

## CINDER CILLA

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Priscilla Beaumains was having a banner day. The kitchen fires had just about lit themselves that morning, so instead of being ordered to walk barefoot in the snow for more kindling, she was allowed to stay in and scrub the grout between the tile. The kitchen floor was three hundred feet long and twenty-five across, so she was sure she'd have enough work to keep her warm and toasty. Of course, that was not usually a problem in the kitchen, where the fires were kept roaring all day, but you never know. A stiff breeze might find its way in, and then where would Cilla be? Certainly not warm and toasty, I shall tell you that. The rags she wore did little enough to keep out the chill.

Warmth was one of the three important passions in Cilla's life. It would be one of yours as well if you had had to sleep in the drafty little corner of the cellar she had to herself. There was no bed, only a straw pallet, but she had wheedled enough away from the stables to burrow herself in at night.

The second passion was food. Cilla was, as most of the kitchen girls were, soft and round, but she was also taller and larger framed, and as such, it took her much more energy to do everything. Just breathing, for example, was made difficult because her nose and mouth were at

a higher altitude. In consequence, she was always hungry. And the aromas she worked in the midst of, day in and day out, were enough to drive her insane with longing. She never got any, because the meals prepared in the kitchen were for the royal family, and the royal family's guests and retainers, as well as the royal family's personal servants and the royal family's servants' servants and the royal family's dog. Cilla got bread and water twice a day and some thin soup on Sundays, if she had been good. So any extra tidbit she could pick up—any discarded crust or peelings—she snatched when she had the chance and confessed on Sundays after her soup.

Cilla had not been born to this life of crime. She had never been meant to do menial labor at all. Her father was a well-off merchant when she was born and her mother was the most delicate, elegant lady in the world. But then her mother had proved too delicate for this world and her father had proved too well off to remain single for long, but not quite well off enough to support his new wife's taste for fashion. Cilla was thirteen when her stepmother had sold her services to the palace kitchen. Cilla never saw any of her wages, but she had been assured that they went directly to her family, and she utterly believed that they did. So she never complained and calmly waited for the day her hard work would bring her father out of the red and she could go home. The other girls thought she was uppity, because she didn't say much and she never tried to make friends, but really, when you believe you'll be going home even as soon as the next day, what is the point? Cilla was a difficult girl to get to know and an easy girl to trip going down the stairs. Those were two things she learned about herself working in the kitchen.

I didn't tell you the third passion. That was Rupert.

You see, just a year ago, she was out in the yard near the stable when one of the Prince's retainers called her over and said, quite naturally, "You look like a sturdy girl. Do us a service and hold His Highness' horse while I help him mount." So Cilla had taken the reins of the

Prince's horse while his friend Sir Rolf helped him up. "I wish," the Prince said while this was in process, continuing the conversation he and Rolf had been having, "that I could be a roving musician and see the whole world. I would give up the throne to do that."

"But you'd be away all the time," said Rolf. "Your wife wouldn't appreciate that."

"She could come along," the Prince suggested.

Rolf laughed. "Can you imagine a princess living on the road? They're bad enough in a stationary palace."

The Prince sighed. "I would like to marry a girl who wouldn't mind. I would marry a gypsy or a wheel-maker's daughter if she would only let me be me and talk to her honestly."

Cilla had never even seen the Prince before that. She hadn't had the slightest notion what he was like. She had heard, of course—that he was intense, moody, and unfriendly, that his father couldn't do a thing with him. And that he was devastatingly handsome. Priscilla had never given much thought to him; she had only been curious the way most people are about celebrity. But now she knew him as a person. He had a voice she could recognize—soft and deep and slightly ominous, like the rumbling of distant thunder. He had a face, drawn and thoughtful. Her heart thudded as she gazed up at him, and she wanted to yell, "Me! Right here! Me!"

"Well, let's go. Thank you very much for your assistance," Rolf said to her, as he climbed onto his own horse unaided.

The Prince looked at her for the first time, his blue eyes like bright ice, and quickly averted his gaze. "Yes, thank you," he said timidly.

Cilla only nodded. She didn't trust her voice. She watched them ride away, and she wanted to shout at all the people who had ever knowingly told her anything. She knew more

than any of them today. *He's shy!* she cried to herself, since she had no one else. *He isn't moody or unfriendly at all! He's just shy and thoughtful and he wishes! Oh, he wishes!* She never knew princes had wishes like ordinary people.

And that was the beginning of the third passion. Since that day, she, who had never shown an interest in girlish chatter with her kitchen mates, began pumping the cook for gossip and listening eagerly when one of the girls had news about the Prince.

Rumor had it that his father had smashed his harp in frustration. Rumor had it that his mother was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Rumor had it that the Prince's friends Sir Rolf and Don John had been forbidden to see him until he chose a bride. Rumor also had it that if the Prince did not agree to marry by his eighteenth birthday, he would be denied the crown forever and the kingdom would pass to some distant cousin. They said his eighteenth birthday ball would be his last chance to pick out a suitable wife on his own. Incidentally, the Prince was turning eighteen the next day.

Which meant the ball was tonight. Cilla was so beside herself with excitement and anxiety, the morning's chores flew by. She was going to the ball. No one knew it but her, for she had no one to confide in, but she was going. She was most definitely going. She couldn't remember when it was exactly she had decided or what made her think she could do it, but she knew now that she had to be there for the Prince—for Rupert. That was his name and she had taken to calling him by it when she spoke of him to herself. Though she had no other belongings, she did have three things she had hidden away in her cellar. Items one and two: she had a pair of her delicate, elegant mother's slippers. Her father had smuggled them to her some months after she had come to the palace with a note explaining that he had always wanted Cilla to have them for her wedding, and that her stepmother was currently hawking everything that

had belonged to Cilla's mother. Her father wrote that he hoped he would one day see his dearly departed's shoes on his little girl's feet, and sealed the note with tear drops.

Cilla also had the dress that she had worn the day her stepmother dropped her off. Her stepmother had complained to her father that it was too fine for her, but Cilla's father had made a rare insistence. Of course, Cilla had received and been ordered into her kitchen rags almost immediately, so the dress had hardly been worn. She had guarded it carefully for the day she would be told she was going home, so she could return to her father like a lady. She never wanted him to see her in her present state.

It was not a proper ball gown, but it would have to do. For months, from the day she had decided that she would be at the ball, she had worked on it, nicking what she needed from the ladies' maids. She had grown some, and the dress' hem had had to be let down. To her surprise, her waist had shrunk, though she still felt plump and embarrassingly large. So the dress had been taken in. The sleeves had been shortened, the neckline lowered, and some of the childish lace removed. She would look frightfully plain, especially with no jewelry, but for her Prince, she would go. She had had to stay up late nights and work by starlight, stabbing her fingers in the dark; there was not time during the day.

But she had to be there for her Prince. It was not that she thought he would look at her or dance with her or even notice she was there. That he might glance her way, that she might meet his soulful blue eyes once more and he recall for the briefest moment the girl who once held his horse—that was too wonderful a hope. No, she hardly cared if he knew she was there or not. But she should be there. It would be a trying time for him, with so much pressure to choose a bride, and she should be there, who alone understood him completely and knew what he wanted

from life. Not even his closest friends could say that. And more than that, tonight felt like her last chance.

She couldn't stay long. The ball did not begin until nine o'clock and she must be back before twelve when the head cook would do a bed check. She would have to miss evening chores and her bread and water, and it was likely in the morning the cook would be cross. Cilla wondered vaguely if she might be so cross she'd have Cilla stuffed into one of the great cook pots and sealed inside for the day. Cilla had seen the head chef do that to some of the kitchen boys. That was one lucky thing about being a girl; the head chef never bothered the girls except to pinch their backsides.

After the midday meal had been prepared, Cilla sneaked off to her cellar. She needed to bathe and wash her hair. The water had to be the icy kind straight from the well and perhaps Cilla would catch pneumonia from it, but it could not be helped. If she did catch pneumonia, she reasoned, she would not feel it until the next day, and that was plenty of time. Whatever happened to her tomorrow did not matter. Tomorrow, Rupert would no longer be her Prince. He would be Heir Apparent, and then he would be King, and moreover he would belong to someone else. Cilla only hoped Someone would be kind to him.

As she shivered in her straw bed, waiting for her hair to dry, she took out her mother's slippers and admired them. They at least were beautiful. She had not put them on since she had first received them; they were so delicate and elegant she was afraid they would break. Sighing, she laid them aside and pulled on her dress, feeling how coarse the fabric seemed now, on her raw and chilled skin. She piled her brown curls high atop her head, letting a few ringlets cling gently to her cheeks. Perhaps she might be able to borrow a barrette or comb from one of the ladies' apartments on the third floor of the palace. Nothing too fine, of course, and she would

return it before she went down to bed. Cilla had only been in that area of the palace twice before, however, and she worried about becoming lost and losing her precious time. The kitchen people were kept downstairs.

Deciding she must leave her hair without ornament, Cilla reached for the slippers. Balancing on one foot, she inserted her left toe and pulled on the heel of the shoe, to slip her entire foot inside.

What happened made Cilla drop the slipper in surprise. It would not go! She hadn't put on the slipper in four years, yet she had never once thought of her feet growing. Hot tears welled up in her eyes. She would not go to the ball after all! Not without the slippers, she simply couldn't. The slippers were all she had worthy of a lady. Without them, she felt how truly silly her dress and her hair and her necklace-less neck were. Feeling utterly friendless, she threw herself down on her straw and sobbed.

After a good long cry, she began to reconsider. Her breathing slowed and she sat up. She looked at the shoe she had dropped, and then she looked at her feet. Perhaps she could try again. She picked up the slipper and put her toes inside again. Slowly, she tugged on the heel. Millimeter by millimeter, her foot went in. She heaved a sigh. Her toes were jammed tight, but at least they were in. She looked nervously to the other slipper and prayed, hoping against hope that her right foot was not bigger than her left. She reached for the gorgeous shoe. But yes, this one went on as well, though she could feel acutely that they both would pinch dreadfully when she stood up. She swallowed her pain and unspent tears and heaved herself up. It occurred to her briefly, as she smoothed her face and brushed off her skirts, that it was not fair. Young girls, even embarrassingly large young girls who work in kitchens with embarrassingly large feet,

should have a mother there to dress for their first ball. But Cilla let the bitterness pass. She was going to the ball and she would see her Prince, whether or not he saw her.

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Upstairs, the royal family was having a quiet supper before the hustle and the bustle of the ball. Rupert was hunched in his chair, not eating, with his harp in his lap. He was tall and thin, but not so thin; it was only that his height made him seem so, and he was more or less always a little hunched. He lightly fingered the strings of his instrument, making soft, unobtrusive dinner music. His father scowled at him. The King was simply enormous and silent as a brooding volcano. In his younger days he had been a war hero, and his greatest shame was the nagging fear that his son was a soft. Dammit, if the boy was a soft he could find his own damn country!

The Queen twittered like a bird and did her best to help her son.

"What about that Countess Clarice?" the Queen suggested, as she cut the Prince's veal for him. "She seems like such a nice girl."

The Prince did not reply. Princess Josephina did. She was only a girl and the second born, but she was tired of that conversation. "She's nice to *you* because she wants to get into Rupe's trousers."

The Queen flushed. "Sit down, young lady!"

"I am sitting."

The Queen re-flushed. "Don't talk back. And don't use such language. It isn't seemly."

The Princess rolled her eyes and was quiet. The Prince sneaked a look at her and she gave him a glum smile. He knew the first law he would change when he was king. It was stupid that the Heir Apparent had to be male, especially since he had realized that his father did not do

anything. That was why his mother was so high strung, because she did everything. The Prince chanced a dissatisfied glance at his father, but he quickly looked down and went back to playing his harp when the King turned his harsh gaze on his son. He glared at the boy's long fingers. Blast, if there wasn't something delicate in the way they plucked the strings!

"Rupert, you must eat something. You're wasting away," said the Queen.

The Prince mutely picked up his fork. But when he looked at the plate of veal his mother placed before him, cut into bite-sized pieces, he put the fork back down. Then he turned his face from the table and threw up.

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The ballroom was lit by over one thousand candles in delicate golden candelabras. The walls were draped in gold and blue, and a marble fountain gurgled in the center of the floor. The place and the people in it seemed to glitter like gossamer wings or sunset on the lake. When Cilla entered the room, a kind, beautiful gentleman with white gloves took her arm. He called her, "My lady," and escorted her down the stairs, and even pretended not to notice the way she wobbled on the first step. Her feet were killing her.

At the bottom of the stair, the gentleman bowed to her. When she merely stood still, looking about her, clearly dazzled and having no idea what to do next, he asked gently, "Is this your first ball?" He felt it safe to drop the "My lady" since it was clear she was not true nobility. He would see a lot of these girls tonight; the Queen had invited all young eligible girls of free birth in the kingdom.

"Yes," she replied shyly. "My lord," she added, because she felt some title was in order.

He chuckled pleasantly. "I'm only a doorman, dear," he explained, "but His Majesty did give me an exquisite waistcoat for the occasion, did he not?"

"Oh, yes, most exquisite," Cilla replied quickly, embarrassed by her mistake.

"Now tell me, love," said the doorman, coming close to her, as if in confidence, "are you without escort this evening?"

"I'm quite alone," Cilla answered.

"Well, then, you shall want to sit with the other young ladies." He directed her attention to a row of gilt chairs along the wall, already half occupied by be-gowned ladies with shimmering hair and glimmering chokers. "And give your name to that gentleman there." He gestured to an even-more sumptuously dressed man with a quill and roll of parchment. "He will put you on the list."

Priscilla looked gratefully at the kind doorman, for he had saved her making all sorts of mistakes. Encouraged, she ventured to ask a question.

"Please, what list?"

"Why, so that you may be announced to His Highness when it is your turn to dance with him."

"Oh," gasped Cilla, putting hand to her heart and taking a step backward on her pinched feet. "Ow!"

"Wouldn't you like to dance with the Prince?" asked the doorman, ignoring her latter expression of pain for her former expression of surprise. "I thought that was why most of the young ladies came tonight, but I could be mistaken. They say he is a terrible tease..."

"Oh, no—" Cilla interjected, rising to defend her Prince's honor before her tongue could form the words to do so, "I only—that is—" She looked painfully at the gentleman with the list.

"I only wondered...must I—must I give my name to the gentleman right away?"

"No, any time during the evening, I'm sure. But you may have to wait—"

"That's all right," said Priscilla quickly. "I shouldn't mind, I mean," she added.

The doorman chuckled again. "Very well, my lady. I wish you enjoy your first ball, and I wish you find His Highness charming and well-behaved."

At this fresh mention of Rupert, Cilla flushed again. Hurriedly, she thanked the doorman and bid him adieu, forgetting herself and dropping a curtsy to him as if he were the head cook sending her off to clean the hearth.

On her way to the row of chairs and young ladies, a dozen servants with trays stopped and offered her their delicacies, most of which she had seen prepared that day. Each time she declined. This night felt too important to mix with anything so mundane as chewing and swallowing. She took the next open chair in the row along the wall, and smoothed her skirts over. Her feet silently thanked her for sitting down, though they begged to be released from their beautiful prisons. Cilla glanced at the line of ladies, all immaculate and speaking nervously among themselves. None paid her any attention, so she turned her gaze back to the ballroom to take in the wondrous sight and watch for the first sign of her Prince.

She had not long to wait. The orchestra stopped playing and the clusters of mingling gentry quieted. The Lord Chamberlain motioned for all to make way, and then he announced His and Her Majesty. Cilla felt she would cry when she saw them, not because the Queen's face was so soft and careworn or the King's so severe and stern, but because they were simply so splendid in their jewels and golden coronets, and because she knew her Prince to be the yet more splendid offspring of these two. She nearly missed the ritual chant, "Long live the King and the Queen!" as the majesties took their thrones at the far end of the room because now, oh now, Rupert was standing in the doorway, ready to make his appearance. Unlike his father—unlike the lowliest footman on that occasion—his costume had no jewels and did not glitter. It was

simple blue satin, without even silver thread embellishment, and his head was bare. Still, he was the best-dressed, most elegant and most heavenly sight in the room. The Princess was on his arm, and Cilla gave over a brief moment of envy to her, with her darling petite frame and her pink gown, and her place at Rupert's side, but then Cilla only had eyes for him. The Princess was enveloped in a group of young people from the court and swept away, and the man with the list pounced upon the Prince, bringing with him a girl in a silly yellow frock with a silly yellow wig in the same shade. Cilla watched as the Prince bowed politely, forced a polite smile and took the wide-eyed young girl in his arms. It was only then she realized that the orchestra had begun to play again and couples had begun to dance.

Cilla could not say how many girls she watched Rupert dance with—some giggling uncontrollably, some confidently pulling him quite close, some moving mutely in awkward silence, unable to look him in the eye instead of the shoes. He considered them all with the same changeless expression, blandly resigned and dogged. Cilla watched the girls, too, jealous and pitying them at the same time, and wondering which among them would have her Prince tomorrow. She was so intent on observing, she barely heard the friendly voice beside her.

"I love your shoes."

"Thank you," intoned Cilla absently, without looking at the speaker. The girl, bemused, followed her gaze.

"Ahah, staring at my brother."

Cilla turned immediately, but before she could do anything, the Princess was sitting down beside her. Josephina leaned towards her ear as if the two were old friends.

"I don't envy his position, out there to poked and prodded like a melon in the market. Of course," she nodded toward her parents, "my time's coming. My mother's too efficient to let unmarried daughters hang around long."

"What about your father?" Cilla asked, realizing belatedly she should have added a "Your Highness." The Princess didn't seem notice, however.

"I don't think my father has spoken to me in twelve years," mused the Princess. "And even then it was only to tell me to stop climbing on his throne."

"That's awful," said Cilla, thinking how she adored her father and how lonely she should have been without his attentions growing up.

"It is," the Princess agreed. "Poor Rupe gets the full brunt of the old cannon's attack."

This was not what Cilla was getting at, of course, but she didn't venture to say so. The Princess yawned.

"I hate these state functions. They're terribly boring; the people who come are so shallow," she complained, and then in to Cilla, "I don't mean you, of course. You looked nice—not frilly like those other bubble-brains."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Cilla said uncertainly.

"You can call me Josephina. My friends never bother with all that 'Highness' stuff. What is your name?"

"Priscilla," said Cilla, wondering whether this meant she was included in the Princess' friends. "Cilla for short."

"I like that. Rupe calls me, 'Josie,' and the rest of the court calls me, 'she-demon.'"

Cilla laughed appreciatively. "My stepsisters used to call me, 'Creature.'"

Now the Princess laughed and Cilla smiled, relaxing a bit.

"Your brother is wonderful though," she ventured to comment.

Josephina sniffed and Cilla was suddenly afraid she's ruined everything. "You too? I'm so tired of girls telling me how wonderful my brother is!" The Princess huffed, and then looked at Cilla's expression. "I'm sorry," she said quickly. "It's all right. I didn't mean to say he *isn't* wonderful. I just think it's ridiculous when girls want to marry him without even meeting."

"Well, actually... I-I did meet him once," Cilla revealed.

"Oh, forgive me, then. I didn't realize you were acquainted."

"We're not, really. I only met him for a moment—I mean, we weren't even properly introduced. He was busy, I think. He was with Sir Rolf. I doubt he even remembers me."

"He does meet a lot of girls," Josephina said gently. "So tell me," she began, changing the subject, "Cilla, why aren't you dancing? Or are you waiting for *him* to be free...? Because I think there's a list."

"There is," said Cilla. "And no one else has asked me."

"I can fix that. Oye!" she hailed a group of young men and Sir Rolf jogged over. "Rolf, I think you know Priscilla here. Why don't you two take a spin around the floor?"

"Sure," said Rolf gamely.

"Maybe I shouldn't," Cilla protested, clutching Josephina's elbow.

"Why not?" asked the Princess, blinking.

"Well... my feet are rather sore. My shoes are too small, you see..." At least here was a truthful excuse.

Josephina almost laughed. "Is that why you look so uncomfortable? It thought it was these bloody chairs; they're awfully hard. Take off the shoes for now. Most of the ladies here will be barefoot by the end of the night anyway."

Cilla wasn't certain. But then, the prospect of freeing her feet for a few minutes was very tempting. She tugged off the slippers and set them carefully underneath her chair, and she took Rolf's proffered arm. Before he led her away, Josephina whispered in her ear.

"Keep Rolf busy for a while, while I snag Don John. He's the best looking man here, if you want my opinion."

Rolf found an open space on the crowded floor that was farther from Josephina and the slippers than Cilla would have liked. Moreover, she had lost track of the Prince in the swirling palette of skirts and waistcoats. She stepped awkwardly into the dance, looking alternately from her feet to the couples around them, hoping to catch Rupert again. Rolf didn't seem to mind her clumsiness.

"Josephina said we'd met?" he asked her.

"Er-yes, actually. Very briefly. You were with His Highness."

He studied her face, and shook his head, smiling apologetically. "I'm sorry. I don't remember."

"That's all right," she replied, eagerly, for she had caught sight of the Prince over her shoulder. She turned and Rolf turned with her, though he was not quite thrilled about it. He kept glancing behind him, and took the first opportunity the music gave to turn them back around.

Cilla frowned and craned her neck.

After several more measures of dueling, Rolf steered her in a quarter-turn and proclaimed, "Truce, eh?" Cilla checked her sightline and nodded. "Very well," said Rolf, smiling a half smile. "We'll both keep an eye on him then, the poor sap."

Cilla swallowed but said nothing. She hardly bothered to look at Rolf.

"Of course," he said after a time, "he'll scold me later for fraternizing with the enemy."

Now Cilla looked straight at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you are here for the same reason all the others are, aren't you? To see and hopefully marry him?"

Priscilla scowled. Sir or no Sir, this Rolf had some nerve. "I came to see him. I don't have any hopes of marrying him. I'm not even on that silly list of girls wanting a dance. I know this is no fun for him; I know his entire future is to be decided tomorrow, and that makes this evening a trial."

"Well," said Rolf, impressed. "A realist among the dreamers."

Cilla flushed. "I'm sorry."

"For what? Saying what you think?"

"No, no. I don't know. I'm sorry for him, I suppose."

"So am I."

Cilla looked at Rolf shyly. "He likes music, doesn't he?"

"He is an accomplished harpist—to the eternal shame of his father. The three of us—Don John, Rupert and I—are a trio, but he is the composer."

"The day I saw the two of you—we didn't truly meet properly—I remember he was telling you he wanted to be a roving musician."

"Yes, well, the Prince is *not* a realist, most of the time."

"It's a wonderful wish," said Cilla. "Don't you think even future kings are entitled to wishes? Stable boys and kitchen girls are. Don't you think royalty should get the same courtesy? They are human, after all."

Rolf was stumped. "But you are a breath of fresh air!" he said, whistling appreciatively. "I've no idea what to say to you. I can tell you about the trio, though, if you're interested."

Cilla said she was interested, and so Rolf talked until he realized something was wrong and wheeled her around. "Uh-oh," he said. Cilla followed his gaze to Rupert, or rather to Rupert's back, as the Prince was heading out the very door he'd come in. Cilla and Rolf were not the only two to notice, either. All the girls along the wall were on their feet. The orchestra's conductor continued conducting but hesitantly, looking around for some direction. The Queen was also standing; the King, however, remained on his throne, looking stony-faced in the direction his son had gone. Rolf caught the Queen's eye and made some sort of signal. She, in turn, nodded and motioned for the conductor to continue. One by one, the girls took their chairs again, and the couples on the floor went on dancing, many of them without ever noticing the crisis. Josephina and John were among them. The King leaned over to the Queen when she had resumed her throne and growled something that made her nervous.

Cilla saw very little of this because as soon as Rolf had made his sign to the Queen, he steered Cilla, as they continued to two-step, toward the door, saying, "I hope you don't mind a small detour from our spin." She did not reply partially because he thereafter nearly wrenched her arm from the socket, as he let go her waist and rushed out of the ballroom. In the hall beyond, there was no sign of the Prince.

"Er—" began Rolf, addressing the doorman, who wordlessly pointed to the left. Rolf nodded in thank-you, and a moment later, in an abandoned corridor, they found the Prince, vomiting into the base of a potted plant. Cilla felt her heart skip a beat. Rolf finally seemed to remember he still had her hand clamped tight in his, and released her. He went to his friend and put his palm supportively on Rupert's prone back. Cilla watched from a safe distance.

"Rupert? Are you all right?" Rolf asked. The Prince nodded faintly and fell into a sitting position, back against the wall. Rolf crouched in front of him and handed him a handkerchief, which he used to wipe his mouth.

"Oh," moaned the Prince, "what the hell do they put in that flan?"

"Goat's milk," said Cilla. Neither of the young men acknowledged her.

"I don't want to go back in there," said Rupert. Though it was muted through the walls, the music and gay chatter at the ball was still audible. Cilla curled her bare toes awkwardly into the plush carpet.

"Take a minute," said Rolf. "Take a minute, then."

Rupert covered his face with his hands and spoke with a muffled voice. "I'd sooner jab red-hot pokers through my eyes than go back in there." He made a disgusted noise then, disgusted with himself and his situation.

"You don't have to," said Rolf.

"My father's going to be out here in a minute," said Rupert. "He'll drag me back in."

"I'll tell him," said Rolf, standing. "I'll tell him you need a break, you're fatigued."

Rupert shook his head. "He won't care."

"Then I'll tell him you're done, all right? I'll tell him you know which girl you're going to marry—unless you think you'll find someone better of the girls that are left."

"No," said Rupert, shaking more furiously. "No, it doesn't make a difference if I meet fifteen girls or five hundred. I'm destined to be lonely forever."

"Then I'll just tell him," said Rolf, with an air of finality. Then, "Do you want me to tell him?"

The Prince made an indifferent noise and Sir Rolf turned to go.

"Would you stay with him a moment? I'll be back shortly."

"Yes," Cilla murmured, and then she was alone with the Prince.

She had no idea what to do next.

Her inefficacy was lost on Rupert, whose face was entirely obscured in his arms, and whose thoughts, it seemed, could not be farther from that corridor. After a moment, Cilla let herself lean against the opposite wall and slide down to the floor, where she rested her chin on her knees and counted threads in the carpet. She looked at Rupert every once in a while when he made sniffing sounds.

Then he said, quite clearly, "I'm sorry."

And she replied, automatically, "Don't worry about it."

Then he heaved a great sigh and turned his face towards her so that she could clearly see, for the first time, that he had been crying all along. "No one understands me," he said. "No one cares."

"That's not true. That's not true at all," said Cilla.

This was just the opening she needed. Just the opening to say, "I care! I've cared for a hundred moons! And I alone have understood!"

But that is not what she said, because that was also, she knew with sudden certainty, untrue. "You have your friends—Sir Rolf and Don John. They care. And your sister—why, if I had a sister like yours..."

He looked at her, interested. "Do you know my sister?"

"A little," she admitted. "We met this evening."

"I apologize for anything she may have said to offend you," he said quickly, anxiously.

"Oh, no, she didn't say anything wrong at all. She was wonderful."

"Hmm," said the Prince. He turned his head away from her again and she wondered if that would be all. But presently he turned his face back to her. "Do you like music?" he asked.

"Very much."

"What sort?"

"All sorts, I think. I don't know much about it," she confessed.

"Would you like to hear me play a little? I play the harp, you see."

Cilla resisted saying, "I know," and simply nodded. He pulled himself up off the floor.

"I play a lot to make myself feel better," he added, suddenly feeling silly and that he needed to make some kind of explanation to her. She said nothing, and he put out his hand to help her to her feet.

Cilla tried to keep herself from hyperventilating at his touch. He didn't notice a thing, and led her in silence to a part of the castle she had never dared dream existed. They came into a bedchamber and she did her best not to feel strange. He sat down at a golden standing harp and didn't seem to realize just how ludicrous a situation he had just created. It was hard for her to concentrate with the Prince's bed just a few feet away, but she forced her attention to his face.

"It's just that...it's difficult to be told it's time to grow up when one feels one never had a childhood," he explained further. He hadn't made a move toward the strings yet and truth be told he was looking at the harp as if he'd never seen one before. It hadn't seemed such an extraordinary idea a few moments ago, but now he was shy at having an audience. But he couldn't sit idly for long; she was staring at him expectantly.

Priscilla looked soulfully at Rupert, wishing she could think of something—anything—to say. She realized her overwhelming love for him and it was crippling her.

"Do you still want to hear me play?" he asked lamely after a long pause. She nodded eagerly, happy to have some clear response. So he cleared his throat several times and finally raised his hands and when he at last called forth notes from the instrument, he also sang out lustily in a rumbling baritone and this is what he sang:

If cats were kings and toads had wings,  
I'd give every ducat to you.  
If wishes had tails and puppies were snails  
Then, dear, I'd give you love true.

For who among us can say he's done  
As well and as best as he could?  
And who among us has left every comfort,  
And I ask who among us ever would?

If feathers had spells as the old story tells  
I'd waste all my magic on you.  
And if horses could fly and oysters could cry  
Then, dear, I'd give you love true.  
Yes, then, dear, I'll give you love true.

And when he had finished, he stood quickly and backed away from the harp, abashed.

"What a sweet song," said Priscilla. "Is it about anyone in particular?"

"It doesn't have to be. It's about the futility of human beings breaking out of selfish, egocentric experience and actually connecting with another person," said Rupert, looking down at the carpet.

"Oh," said Priscilla. She sought in vain for some other comment on her tongue, but it was the weather that saved her. She caught sight of the night sky behind him, through glass doors that led out to a spacious balcony.

"It's snowing," she said.

"Is it?" he asked, brightening, and he turned to see the lacey white flakes as well. "Do you like snow?"

"When I have somewhere dry and warm to come inside to," she replied.

"Come," he said, and he took her hand. Like the boy he was, he pulled her through the doors out onto the balcony. Their breath was gray mist in the cold air, but Priscilla didn't feel cold. Rather, she welcomed the chill on her bare arms like a refreshing draught on a hot summer day. It felt like waking up clear-headed and well after a long illness.

Rupert's cheeks were ruddy red and he looked younger outside than he did inside. He ran to the edge of the balcony and looked out breathlessly on the castle gardens where the snow was rapidly blanketing the inhabitants of a topiary zoo.

"I love snow," he said. "Especially new snow. I wish it would snow for days and days and bury the whole kingdom so I'd never have to think about it again."

"I think you should be able to do what you want," Cilla ventured, "and not bother about the kingdom."

Rupert looked at her seriously. "Come," he said again.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To make snow angels."

She laughed. "Snow angels?"

"Yes," he said earnestly, "we've got to make them while it's still coming down."

She giggled. Then she gave him her hand once more and he rushed away with her, back inside the palace, leaving the doors to his balcony open with the snow fluttering in and landing on the bedclothes. And as they hurtled headlong through the hallways and down staircases, he explained, "When Josie and I were little, on the first snowfall of the year, Mother would declare a holiday and bundle us up as fast as she could and bring us out to make snow angels. It didn't matter where she was or what she was doing, as soon as someone spotted the first flakes, they

were to notify her and she dropped everything. I remember once, my father was just riding in from one of his journeys to the frontlines or somewhere while we were out in the yard. He had this fantastic dapple-gray horse called Mephistofeles—the largest horse you every saw—and he only let Dad ride him. Anyway, my father rode right up to us and hopped out of the saddle and made his own snow angel next to ours. Mine and Josie's looked like midgets next to his. I remember my mother saying—she always missed him so much while he was away—she said, "Now it's a whole family of guardian angels to watch over our family."

Rupert led Cilla out to the lawn, where the snow had already amounted to a soft blanket on the grass, but it was thin and it mostly melted beneath her bare feet. "Right here is where we made them. You just lie on your back—" he demonstrated, and she lay beside him— "and now you swing your arms and legs back and forth over the ground to make the wings. Yes, just like that." He turned his head sideways to watch her. She swung her arms and legs while she smiled happily at the stars beyond the clouds and laughed softly to herself and the soft flakes landed gently on her cheeks and disappeared.

So they made angels in the snow and when they had tired of that they ran and slipped and shrieked with laughter between the hedgerows and ended up throwing snowballs at each other. Snow was all through Cilla's curls like a misty white veil and she was more beautiful than she had ever been in her entire life as she wound up and hurled a snowball at Rupert that hit him squarely in the face. He burned with good-natured vengeance and ran and caught her around the waist to knock her down and ended up in the slush they had made beside her. They rolled over, laughing in complete forgetfulness of who, where, and when they were.

"Would you like to know," he began, lying back comfortably, "which wing of the castle I intend to tear down first?"

"Which wing?" asked Cilla, smiling by all that's subversive. She staggered to her feet and looked down at him.

"That one right there," he said, pointing vaguely. "It's the oldest, draftiest, most miserable part of the whole place. And it's my father's favorite," he added rakishly.

Cilla beamed. "But Rupert," she protested with mock concern, "won't that be counterproductive? You should be building up, not tearing down." That had been a favorite motto of the royal family for generations: "Tear not down, build up."

"Well, no," Rupert replied, with the mischief gone from his eyes, "because it can't be used for anything as it is, having as many leaks as it does. The mortar's so old it's completely worn away in some places, and the rooms are too big to be lit or heated properly. But the stone could be re-used to build several smaller dwellings, and then the kids from the kitchen could have somewhere decent to live instead of the cellars."

She was taken completely off guard. It took her a moment to fully understand his words and the earnestness behind them. He knew where the kitchen girls and boys lived. She could have kissed him. He spoke before she had the chance, though—luckily, perhaps, because a kiss then would have shaken him and possibly frightened him beyond repair.

"We'd better get back inside," he said, peering up at her keenly. "Here I've gotten you all damp and you're barely dressed for a summer garden party, let alone a winter night outdoors."

She would have told him not to worry or be so hard on himself. She would have told him she had endured far worse, but the clock in the tower began to chime.

"Is it eleven o'clock already?" she asked him, already fearing his answer.

"Twelve, I think," he replied.

She gasped. "I must go. Thank you, Your Highness!" she called as she ran off.

"Wait," said he. He watched her run for a moment, stunned by her sudden departure, before he could get to his feet and collect himself enough to follow. "Wait!"

Priscilla heard the Prince's calls behind her, and her heart ached. She thought of her mother's shoes sitting in the ballroom and it ached a little more. But there was not time to stop. She had all but guaranteed herself a whipping already for staying so long. She only hoped the cook would be slow to reach her small corner of the cellar.

She arrived with scarcely a minute to spare, and hurriedly changed back to her dry rags. She carefully and quickly rolled up the dress for safekeeping, and buried herself and it beneath the straw, where she lay trembling with her eyes slammed shut. A moment later, she felt candlelight and heard the cook's clumsy, heavy footsteps approach. They paused above her a moment, and then retreated, but Cilla did not cease to tremble. Her stomach demanded her attention now, wondering where its evening bread had gone, and her damp head made her feel chilled beyond hope of recovery. Her heart sang and despaired in the same beat, for now she knew, truly knew, her Prince and he was more wonderful than any girlish dream in flesh and oh-so-flawed blood, but tomorrow—or rather, *today* now that the clock had chimed midnight—he would be lost to her forever. She felt strange and shaky and almost sure she would not live through the night.

~

Rupert stood for some while in the dark palace foyer, dumbfounded and disappointed. She had been interesting. But at last he shrugged his shoulders and headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time, part of his head already forming the words he would use the next morning divulging the puzzle of the girl to Rolf and John. Then with an inward groan, he remembered the ball and his birthday. His step on the stair slowed as he recalled the necessity of choosing a

bride. He couldn't even begin to think how he would go about doing that—none of the debutantes he'd danced with stuck out in his mind. Perhaps, he sighed to himself, he could get Rolf to lay hands on that ridiculous dance card and they could place all the names in a hat and pick that way. That might be fairest. He was still musing over impartial manners to choose a wife when, on the fourth flight of stairs below the ballroom, on the twenty-sixth step, with his right foot poised to touch down on the twenty-seventh, the realization hit him. He was so overwhelmed that he ran back down to the foyer, half expecting to be able to catch her. Of course, she was long gone by then, and he didn't dare waste another moment.

The ball was just hitting its stride. Naturally those guests who'd come strictly to make a royal match were frustrated by the Prince's premature departure, but those who had come to enjoy the entertainment were having a high time by then, greatly augmented by the retirement of the old cannon and battleaxe, as Josephina referred to the King and Queen. They left soon after Rolf told them Rupert had made his decision and would not be returning to the ballroom. He—Rolf, that is—Don John, and Josephina were happily conversing in a circle of the court's young people when Rupert burst upon them, breathing hard, his face sweaty and pink. His exquisite costume was creased and damp to a point beyond what perspiration could account for. At his appearance, half the young ladies in the room flew into action, primping their hair and smoothing their skirts, but he took no notice of them.

"There you are, you rascal," Rolf chided him. "I told you I would be back in a moment and you disappear. That's the last time I take any concern for your well-being, Highness, I can tell you that."

"The girl," the Prince managed to say, struggling to regain his breath.

"What's that, Rupert?" Don John asked.

"The girl," Rupert repeated. "I need to know where I can find her. I need to ask her to marry me," he explained urgently.

"Now slow down, my Prince," said Rolf as he exchanged a look with John and Josephina. "What girl?"

"You know," Rupert replied insistently, "the girl you brought out into the hallway with you."

"You brought the girl he wants to marry into the hallway?" John asked Rold, raising an eyebrow. That sounded scandalous and John had a moralistic streak in him. Rolf ignored him entirely.

"I left her with you. If you don't have her, I don't know where she is," Rolf told Rupert.

"Her name then, her parents', anything," Rupert pressed. "Please tell me she's not a relation."

Rolf shrugged. "She could be for all I know. I don't know her name, or her parents'. Never laid eyes on her before."

Rupert was on the verge of frustrated, exhausted tears. "Why were you dancing with her then?" he burst out.

"Josephina wanted me to," Rolf replied, putting up his hands defensively. "Ask her." And Rupert turned to his sister to do just that. "You remember, Josie, the tall girl with the plain dress," Rolf prompted.

The Princess frowned. "I'm sorry, Rupe, I know the girl you're talking about, but I don't know her either. I only spoke with her for a moment."

"But you must have gotten her *name*!"

"Erm—" Josephina's brow crinkled in concentration. "Pru—no. Pr—Pr—Priscilla! That was it."

"Priscilla," repeated the Prince. "Good, good. Priscilla who?"

"How should I know? I didn't interrogate the poor girl."

It was almost too ludicrous for words. Rupert floundered. "You didn't even ask her last name?" he asked, incredulous.

"You're the one who wants to marry her," the Princess returned. At that, the Prince moaned and covered his face with his hands.

"Now calm down," John soothed. "We can find out who she is."

"Yes, there must be someone here who knows her," Rolf added logically. "Let's ask around."

The four fanned out across the ballroom, querying each of the guests about the vanished girl. But none of them seemed to know anything about her, nor, in most cases, even who they were talking about. Her name was not on the list of ladies to dance with the Prince—as, indeed, Rolf belatedly remembered her telling him it would not be. The most promising clue was Josephina's, who spotted the girl's slippers beneath the chair where she had sat.

"Poor thing went home barefoot. What on earth did you do to scare her off like that?"

"Nothing. I just told her the time," Rupert replied, still bewildered. John gave him a hard stare, suspecting that was some sort of euphemism.

"Rupert, my Prince, you certainly have a way with women," Rolf commented, stifling a yawn.

"I think you'd better go to bed now, birthday boy," Josephina advised her brother.

"Cannon and Battleaxe will want an audience first thing in the morning."

"But what can I tell them about the betrothal?" he asked forlornly.

The Princess shrugged. "Tell them you've got the girl picked, you just need to get in touch with her to iron out the details. We can draw up some sort of advertisement about the shoes. Someone is sure to come forward to claim them, and then you'll have your mystery girl—if she's still the one you want to marry in the morning, that is."

"She will be," Rupert said firmly. The Princess gave him a humoring nod and dropped the slippers into his arms. He caught her wrist before she could turn to go. "She's the only one I could marry," he said.

The Princess did not reply. She merely pressed her lips together and gave her brother a penetrating look, then she bid him good-night.

~

Josephina was awake and dressed before her brother in the morning. He woke to find her sitting straight-backed at the foot of his bed, gazing out the window. Sunlight was pouring in through the glass doors to the balcony, made twice as bright from the reflection off the snow. The temperature had dropped considerably in the wee hours of the morning and the light fluff that Rupert and Cilla had played in was frozen into a solid crust of ice.

"I ordered up breakfast," Josephina told him as she took a sip of her morning coffee. He was still blinking his way to consciousness. "Bacon and eggs."

The Prince rubbed his stomach. "I'd rather just toast."

"Shall I send it back down then?"

"Never mind," he said, standing up purposefully. He poured himself a cup of coffee as well. "I'm not hungry anyway."

Josephina noticed the pair of slippers beside his pillow and the conspicuous impression of a heel on his left cheek, but she avoided commenting by taking another sip. Three lumps of sugar dropped into Rupert's coffee. His sister watched him keenly. There was a knock at the door.

"Enter," called Rupert, and in stepped the Lord Chamberlain. He bowed to Their Highnesses.

"His and Her Majesty would like to see you, my Prince, in Her Majesty's morning chamber."

The royal siblings exchanged a glance, and Rupert headed out to answer the summons. Josephina, as no one had told her expressly she was *not* to come, followed him. On their way, they passed the ballroom, where the servants were beginning to clean up and show the very last guests out.

The King and Queen were at breakfast themselves when the children arrived. The King scowled at his son.

"Good morning, sweetheart," chirped the Queen brightly, attempting to ignore the brooding volcano beside her. She did it well; she had had lots of practice.

"What are you wearing?" the King demanded.

Rupert looked down at himself. "Er—my nightshirt, sir," he replied.

The King frowned more deeply. "Awfully *flowy*, isn't it?"

"Well, it is silk, sir," Rupert offered helplessly. In all their years, Rupert and Josephina had never seen either of their parents in less than full dress. Josephina claimed this was because they in fact belonged to a small breed of dragons who had to hide the scales that covered their

bodies, and she and Rupert secretly were not their natural children. Rupert had never given it much thought.

The King indicated by the way he sat back on his chair how thoroughly unsatisfactory he found Rupert's explanation, but he said nothing more and looked at the boy's mother to get to the point. She did so with a flutter of her delicate hands.

"Darling, we—that is, your father and I—were wondering if, last evening, you were able to choose a suitable young lady to—to become your queen, as it were."

Rupert looked at Josephina.

"Happy birthday," she said.

Rupert turned back to his parents. "Well yes, Mother, I was. As we agreed I would..."

The Queen was visibly relieved. "Good boy. I knew you would, of course. Sir Rolf told us you had, and there was never any doubt, but naturally we wanted to hear you say so yourself. And she is a young lady of character?"

"Oh, yes, full of character," Rupert assured his mother. He had no idea what that meant, except that it probably had something to do with her parents' income.

"That's fine," said the Queen, delightedly. "As soon as her parents are willing, we shall begin the negotiations."

Rupert began backing slowly toward the door. "I'm pleased to hear it," he said. "But first I just need to—get a message to her myself. Naturally, I couldn't smooth out all the particulars at the ball last night."

"Certainly," his mother agreed. "A ball is no place to conduct serious business. But you will let us know when preparations might begin, won't you?"

"Absolutely, without fail," the Prince replied with a confident smile before he and the Princess made a hasty retreat. He started back quickly toward his chambers to dress.

"Rupert," Josephina called pensively. She had to trot to keep up with his long, direct strides.

"Yes?" he asked, distracted.

"What are you going to do," the Princess asked, "if you can't find her?"

"Don't ask that, Josie, it's too awful to even consider. She's too perfect for me not to find her."

The Princess was silent for a moment, chewing her lip. She knew her brother's frailties better than he did. "Rupert," she said again, "what if you do find her?"

He stopped short. "What do you mean?"

"It's only that...well, she isn't royalty. She probably isn't even nobility."

"Oh, I don't give two bits for all that. That doesn't matter."

"Yes, I know you think so, but the truth is, you'll have lived very different lives. It's only fair that your expectations of her be realistic."

"I don't expect her to be anything but who she is."

Josephina sighed. "It's only that I don't want you to be disappointed."

"I know," said he, and in a rush of warm feelings, he kissed her temple. "Now, we'd better hurry along. I never shall find her if I don't get started."

When Rupert was dressed for his day of searching, he and the Princess first sought out Sir Rolf and Don John. The young gentlemen had not been idle. While the royal siblings had been with their royal parents, Rolf and John had gotten the court painter out of bed and commissioned him to do a charcoal rendering of the girl, based on Rupert's description.

Josephina and Rolf stepped in to help when the artist needed advice on the length of her nose or the shape of her ears and Rupert's memory failed. In the meantime, John took the slippers and dispatched two messengers, one to the north and one to the south, each with a shoe, to begin knocking on doors to see if anyone recognized them. Rupert was reluctant to let both slippers out of his sight at once, but, as John explained, it would speed the search. When the composite sketch was completed, it was circulated among the servants in attendance at the ball and though three or four remembered seeing her there, none knew any more about her than the Prince did. A dozen of the painter's apprentices were engaged in copying over the master's sketch and new servants were readily dispatched in fresh directions, bearing the portrait and a promise of reward that Rupert was sure the royal treasury would be most delighted to pay.

By noon, the upper floors of the palace were buzzing with talk of the Prince's mystery girl—who she could possibly be, and his chances of finding her at all. Among the small percentage of the castle inhabitants who did not hear this gossip were the King and Queen. Their Majesties were barricaded in their chambers with counselors, absorbed in matters of state, and quite oblivious to the campaign being launched outside their door. Equally oblivious to the search was Cilla.

~

Despite the best of intentions, she had woken late. When she saw the sunlight streaming in through the cracks in the wall near the ceiling, she knew she had missed breakfast—not her own, she didn't think of that, but the palace's. Though she was sore and stiff and her head was throbbing, she hurried up and ran to the kitchen. To do so, she had to pass outside and through a short alleyway. Even in this brief moment, she felt the bite in the air. It was colder than she could ever remember the air being, and she was glad at once for the warmth of the kitchen.

Inside, she glanced quickly around. The chef's boys were at the fresh meat for dinner by that time, wearing their gore-splattered smocks. The girls were at the breakfast dishes. The cook was nowhere in sight. Cilla quickly took her place at the stone basins beside the other girls. The chef turned a beady eye toward her as she passed, but said nothing, and she hoped he wouldn't alert the cook.

"Late this morning, Priss," hissed the girl beside Cilla. "You'll catch it when Cook sees you."

Priscilla did not reply. Her companion did not expect her to and what could she say? Certainly not that she had been out late last night with the Prince. Cilla wasn't sure she believed that herself.

For a moment all was calm and normalcy, but suddenly a grubby hand clasped Cilla by the ear and yanked her away from the sink. The cook was shorter than Cilla, but a good deal wider and stronger.

"And where have you been, my lamb?"

"I'm very sorry, madame, I overslept," Cilla said quickly, stooping awkwardly because her ear had not yet been released.

"And last evening? At dinner? Did you oversleep then as well?"

"No, madame, no—please madame, I was ill."

"Oh, my poor child," said the cook, releasing the girl at last. "I hope you are better now."

"Yes, quite better," Cilla replied softly, massaging her crumpled ear.

"Good, because I want you to collect more firewood. The snow came thick last night, so you may have to go to the forest to get it. Do you understand me, my pet?"

Cilla listened to the wind howling through the floo. "Yes, madame," she whispered.

Outside once more, Cilla blandly noted the full stack of wood sheltering below the lean-to and tied a ragged shawl around herself. She rested a rusty hatchet over her shoulder. At the castle gate, she noticed a peculiar booth had been erected, and a line of higher class servants standing at it. On the road was a queue of carriages. She paused at the curious sight, wondering what it was all about, but then she heard the cook's sharp voice from the kitchen door.

"Get going! Don't stop to dilly dally!"

Cilla sidestepped the wooden spoon that came hurtling at her head. Then she picked it up from the snow and returned it to the cook, who rapped her knuckles with it in thanks. Then she set off. She shivered terribly, but that lasted only minutes. Soon she was quite numb and barely thought of the cold.

As she walked through the woods, keeping her eyes peeled for dead limbs within striking distance, she did her best not to think of Rupert. This was difficult because, over the past year, thinking of Rupert had become her favorite pastime. She was struck by the fancy that perhaps he had gone out for a ride that morning, to get away from the stifling atmosphere of the palace or to think over his decision about whom to marry. If so, then he might be riding in those very woods, and he might come upon her. She wondered what she would say if he did; she wondered what he would say. He might not even recognize her as she was now, dressed in rags and stooping with a load of kindling on her back. He might wonder what brought her so far from the palace and she would say she was being punished and he would say, "What for?"

"For loving you," she would reply, and in a fit of reckless abandon, she might tell him everything—from holding his horse to her mother's slippers and the wild and capricious whim of Fate that had brought them out into the snow the night before. Would he be happy to see her, she

wondered. Would he be frightened? He couldn't simply laugh at her, could he? To keep herself from thinking, she began to sing.

"If cats were kings and toads had wings..."

~

But there was no danger of Cilla running into Rupert in the forest. He was pacing in his room while messengers rode back to the palace, chilled and discouraged and feeling their Prince had sent them on a fool's errand. Rolf, Josephina, and John sat in a row, watching Rupert move back and forth like a pendulum. In their own chambers, the King and Queen sat at their leisure, still unaware of the frantic search, but discussing the very subject that was on everyone's mind nonetheless.

"He's a cowardly, obsequious little milkweed," the King grumbled.

"You mightn't be so hard. He is your son," the Queen twitted. Her eyes were moist. She rose to look out through the garden window.

"Son or not, I know when someone is deceiving me!" thundered her husband.

"Dear," said the Queen, putting her hand to her head wearily, "you can't know when someone is deceiving you because your knowing implies the deception has been unsuccessful in the first place, meaning you aren't being deceived in the slightest."

This was a bit thick for His Majesty and he chose to ignore it. "Son or no son, the boy is simply stalling. I don't believe he's chosen a girl at all."

The Queen was silent. She was staring at two snow angels, frozen in the garden lawn. The King was frustrated by her silence.

"By God," he swore, "if he hasn't given us a name and forwarding address by sundown, the agreement is over. He can find his own bloody kingdom!"

~

"He's going to lose the kingdom," Don John whispered.

"I don't think he cares about that," Sir Rolf murmured.

"No," Josephina said quietly. She knew her brother best. "You're both wrong. He'll marry someone else before he lets that happen."

"Well, don't let's give up hope," Rolf whispered. "The messenger with the right slipper hasn't come back yet."

~

The sun was westering by the time Cilla arrived back with the firewood. She might have been able to gather more had she made two trips, but as it was, she had no idea where she was to put it and the wind buffeted her so mercilessly beyond the protection of the trees she had wanted to spend as much time there (in the forest) as possible. Again she saw the booth at the gate, but by now there was a lone carriage idling in the road. While Cilla watched, a lady's maid hopped out and trotted to the booth. She spoke with the attendant there several minutes before turning back toward the carriage, apparently thwarted. Cilla ventured to stop her.

"Excuse me, but please can you tell me what that booth is about? There was a great crowd of people here this morning."

"Aye, I expect there was," replied the lady's maid. "Folks always leave summat behind at parties, a hat or a cane or what have you. My lady's lost a silver hair comb, but the man there says they found nothing of the sort in the ballroom. More like some greedy servant's pinched it, I say."

Cilla's heart rose with excitement. "Do you mean," she began, just to be sure, "that if someone left something—inadvertently—at the ball, all she'd have to do is go to that booth to see if it was found? And they'd give it back to her?"

"Well, His and Her Majesty hain't so common as to keep all those hodds and hends! That'd be downright thievery, it would," replied the maid. "You'd better get inside now, love, afore you lose a finger or a foot to this frost."

With that she hurried back to the carriage to break the bad news to her lady. Cilla glanced around her to be sure the coast was clear. Then she stacked the firewood carefully beside the kitchen door and strode casually as she could to the booth. While she went, she concocted what sounded like a reasonable story. She couldn't, naturally, say the shoes were hers. Who would believe her? The attendant there frowned at her even before she'd opened her mouth. Only sheer love for the last of her mother's possessions could have induced her to go on.

"Pardon me, but did anyone find a pair of shoes in the ballroom last night?"

"Shoes?" asked the attendant, raising an eyebrow.

"Lady's slippers," she clarified. "With glass heels and sapphires crusted on the toes. Did anyone find a pair like that?"

Now the attendant's eyes were wide-open and nearly bursting from their sockets. "Do you know who they belong to?" the man asked, incredulous.

Cilla swallowed and managed to get her tongue around her lie, but only just. "A lady stopped me on the road and asked if I came from the palace and I said yes. And she asked if I was going back there now and I said yes. Then she told me to see if anyone had happened on her slippers and asked me to bring them to her."

"Just a minute, just a minute," cried the attendant, jumping off his stool. He came out from inside the booth and shut it behind him. "Can you step inside with me?"

"I suppose so," said Cilla uncertainly, wondering whether this was standard procedure. "Do you have the lady's shoes?"

"I think we just might."

~

"Your Highness! Your Highness!" The messenger with the right shoe was smug. He had just arrived back at the palace and he had found a trail. Moreover, he had been informed that the messenger with the left shoe had turned up nothing, which made his find all the more important.

"Yes?" Prince Rupert looked fatigued beyond his years. His voice was soft and weak as a newborn kitten with one eye. He was holding the left shoe tightly in both hands.

"I've found a gentleman who knows something about the slippers, Your Highness."

There was a spark in Rupert's dull eyes. "Where is he?"

"Just downstairs, in the Spanish tearoom, Your Highness. I thought it best to bring him back with me, so that you might question him yourself."

"Well, why didn't you say so?"

Suddenly alert and energetic, the Prince flew down the stairs. The Princess, Sir Rolf, Don John, the lately arrived messenger, and a dozen other eavesdropping members of the household followed close behind. In the tearoom, Rupert stopped short, creating a domino effect behind him. A handsome gentleman with grey hair and threadbare but neat garments bowed to the crowd.

"Your Highness," he greeted, "and...others."

"Sir, I'm very pleased to have you here," said Rupert. "Please sit down and tell me your name and, if you can, the owner of these lovely slippers." He took the right slipper from his servant and held them both in his lap as he took his own chair.

The gentleman seated himself gratefully. "My name, Your Highness, is Edward Beaumains, and the slippers you are holding belonged to my first wife, God rest her soul."

"God rest her soul"s rippled through the assembled audience.

"Then how did they end up at my ball?" asked the Prince.

"I cannot say, Your Highness. I saw the last of those slippers four years ago, when I sent them to my daughter. I had wanted to see her wear them on her wedding day, but she is also dead."

Murmurs of "God rest *her* soul" echoed through the crowd of onlookers, and a few were moved to take their handkerchiefs from their pockets. Rupert looked down at the carpet in distress.

"Do you not know," he began again at last, "to whom your daughter might have given them?"

The gentleman shook his head. "I'm very sorry, Your Highness, but no."

At that moment, a miracle occurred, for a servant entered the room with a girl in tow. "Your Highness, so sorry for interrupting, but—" he began, about to tell the Prince that this girl knew the owner of the slippers, but he stopped short when he realized no one was giving him the slightest attention. The Prince was staring at the girl, and the old gentleman was as well. Cilla saw Rupert first, for he was across the room, and met his eyes, but then she saw her father.

"Papa?" she exclaimed, and when she was sure it was he, she rushed to him, and fell to her knees at his chair, kissing his trembling hands.

"Priscilla? Oh, my girl, my child!" cried the incredulous parent, weeping over his daughter's curls.

"Priscilla?" the Prince repeated in wonder, but he saw that he would have to wait his turn.

"Oh, my child, can you ever forgive me?"

"For what, Papa, for what?"

"I tried to get you back, but they told me you had died. After your stepmother passed away—"

"My stepmother? Gone?"

"Yes, she went and left me quite alone in this world."

The crowd of servants and retainers at the Prince's flank were too absorbed in the drama then and missed their cue. There were no calls upon God to rest Priscilla's stepmother's soul.

"What about my stepsisters?" Cilla asked.

"Married to a brace of bankers," her father answered.

And little by little, as the Prince and the Princess and their friends listened with bated breath, the entire sad history came out. After Priscilla had been sold into the service of the kitchen, her stepsisters had been sold into another kind of service: married off to the worst of the family's creditors in hopes some of their debt might be forgiven. Then Priscilla's stepmother had gone and died a little less than a year later. Her father had sold their fine house and most of what lay inside to satisfy the remaining creditors (the stepsisters' husbands were apparently more than satisfied) and he had moved into a modest cottage. He had thence gone to the palace seeking Cilla, but the persons of authority with whom he spoke had told him, after some conference, that she had died only lately of the pox. He asked to see the body, but was told the corpse had been burned immediately to prevent the spread of disease.

"Then where have my wages gone all this time?" Priscilla asked.

"I don't know whose pockets they've been lining, my girl, but it hasn't been mine," her father replied. "But I tell you something about this young man," he went on, indicating the Prince, "if he shows half the dedication in being king that he has in returning misplaced shoes, then I've a great deal of hope for the future."

With that, the attention turned toward Rupert once more and he, realizing this, turned red and coughed nervously. He stood and took a step toward Cilla, and she popped to her feet, her head bowed in proper deference, but yet with her eyes locked outrageously on his.

"I—I believe these are yours," he said, and made as if to place the slippers directly on her feet. She backed away and tried to lengthen her tattered skirt, as if to hide her bare, frostbitten toes, but everyone saw them. He saw them, and paused, and cleared his throat. Clumsily, he held the slippers forth and clumsily she received them.

"Thank you, Your Highness."

The room was still as a tomb. No one dared to speak, or make the slightest move. Rupert and Cilla stared at each other, and in that moment, both saw how easily it could have been left at that. He might have turned to go, she might have made some comment about Cook missing her. But Rupert was kind if not courageous, and the story of her family, aside from all else, had moved him.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," he said softly.

"It was my fault for forgetting them."

He blinked at her quizzically, and then he laughed. He shook his head. "No, I mean I am sorry," he repeated, gently taking her hand, "for everything you have suffered. It was in my

service that so many wrongs were done to you, and the others occurred in my country, and so I share in your persecutors' guilt."

Cilla saw how grievously he meant those words despite his laughter a few moments ago. She looked away, because he was so beautiful, she felt she might cry. Josephina folded her arms satisfactorily across her chest and nudged John and Rolf, distinctly proud of her brother. The Prince, still clasping Cilla's hand, stepped toward her father and held out his free hand to the gentleman.

"Sir," he said, and Master Beaumains gave his Prince his hand, and the three made a sort of lopsided ring. Rupert addressed them both earnestly, with all the simplicity of a very young child. "When I am King, I will change a lot in this kingdom. Children will not be bought and sold, especially not in my palace. Miss Beaumains," he looked into her eyes. Now was the crucial moment. The room was deathly silent. Cilla had no idea what to expect.

"Miss Beaumains," said Rupert resolutely, placing Cilla's hand in her father's and disengaging himself, "I should like nothing better than that you return to your father. You are released from your service here and I give you my word that whoever in my employ has profited wrongly from that service will be punished and you will receive just compensation."

"Punishment" and "compensation" were such harsh, unromantic words to come from such a gentle, whimsical heart that Cilla turned cold. She swallowed and waited for him to make his escape from her. He had all but closed the deal now. All that was wanting was for him to dismiss them, and she and her father would go. She wondered why he hesitated. Surely he must want to escape from such an embarrassing predicament. For a prince, even one as unconventional as Rupert, it was most certainly a blow to his dignity to realize he'd spent an

evening carousing with a kitchen maid in the snow. She wished she could somehow—without words or any affront to his pride—assure him he never need mention it.

Rupert was on the verge of retreating back to his room and letting Priscilla walk out of his life forever (or at least for the time being), but as soon as he'd half-turned, he was confronted by the hard stare of Don John, Sir Rolf, and Josephina, a trio of scornful witnesses to his spinelessness and social incompetence. He turned back with a sigh.

"Miss Beaumains?"

"Yes, Your Highness?" she said meekly.

He closed his eyes. "Miss Beaumains, as you may have heard, today is my birthday, and I am to become engaged on this day, by agreement with my parents. I," he paused, thinking of her feet, when he had never been allowed to get so much as a paper cut. "I will never be as strong as you, but the person I would like to become engaged to, if she will have me, is yourself."

There was no sound, and so Rupert chanced opening his eyes, one at a time. It was as he feared. She was shocked. A moment later she began to cry.

Edward Beaumains, absolutely bewildered, was on his feet, doing his best to comfort his daughter. Josie rushed over and pressed Cilla into the chair her father vacated, offering her a handkerchief and calling her "honey" and "dear." Cilla did not seem to feel her father's arm around her. She struggled to fix Rupert in her gaze. He came forward and knelt before her.

"Oh! you don't have to," he assured her. "I'll do everything I said just the same. You're free, you can go with your father, and I'll help you in any way I can regardless. I'd only look on it as—a kindness to me if you'd consent."

This only gave way to a fresh spate of sobs in Cilla and, unable to speak, she began to shake her head. Rupert's hopes sank, but he bore it well.

"It's all right," he comforted. "I hadn't truly expected you to agree. After all, I'm almost a complete stranger and what you saw of me last night can't have been very appealing."

"*No*," Cilla finally managed to spit out in protest, "*no*. Never abuse yourself so. I love you," she blurted out, and once she heard the words she plunged recklessly on, "probably more than you could ever love me. I love you more than breathing or my own heartbeat. I've loved you so long, I can't remember living without loving you, and if you are sure you want someone so unworthy of you, you are all that I want."

Now it was she who had shocked he, and after a moment tears began to seep out of his eyes as well, and his silly, foolish face made Cilla laugh out loud. Then he began to laugh with her, and as they laughed and cried together, they found themselves embracing, positively clinging to each other. Cilla could barely believe it was more than a dream, but she was happier than she had ever been in her entire life. Rupert felt as if he had just woken from a nightmare to find sunshine and birds singing. The onlookers sighed wistfully and clapped politely.

"I just thought of something," Cilla said suddenly, pulling back from him, but not completely. "Your parents will never approve."

He smiled at her, enchanted. "That only adds to the appeal," he replied breathlessly, and Priscilla kissed her Prince.