

Heigh-ho.

Eight Dead Shrimp

by Gerard Houarner

The first thing you have to know, young Prince, is that there were eight of us at the start, not seven. But people only talk about what happened later, when She arrived at the house.

The second thing you have to know is that I'm glad I didn't make it into the story. I'd have been called Sleazy. Or Slut. If they'd even gotten around to calling us something besides first dwarf, second dwarf, and so on. She's the only one they bothered to name. Even you're reduced to 'King's son.' No honored title, not even that nauseating baby-name the young girls still call you—'Handsome.' But she's Little Mistress White As Snow. Mother killer. She's the slut, moving in with seven dwarfs without so much as a blessing. Do you know what would've made it worse than being in the story?

Being compared to Her.

Everybody would have liked Her even more.

Stupid was the easiest of course. He's the Dwarf Terrine: pounded medallions and scallops of meat, with some sweetbread thrown in, seasoned with pepper, thyme, bayleaf, brandy and wine, well-baked in lidded earthenware.

He liked me. He liked all the girls. Of course, I was the only female dwarf he knew. That didn't stop him from chasing down a comely doe, a fetching pig, a lost sheep.

I didn't need any of the Queen's magics to lure him. He caught my subtly disguised scent as soon as he came out of the mines. Always had the sharpest nose. Dropped his jewel sack and came after me like a wild boar. Couldn't even tell the others what he was chasing. All he did was grunt his lust.

I dropped a rock on his head.

The others may not have known if he was chasing mortal, beast, or creature, but they knew what he wanted. They didn't miss him until the next morning when they came to work the mine. By then I'd used the Queen's flying carpet to get him out of the hills.

I should have added garlic. I love garlic. But the Queen, worried about what the Mirror would say about

her breath.

I wasn't a slave they bought from a goblin, nor a child bride my parents sold to finance a new cave, as some have said. And while it's true my parents are dead, the gossips are wrong in saying I killed them for their fortune and, failing to find it, came to live with the seven dwarfs to try and steal their hoard.

When my parents died in a mine collapse, I tried to find shelter among other mountain dwarfs. Even in the best of times, mountain dwarfs suffer terribly from dragons and griffin and all manner of snow beasts too lazy to fight mortal hero prey in the valleys or in the high and lonely brigand and wizard keeps. Years of hunting have made the surviving few suspicious, selfish, greedy. While not as cruel as mountain elves, they have no particular love for family, much less charity. I was left to the ice and rocks, and the teeth and gullets of predators.

I made my way down from the mountains. I will not say no mortal blood was shed or flesh and blood consumed. What is done is done. I have my own scars from those times, which I'd gladly show you now, if I could.

Once in the lower hills, which the locals called mountains, I learned of the seven dwarfs living alone and presented myself at their door. We talked. I proved my strength with a turn in the mines, my skill in the hunt by bringing home dinner, my talents in the kitchen by preparing a meal from the kill. I tucked each into bed and cleaned their house while they slept. And in the morning, fixed fresh porridge and fruit for all.

They were pleased and let me stay.

And I was grateful.

Drunk was no more of a challenge than Stupid, though I would have chosen a better wine than what he drank to marinate my Dwarf Bourguignonne. I'm afraid the vintage I poured into the pot might have clashed with what was already in the meat. I trust the onions, shallots, thyme, and peppercorn served to blend the tasting experience into a coherent whole. I'm sure the brandy flam-bé helped distract the Queen from any inconsistencies.

I caught Drunk taking his afternoon nap outside the