mirana pretended not to have heard that remark.

“Love, I think this is the first time I’ve seen you smile without looking troubled in weeks,” he said, regarding his lady fondly. “I suppose if for no other reason than that, I should accept this offer.”

Casiphia took his hand. “Your acceptance may be nothing but chivalry, but I thank you for it. And I am so looking forward to seeing what we can make of that place where so much pain and cruelty once were.”

“The place where we met,” Ilosovic reminded her.

“The place where we met,” Casiphia smiled.

~fin~

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!