

Untitled Snow White Retelling

by Emily Michel

Chapter 1

Like everything in her life, including her name, Rane's fairy tale began with an accident. She balanced precariously on a thick, knobby branch and stretched for the rosy apple just out of reach. Her dog circled the tree, barking and whining in warning. She teetered for an instant, but a triumphant smile flourished on her lips as her fingers closed around the fruit. Catching herself on the trunk of the tree, she yanked on the apple, and it pulled away from its branch with a satisfying snap.

"Easy, Bash," she said to the distressed hound. "I'm fine."

Bash let out one last, low whine and settled into a small hollow in the tree's roots. It wasn't her fault she was so protective. The fairy hound had been bred to be a loyal companion and a guardian to keep Rane safe from dangers both known and unknown, even when she herself was the danger.

She slid down the trunk until her ass hit the branch of the oldest tree in the ancient orchard, one of the few places away from prying eyes where she could be herself. Dangling a leg in the air below, she polished the fruit on her threadbare tunic. Rane bit into the firm, snow-white flesh. Nothing tasted so good as a stolen apple on a beautiful autumn day.

She should have been in the castle today helping to set up for the big feast tomorrow instead of taking refuge among the twisty trees and ramshackle sheds. The ambassador from Teruelle was due later, and her mother had asked—no, ordered—her to help the steward with the guest quarters. That being the last thing she'd wanted to do, Rane snuck out right after breakfast, leaving the details to her much more obedient and efficient siblings.

Besides, wasn't it more important she take advantage of the last two months before she turned twenty-one than help old Radclyffe make a few beds? The orchard was an excellent place to disappear for a few hours. Her life would change after her next birthday, and not for the better. New duties, less fun, and it would be time to pick a husband from her limited options. The thought ripped away a bit of her joy and soured the apple she held. Rane pulled out her knife and cut off a piece.

"Here you go." She dropped it.

Bash lifted her head, tail thumping against the ground, and snatched the small piece out of the air. The dog resembled a normal hound for the most part, but her eyes were as blue as the summer sky, and the pattern of her coat was too symmetrical, with three perfect circles of dark brown fur along her spine. Rane smiled and bit into the apple, its sweetness restored. If nothing else, she'd always have Bash.

A low rumble drew her attention to the road. A dust cloud hung over the wide thoroughfare, and two mounted guards led a trio of carriages surrounded by another ten guards. The coat of arms shone through the dust kicked up by the horses and wheels of the lead carriage. A red saltire crossed the crest from corner to corner behind the

crouching green dragon on a field of gold, announcing the ambassador from Teruelle was ahead of schedule. Well, shit, it appeared her morning adventure would be cut short.

She'd left her mare in a meadow on the other side of the road. Rane would have to ride like the wind to beat them to Avora once the delegation passed. But they didn't pass; they slowed.

The mounted guards fanned out to the edge of the old orchard. The doors to the carriages opened, spewing their inhabitants onto the dusty road. From the lead carriage, a young man emerged. He wore travel-rumpled clothes that seemed a bit too big, as if he wanted to hide in them. There was a placid, almost vacant, expression on his face as he helped the woman with him exit with a flourish worthy of the most insipid dandy in the Lorean court. This must be the young ambassador, Lord Nevar of Otero, and the advisor sent along to help the novice diplomat not fuck things up. Idoya, Mother of All, help them. King Armel had sent a sycophant as ambassador.

Most of the party stayed close to the carriages, a few heading into the woods on the other side of the road. The lordling waited until the woman's attention was drawn elsewhere before shuffling into the orchards, heading in Rane's direction in an awkward zigzag, a guard following in his wake.

"Go hide, Bash."

Bash could sniff out a shady character from a furlong away and run faster than a horse. Should the ambassador prove a threat, the dog would be at his throat before Rane could call for help. The hound whined, whipping her tail back and forth in protest. Rane gave her the hand signal to go, and Bash obeyed, taking off like a shot. The undergrowth barely trembled with her passing.

Rane drew her leg up and huddled against the tree trunk. The leaves would shield her from discovery if the goddess looked favorably upon her. She stilled her mind, wishing she hadn't left the invisibility charm with her horse. Sunny wouldn't do much more than search for greener grass to munch on, but Rane hadn't wanted her to contend with the bears she'd heard snuffling around during her journey out. Though she hadn't heard, smelled, or otherwise sensed them, the occasional fey creature wandered this area hunting for easy prey.

She certainly wouldn't waste her single boon from her godmother on retrieving the charm when her own stealth should be sufficient. Rane dared to look toward the road again.

The ambassador gesticulated clumsily at the man trailing him. The guard glanced over his shoulder, his attention on the woman traveling in the lead carriage. The ambassador said something with a feeble smile, and the guard mirrored the smile before striding off toward the rest of the party.

As he slipped away from the guard, the ambassador's strange, shuffling gait and blank expression vanished. The further he wandered from the road, the taller he seemed, gaining an inch or two in height, and he walked with a distinct spring to his step. He transformed before her eyes from a vacuous little lordling into a confident man, leaving her to question why he felt the need to hide his true nature.

His long strides brought him to her tree in no time. She noticed his square-jawed face right away. How could she not? He wasn't just handsome. He was goddess-

blessed beautiful. His reddish-brown flawless skin, strong nose, full lips, and tight black curls were something out of a dream.

She leaned out from her well-hidden perch, desperate to figure out what made this man different from any she'd met. The leaves fluttered and crackled around her. He looked up, his eyes as sharp as bronze knives. She gasped at the intensity of his gaze and let go of the branch she held for balance.

"Fuck," she said as she lost the battle and slid off the tree.