



The Other Belle

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Description: "I'm giving you one last chance to tell me that I own you..."

Those are thirteen words that I refuse to give to the beastly man who kidnapped me in the middle of the night and forced me on a never-ending journey through the woods.

While he's desperate to break a tragic kingdom-wide curse that's ruined him to his core, I'm determined to escape and find my way home.

I'm not the woman he wants anyway...

He wants my sister, the beautiful, book-loving girl who wants more out of life and believes a prince is all she needs to find a happily ever after.

Of course, he has no idea that she's none of those things, and as much as I want to deny the chemistry between us, I can only take so much punishment, and I may be forced to finally submit to his desires...

Until then, I'll hold off on getting closer to a man like him, a true villain, destined for Hell...

He'll never have the real me, the other Belle...

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*****FULL BOOK START HERE*****

One day I will go to all the places I have seen

Between the pages of my reads

And when you ask me where I've been

You'll be convinced it's all a dream...

* * *

—My mother's lullaby to me

Once Upon a Time

Belle

I've always known that I am the biggest disappointment in my family.

Since the day I was born, my father made it painstakingly clear that my older sister Isabelle, "the better Belle," is his golden child.

I'm an unwanted copper tin that he can't wait to throw away, the "ugly rubbish" that he keeps hidden from sight as often as possible.

Only a few people in our village even know that I exist...

On countless nights, I've awoken to the sound of his vicious prayers, wondering if he knew I could hear them. Then again, I doubt that he cares, and I have them all memorized by now anyway.

"Please change Belle into someone else, so she can land a suitor who will help pull us out of our debt."

* * *

“Why couldn’t you drag her to heaven instead of her mother?”

* * *

“Can you at least teach her how to read books as well as Izzie, so the town library might have a job for her when I die?”

I can’t help but see the irony in his last prayer since my sister is a living, breathing fraud, but that’s a story for another day.

“This is your last chance to prove your worth to this family, Belle.” He suddenly steps in front of my bed, holding out a bright red ribbon.

“If this prince’s glass slipper doesn’t fit your foot today, there’s no shame in that, but if it does and you even try to resist, I swear on everything I own that—”

“You’ll punish me by locking me in the basement until I’m forgiven.”

“I’ll never forgive you.” He snaps his fingers. “Izzie! Come help Belle with her hair and face, please!”

Stifling a groan, I walk over to the window and watch heavy sheets of rain attack our land. I silently wish the hills would rise and roll over our cottage so I won’t have to take part in this.

Every woman in town is buzzing with glee over the day’s big news: A prince from the Second Kingdom is crossing through The Whispering Woods in search of his lost love via a “Which maiden’s foot can fit the slipper she left behind?” contest.

I desperately want to know why he can’t remember what this woman looks like and attempt to find her that way, but no one else seems to find this odd.

Can a prince really be that stupid?

“Your eyes are so beautiful, Belle.” Izzie pulls a brush through my curls, yanking all the life from them. “Dark emerald and grey, like our mother’s. Instead of opening your mouth, you should help the prince focus on those when he arrives.”

“I’ll try.”

“Try hard,” she scolds. “I mean, that’s what I would do if this were my only shot at landing a prince. This is as close as you’ll ever get to attracting a suitor, so don’t cry if it doesn’t work out.”

“Right...” I don’t dare mention that she cried bloody murder this morning when she found out she was ineligible for this silly fitting game.

“Are you reading anything good lately?” she asks.

“Romeo & Juliet,” I say. “Oh, and I’m almost done with Oedipus Rex.”

“I see.” She loops the red ribbon around my smoothed hair. “Are they romances?”

“No, Izzie.” I hold back a sigh. “They both end in utter tragedy.”

“What?” She sucks in a breath. “Then why are you reading them? Better yet, how could any author bother to write such awful things?”

I bite my tongue as hard as I can.

Moments like this are what I wish most people witnessed when they complimented how “well-read” and “worldly” my sister is.

They're completely unaware that she reads the same three books every week—usually skipping ahead to revisit her favorite chapters—and I'm convinced that she can recite those stories word for word. All without ever glancing at the page. She complains about being misunderstood and wanting to explore the world outside of our small kingdom, but whenever I tell her that we should go together, she comes up with an excuse.

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Standing still, I force myself to smile as she paints my face in a pale powder and coats my lips in a crimson rouge.

“Okay, you’re all set.” She spins me around to face my father. “This is the best I can do.”

“Much better.” He glances at his pocket watch and pushes me closer to the door. “Don’t keep him waiting when he’s close. Make a good impression and say all the right things.”

“All the right things” means utter silence in his book.

I stare through the glass as a sparkling gold carriage led by four grand, white horses makes its way down our winding road.

With every galloping step, I can’t help but wonder what life in the other kingdoms is like.

They can’t all be this way...

When the procession stops in front of our gate, two footmen step into the rain and roll out a royal blue carpet.

Another servant opens the back door and holds up a parasol while another ties the stallions to our fence.

The prince emerges in a white and blue coat, and I crane my neck to steal a glimpse

of his face. I can make out a hard, chiseled jawline and intense green eyes, but my heart doesn't skip a beat when I see all of his breathtaking features.

Not a single butterfly flutters in my chest, and I don't feel the world stop under my feet.

I'm not attracted to him in the slightest...

He knocks on our door a few times, and I contemplate letting him stand there until he walks away.

"Open the door, Belle," my father hisses. "Now."

I let out a breath before pulling it open.

"Your Grace." I offer a weak curtsy. "How may I help you?"

"I'm Prince Charming," he says. "Son of King Aries II & Queen Arabella Windsor, victor from the War of Beasts, and heir to the throne of the Second Kingdom."

"Please tell me that you don't have to say all that every time you introduce yourself."

"I do." He smiles. "I'm looking for the eligible maiden of the house."

His gaze ventures toward Izzie, and I can practically see him undressing her with his eyes like every man in town does.

"The eligible maiden is me." I roll my eyes and usher him inside.

"Oh." He looks Izzie over one last time before looking my way. "Please have a seat so that my men can determine if you're my long-lost true love."

“Can’t you already see that I’m not?” I ask. “I think we would both remember if we’d ever met.”

“Belle,” my father warns.

“Right over here.” Izzie guides me onto a chair, mouthing, “Stop it.”

Prince Charming’s footman clears his throat and reads from a long scroll.

I’m grateful that we can hardly hear his words over the heavy rainfall, and I’m holding out hope that a flood will wipe all of us away at any moment.

“And now, let the fitting begin!” The footman pulls a sparkling glass slipper from his satchel and slides it onto my right foot. “Please rise, Madam.”

I stand to my feet, hoping to show that the shoe is too small, but it fits perfectly.

What the...

“It’s you.” The prince pulls me into his arms and presses his lips against mine without warning, giving me the worst ‘first kiss’ in history.

It’s wet and sloppy, rhythmless and wild, and...It means nothing.

My heart doesn’t hope that his mouth will never leave mine, and every nerve in my body begs me to get the hell away from him.

“Our master has found his true love at last!” someone announces. “Prepare the carriage for a return to our kingdom with its future queen and king.”

As the prince pulls his mouth away from mine, my relief turns to dread. I’m forced to

watch one of his men arranging payment with my father.

“I can’t wait to have you alone again, Belle,” the prince whispers. “I’ve searched for you for far too long, and I want us to pick up where we left off.”

“How do you not remember what the woman you fell in love with looks like, or notice that she’s not me?” I cross my arms. “Like, how is that even possible?”

“It was a dark night when you left me.” He clasps my hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t pay better attention.”

“No.” I yank my hand away. “I’m not the woman you’re looking for, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not going with you. I’m staying here.”

“Can you not see the filthy life that you’re currently leading?” He narrows his eyes at me, still whispering, “You live in a poor, disgusting village where gossip is the main attraction.”

“Anything here is far more attractive than you.”

His gaze darkens, but he keeps his voice low. “Coming with me will benefit you and your family. You’re days away from marrying a man who is next in line for the throne.”

“Sounds like you’re willing to settle for any girl at your side.”

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“No, it sounds like you should stop talking and focus on getting a better life.” He runs his hand against my bare neck, making me shudder at his touch. “I’m looking forward to taming every inch of you, so you can learn to behave and keep your troubling little lips shut.”

“I’ll never sleep with you.”

“Oh, you definitely will.” He runs a hand through my hair, and my flesh crawls. “The moment we return tonight, I’ll show you exactly how to please me with your mouth, and I’ll give you a taste of what it feels like to be owned by a man like me ... You’ll like it so much that you’ll beg for it again.”

I glare at him as he stares into my eyes, sensing a world full of pain and misery in my future.

“I’m so thrilled that you’ve reunited with my daughter, and I can assure you that she’s talked about finding you for weeks.” My father juggles a full satchel of coins. “I trust that you’ll continue to send payment since this isn’t her full dowry?”

“Depends.” He’s still looking into my eyes. “Are you coming back to the Second Kingdom with me, Belle? To a much cleaner and fulfilling life?”

“Fuck you.”

A thick silence suddenly suffocates the room.

Izzie’s jaw drops to the floor.

“Madam, that’s no way to talk to your future husband, let alone sitting royalty.” One of his men speaks. “Apologize to His Grace now.”

“I apologize for not being the slightest bit interested in a life with you, Your Grace,” I say. “I’m sure you can find another woman who will be happy to get ‘tamed’ by your disgusting touch whenever you like.”

The prince presses his lips into a thin line, then he snatches the coins from my father.

“Thank you for your honesty, Belle,” he says. “May you enjoy the rest of your life. Alone, I’m sure.”

He walks toward the door, and his servants follow suit.

Before I can walk over to the window and watch him leave, I’m suddenly yanked back by my hair and my head hits the wall.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” my father hisses, slapping me across the face. “Do you?”

“Wait,” I beg. “Let me explain.”

“Explain what?” He slaps me again. “Why you just ruined all of our lives within seconds?”

Izzie serves me a look of sympathy from across the room, but she doesn’t move to intervene.

She’s just as livid as he is.

“You’re always ruining everything, Belle,” he yells so loudly that the windows shake.

His third strike sends my body to the floor, and I can no longer feel the left side of my face.

Shutting my eyes, I wince as he yells how I'm a "forever disappointment" at the top of his lungs. He kicks me all over, harder than he ever has before, and I hold back tears.

I refuse to let him see me cry, silently repeating my mother's last words.

"Never let anyone see you look weak, Belle. Ever."

When his insults come to an end and the height of his anger dissolves, he grabs me by the arms. Clutching them tightly, he drags me across the room and toward our second basement.

"I should've fucking known," he curses under his breath as he opens the hatch.

"Here, Belle." Izzie, late as ever, presses a cold wet cloth into my hand.

To my surprise, my father doesn't snatch it away.

He picks me up and tosses my body over his shoulder, carrying me down the steps. Dropping me onto a stack of quilts, he glares at me.

"I meant what I said about never forgiving you for this."

I'll never be sorry for this.

He looks at me as if he's heard my thought, as if he's tempted to slap me again.

Shaking his head, he storms up the steps and slams the door shut.

The sickening sound of the lock twisting echoes through the basement, and I finally break into sobs because no one can see me now.

No one will probably see me for a very long time.

The last time I disappointed my father, he left me down here for three months.

From the disgusted look in his eyes, I have a feeling I may not see the sun for an entire year ...

Seven Months Later...

In a Faraway Land

Belle

“Breakfast is served.” My father tosses a slice of burnt toast down the steps. “You can use the same butter I gave you yesterday.”

A swarm of spiders stakes a claim over the bread before I can grab it, and I hold back a groan. Today marks the sixteenth day in a row that I’ve missed breakfast, and I’ll have to wait until dinner for another meal.

Although I have a small plot of red apples growing on the ledge of a covered window, it will only last me another week.

If I’m lucky.

“I didn’t hear a ‘Thank you,’ Belle!” he bellows. “Is that your way of saying you don’t want any more food today?”

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“No, Father.” I force my voice to sound sweet. “Thank you very much for breakfast.”

I await to hear the lock sliding into the door, the usual “I can’t believe you ruined us” that follows, but the top step begins to creak under his weight.

“A good daughter should obey her parents, no matter what,” he says. “But you have disregarded my will at every turn, and you don’t know how badly it hurts me to punish you like this. Are you ashamed?”

“Yes.” I swallow my pride. “I’m very ashamed, Father.”

“Good. You should be. You should also be praying every night for your sister to restore us to wealth, since I clearly can’t depend on you, and...”

While he speaks, I shut my eyes and visualize my favorite fantasy: A pair of flying dragons circling our home and burning him alive until his skin and bones dissolve to ashes. Then, just in case someone is tempted to revive him with witchcraft, the dragons swallow every morsel of his dust.

Long ago, I might’ve felt terrible about this dream, but the past several months have only strengthened my resolve. All I need to do is stay quiet and smile, pretend as if I don’t mind his twisted abuse, and whenever his guard is down, I’ll run away to someplace he’ll never find me.

And try to befriend two dragons...

“That said, you are utterly useless to me,” he’s still talking, “and I swear if I didn’t

promise your late mother that I'd take care of you, I would've abandoned you long ago."

"It's not too late for that," I mutter.

"What's that you're saying?" he asks. "Are you requesting something?"

I want to ask for a mirror so I can finally see if the left side of my face looks as bad as it feels, or if the welts have left marks, but I can't bring myself to beg.

"No, sir," I say. "I'm fine."

"Step into the light and let me see you, please."

I push off the blanket and make my way to the base of the stairs—standing directly under the light.

"You're even uglier now than you were before." He shakes his head. "Do you think you've learned your lesson about disobedience now?"

"Yes, Father."

"Will you ever hurt or betray this family again?"

"No, Father."

"Good." He opens the door wider, motioning for me to walk up the staircase.

I wince with every step and hold back a relieved sigh as rays of sunlight kiss my skin.

"It's officially suitor season, so you'll need to make sure this house sparkles like a

crown every day,” he says. “It cannot look like this while Izzie is entertaining suitors.”

I nod, eyeing the pigsty they’ve created in my absence.

“I’ll do my best to convince Izzie’s eventual husband to take you on as a servant, but that’s only if you play your role properly.”

“I appreciate that, sir.”

“I would hope so,” he says. “After you clean, prepare a lily and jasmine bath for your sister. Her skin needs to be as pure and virginal as she is.”

I hold back a laugh.

Izzie isn’t a virgin.

At all.

I’ve woken up multiple times to the sound of her panting and moaning outside the house. I’m not quite sure who the man is or what all he does to her under the moonlight, but her pleasurable cries for “Yes, more...More!” are unmistakable.

“Belle.” My father’s tone snaps me out of my thoughts. “Belle, did you hear what I said?”

“A purifying bath for Izzie, wait on her hand and foot, and do whatever she asks until she selects a suitor.”

“And most importantly, keep your mouth shut.” He walks past me, brushing against my shoulder and leaving the house without another word.

I wait until I hear the hooves of his horse trotting in the distance before I walk over to a spigot. Beyond thirsty, I hold my head down and sip water until I can't swallow anymore.

As I'm preparing a wash pail, Izzie walks through the front door humming.

Wearing a beautiful golden gown that falls to the floor in waves, her dark brown hair is pinned high in a bun, and she looks like the princesses she loves to read about.

Well, minus the tears that are falling from her eyes.

Pulling the white gloves off her hands, she notices me staring and offers a sympathetic smile.

"They sent me home again without a reason, and I can't believe that I—Oh my god!" She rushes toward me and presses her hand against my left cheek, caressing it in utter horror. "Oh, Belle. These are the worst ones yet..."

"They'll heal eventually."

"Have you seen them?"

"No." I shake my head. "Just pretend they're not there, okay?"

"Okay." She soaks a cloth in my pail, pressing it against my skin.

I'm not in the mood for a pity party, especially not from her, so I clear my throat.

"What were you saying about being sent home?" I ask. "Who is 'they'?"

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“The Fifth Kingdom.” She frowns. “They sent out a request for all eligible maidens. They said that only the women worthy of wearing a crown would be invited to stay, so I got my hopes up, you know? I know everything about being a princess. Everything.”

I raise my eyebrow.

“When I made it there, everything was exactly like it was when you and I went two years ago,” she says. “The queen hosted a lavish party in the ballroom, a feast fit for a king, and a long bath afterward in a heated spring.”

“Then, what?”

“She sent us all to bed in beautiful rooms that overlooked the realm...” Her voice trails off for several seconds. “In the morning, she asked how I slept, and I told her it was like sleeping on a cloud. It was even more amazing than the last time.”

I wince at the memory of the ‘last time’. From what I remember, my entire night there was spent tossing and turning in agony. I felt like there was a rock lodged directly under my spine, and the pain was far worse than any of my basement nights.

I never said anything about it to the queen, of course. I didn’t want to risk a beating from my father.

“Was there any girl who said something different?” I ask. “Someone who didn’t sleep well?”

“As if any commoner would tell a queen that her beds are subpar.” Izzie scoffs. “The prince was dreamy, though. Such a shame I won’t have him for myself...”

“Maybe you’ll land someone just as good during suitor season.”

“Don’t remind me.” She groans, pulling the cloth away from my skin. “You should get some fresh air while Father is away.”

“He told me that I have to clean.”

“He’s not returning from his trip for a while, so you can start cleaning this evening.” She looks genuine. “Even if you only sit on the front steps, you need to let the sun kiss your skin. You’re very pale.”

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll run to the market for a book after I bathe. Want anything back?”

“Only if Mr. Lorimer has a new love story for me,” she says. “Don’t bring anything by that Shakespeare guy ever again. He can’t write a real romance to save his life.”

“Noted.” I laugh and grab a bar of jasmine.

Sensing that my legs are weak, Izzie grabs my hand and leads me to the tub.

“I’ll clean you up and help you dress,” she says. “And you can wear one of my scarves around your mouth so no one will see the scars.”

“Thank you, Izzie.”

“You’re very welcome.”

For a moment, I’m not upset with her for ignoring my existence over the past several

months.

“You know what I’ve been thinking this entire time you’ve been on punishment?” she asks. “Your life would be so much better if you simply accepted that women have a place in this world. If you learned how to stay in yours, you would get the chance to truly live, you know?”

And she fucks it up just that quickly...

I remain silent as she thoroughly washes my hair and pulls it into two long French braids that fall down my back. When she’s finished, she helps me out of the tub and dresses me in one of her older beige dresses.

“Last thing,” she says, wrapping a matching cloth around my cheeks. “There. Now, no one will know anything.”

“Thanks, Izzie.”

“You’re welcome.” She walks over to the door and opens it. “Be back by sunfall.”

My heart is beating an uneven rhythm of grief and hope during my dash to the town’s bookstore. There’s a certain someone I’ve missed more than anything these past seven months, and I’m hoping that I haven’t been forgotten.

Please still be there, please still be there...

“Hey there, Belle!” Mr. Lorimer pushes a pair of spectacles up his nose once I walk through the door. “Here to pick up new books for your sister?”

“Always,” I say. “She wants your latest romance.”

“I figured she might.” He smiles. “Stay put while I retrieve it from the back. I have to make sure the proper pages are set aside, you know.”

“Of course.” I wait for him to disappear and walk over to the case where the other novels stand. I pick up a copy of *Ulysses* and flip toward the end of the book, scanning the margins for a note.

The handwriting inside belongs to the man I’ve missed—my only friend who reads as voraciously as I do—and his latest words are staring at me in smooth, black ink.

I haven’t heard from you in months... Is your father punishing you again? I finished the second part of this story and hated it, so find me in *Macbeth*.

—Your only friend

I drop it and pick up *Macbeth*.

The queen in this one is truly evil. I think I might like this more than any of the other books we’ve read together...Find me on page 83.

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—Your only friend

I oblige and read his next one.

This is why we should finally exchange names. I have no idea who you are or how to find you, and I swear, if I find out that it's because you ran off with that prince who came here, I'll be highly disappointed.

That doesn't seem like the type of woman you are at all...

—Your only friend

Four months without a response?

Now, granted, I am the most brilliant man in this town and by far the best, but I must admit I'm getting rather lonely not writing with you, the second best.

Where have you gone?

—Your only friend

I follow his notes and comments, stopping when I reach his last one.

Well, I'm guessing your silence means you did marry that prince after all. Or perhaps you've married someone else, and your husband isn't allowing you to come and select your own books. You could've at least told me goodbye or given me a reason. Maybe even finally let me see you so we could properly bid farewell.

Alas, I'll check A Midsummer's Night Dream for another fortnight, and then I won't check for you anymore.

—Your only friend, or so I thought...

* * *

“Belle?” Mr. Lorimer calls. “Belle, do you think your sister will want one or two romances this time?”

“Two!” I find A Midsummer's Night Dream and pull a quill from my satchel.

I'm so sorry for my delay.

I was being punished by my father again because I turned down that awful prince, but I'm still here.

You won't like this one, and I'm not surprised you enjoyed Macbeth.

That's why we can't meet, though.

You clearly like macabre things, and that's never a good sign in a friend.

—Your only friend, too

I smile and shut the book.

I've been writing to him for over two years now, and I've somehow convinced myself that I mean as much to him as he means to me. Although I desire to see him face to face—to finally get a glimpse of someone who understands me all too well—I know it's best if we keep each other at a distance.

From the way he writes, he's clearly educated, and he's mentioned owning large swaths of land, which means he'll want to marry a woman of status or beauty.

Someone like Izzie.

"Come grab the books, Belle!"

I return the book to the shelf and walk to the counter, but Mr. Lorimer is nowhere to be found. Instead, it's his shared maid, Cinderella.

Easily one of the prettiest women in town, her cinnamon-kissed skin glows under the store's dim lighting, and her dark curly hair falls to her shoulders in waves.

"Well, hello there, fellow peasant." She smiles. "Are you still running errands for your wicked sister?"

"Depends. Are you still being abused by yours?"

"By both of them, in fact."

We burst into laughter, and she hands me the wrapped books.

"I think you'd look a lot better without that ridiculous scarf wrapped around your face," she jokes. "Then again, I'm far less intimidated by your looks now."

"I'm sure you are." I roll my eyes. "If you were ever allowed to leave this place, every man in town would fall in love with you at first sight."

"Stop talking about yourself." She climbs over the counter and pulls me toward a mirror. She gently tugs at the scarf, but I keep it close.

“Did your father hit you again?”

I nod. “He left a mark this time.”

“Can you let me see it so I can help?” She says it as more of a statement than a question, and before I know it, she’s pulling it away.

I let out a sigh as we both turn to face my reflection.

Three purple bruises are stamped on my left cheek and they’re all swollen.

I await her gasp, for her to hastily return the cloth, but she doesn’t say a word.

Instead, she pulls open a drawer that holds jars of powder and presses it against my skin.

“It honestly doesn’t even matter,” she says. “You’re still the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen, and by the time I get done with you, you’ll barely notice it.”

“No need to waste any of this on me,” I say. “I don’t have any powder of my own at home.”

“Then you can take all of my sisters’ jars.” She shrugs. “All the powder in the world will never make their faces pretty.”

I laugh, and she smiles at me through the mirror.

“Thank you,” I say. “Have you caught a glimpse of the man who writes me yet?”

“Not even once.” She shakes her head. “Whoever he is, he gets in and out of here without leaving a trace.”

“The notes aren’t from you, right? You promise you’re not playing a wicked game with me?”

“Please.” She pats my face with more powder. “I hate your sister, but I’m with her when it comes to reading. Anything other than a romance isn’t worth my time...”

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A Suitor Not So Sweet

Belle

The sun is sliding down the sky by the time I return home.

Father's horse is nowhere to be found, and Izzie has left a red candle in the front window. It's her subtle way of saying, "I'm off reading," when she's really frolicking in a field somewhere and singing about wanting a prince.

Or maybe she's having sex again...

Setting my basket on the porch, I unlock the door and head into the kitchen. I pull Izzie's scarf off my face and light the stove.

"Took you long enough to return home," a deep voice says from behind. "This isn't how I like to run my business."

Gasping, I instinctively pick up my father's rifle and spin around, ready to fire a fatal shot in the intruder's chest.

What the hell?

At the end of my barrel, a beautiful man in navy blue is smirking at me. His muscles are straining the fabric of his overcoat, and his deep blue eyes and perfectly carved jawline instantly confirm that he's the most attractive man I've ever seen in my life.

And yet, despite the sudden flight of butterflies in my chest, the recognition ruins the view.

He's G'aston, Mister Gabriel Aston.

The cockiest, most-self-absorbed bastard who owns almost every building in the village and thinks he's entitled to whatever and whoever he wants.

I hold my finger over the trigger and narrow my eyes. "Who let you inside this house?"

"No one." He smiles as he eyes the gun. "You may want to put that down before you make a fool of yourself and miss."

"I never miss." I tilt the barrel toward the glass jars on the window behind him. Pulling the trigger, I shatter the first one to pieces before refocusing my aim on his mouth.

"Get out." I aim for his heart. "Now."

Looking impressed, he stares at me for several seconds. Then he places his hand over the muzzle before gently prying the gun from my hands.

"This is a friendly visit." He sets the rifle against the wall, still staring at me, making me wonder if Cinderella's powder has worn off already.

"You can stop staring at my scars now," I say. "It's rude."

"I don't see any scars." He tilts his head to the side. "I don't see any imperfections at all..."

“Well, good.” I swallow, sliding a hand under my dress for my dagger. “Don’t make me ask you to leave again. I’ll be sure that you regret it.”

“I’m sure.” He doesn’t look the slightest bit threatened. “I’d like you to make me a glass of water now.”

“I’d like for you to walk away or disappear.”

“That wasn’t a request.”

“That’s exactly why I’m not getting it for you.”

Silence.

He looks me up and down, causing more butterflies to flutter in my chest.

Domineering and gorgeous, he steps closer, his eyes locked on mine. “Is there a reason why I’ve never seen you before?”

“Probably because I haven’t made any trips to Hell lately.”

“I’m fairly certain that I’m going to heaven when I die.”

“Would you like me to speed up that process so you can find out?”

He lets out a low laugh that sends tingles up my spine. “I’m here to see Isabelle. Where is she?”

“She’s not interested in you.”

“What about Mr. Arwyn?”

“He’ll entertain your affection as long as you’re willing to pay for it. Leave a check.”

“This is about a conversation we need to have; he’s expecting me.” He looks beyond amused. “Who are you?”

“I’m—” I pause as he steps even closer, as I breathe in his intoxicating scent. “I’m the family’s servant.”

“Excuse me?” He raises his eyebrow. “Since when can Mr. Arwyn afford a servant?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“It is when he owes me something.”

“Okay, look asshole.” I cross my arms. “You barged into this house uninvited, and you’re suddenly acting like everything in it belongs to you. You don’t have permission to ask me any more questions, and it’s far past time for you to leave. I’ll tell Mr. Arwyn and Izzie that you stopped by.”

“Can you promise me that?”

“No.”

“I figured.” He pulls a red rose bloom from his coat pocket and sets it on the table.

“Word of advice to you, Miss Anonymous. If you don’t wish to be a spinster or a servant girl for the rest of your life, you should learn how to be nice.”

“I didn’t shoot you between your eyes for trespassing,” I say. “I’m being more than nice.”

His lips curve into a slow, sexy smile. “In case I run into Izzie, do you have a name so I can tell her that we’ve spoken?”

“Yes. It’s Get Out,” I say, and he laughs again as he heads toward the door.

Even though I know that Izzie will say no to Gabriel’s attempt at affection on the count of him not being a prince, I can’t help but give him a false sense of hope.

“You’re forgetting something,” I say.

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“I don’t have any extra manners.” He looks over his shoulder. “I would leave some for you if I did. Trust me.”

“Funny.” I roll my eyes. “Izzie appreciates lavish gifts from the men who want to impress her, so...” I look over at the single bloom, then back at him. “You’ll need to leave a lot more than a flower if you want a chance with her during suitor season.”

“That rose is for you.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” he says. “I highly doubt that any suitors are lining up for a taste of your mouth, so consider it my consolation.” He pauses. “This is the part when you thank me and give me the water I asked for.”

I slam the door in his face and rush over to the window.

I watch as he summons a stunning brown stallion from afar and writes something on the inside of his palm.

He takes one last look at our house before settling onto the saddle and riding away.

When he’s long gone, I pick up his sympathy gift and twirl it between my fingertips.

I hate that he’s right about this being the only gift I’ve ever received from a man, and it’s far too beautiful to throw away.

Even if it's out of spite.

Not wanting to think about it, I trap the bloom under a glass jar and hide it under my bed.

Someone Quite Peculiar

Gabriel

One Day Later

“Introducing the stunning and beautiful Odette Swan of the Lake!”

I stare at the woman before me, taking in her soft pink lips and crimson-colored cheeks. Her eyes are as blue as a summer sky and her golden hair falls to her waist in waves.

She's twirling around the wooded floor in a moon-white dress, leaving every man in my tavern spellbound.

Every man except me...

Before yesterday, I would've considered her one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen, but the red-headed goddess I saw in Mr. Arwyn's home has completely rewritten what that word means.

Who the hell was she?

“My daughter is as pure as snow, and she'll make a fine wife for any gentleman who chooses to pursue her affection during this suitor season,” her father speaks. “But we will only entertain meetings with men who own land and livestock. I will not

condone her being wed to anyone who doesn't at least own those two things."

Unimpressed, I stand to my feet and weave through the crowd, slipping outside and into the evening air. I've seen enough "fine wife" options to last a lifetime, and none of them are my type.

Walking to the side of the building, I peer through a window to ensure everyone is still entranced by the Swan before descending into the basement.

I hesitate a few moments before unlocking the door, bracing myself for the part of my life I have to keep hidden. The part that no one in this village will ever see.

The room on the other side is full of red roses that will never die. They cling to the walls like ivy, their bright petals a constant reminder of a mistake I made decades ago, but they're not the reason I detest coming here.

"Mirror, Mirror, on the wall..." My handheld mirror, the bane of my existence, laughs atop my desk when I enter. "Who's the fairest one of all?"

"Stop talking," I say. "I need to work in peace."

"If only I could be normal, just for a day..." It ignores my request. "Star light, star bright, I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight."

I walk over and pick it up, staring into the cold, black eyes of the ugly woman who cursed me years ago. No matter how often I see her face, I'm instantly reminded that I'm not living anymore.

I'm merely existing.

"My apologies, Gabriel." She ties a tattered shawl around her head. "I guess I forgot

which wish you always make before going to sleep. I'm mixing up all these damnations in my old age, you know?"

"You're only thirty years old."

"Yet, you called me an eighty-year-old hag when you first saw me." She snorts. "I figure I should always look the part."

"Can you please stop talking? I don't come down here often for a reason."

"No, no, no, wait. I remember your bedtime wish now." Her toothless smile is enough to give any child nightmares. "Please forgive me for being so heartless and cold years ago. I promise to make it up to you if you give me my life back..."

"I haven't made that wish in a long time," I say. "I don't feel that way anymore."

"Oh? Well, how does it feel to be the most ruthless and wealthiest man in the entire village who is running out of time?"

"You left out the fact that I'm the most attractive man as well," I say. "It feels pretty damn good."

"If any of these people knew who you really were, it wouldn't." She looks up toward the sky, cackling. "There's a full moon tonight. Shouldn't you be preparing to hide somewhere?"

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I open a desk drawer and toss her into it. Then I stack books and folders on top before locking her inside.

Even with her laughter slightly muffled, I can hear every word she's uttering.

Invenire puellam pulcherrimam et sapientissimam in tota terra, et si te amare contigerit, te et omne tuum genus e tenebris tuis noctes liberabo.

It's my curse once a day for good measure, a cruel reminder that I've consistently failed to restore my former life: "Find the most beautiful and wisest girl in all the land, and if she should fall in love with you, I'll free you and all your kin from your darkest nights..."

Ignoring the sudden ache in my chest, I walk over to the wall on the far end of the room and light a lamp.

Ahead of me stands a copy of every legal record in town, and I'm determined to uncover more about the woman who nearly shot me.

She definitely wouldn't have missed.

I run my fingers across dusty spines and stop when I reach The Village Ledger: Kingdom Six.

Blowing the dust off the cover, I pluck a rose bloom and set it on top of the book.

"Show me any servants who are indentured to Isabelle Arwyn's family, and then

show me her entire bloodline. Now.”

The pages gleam and flip one after the other in slow motion, as if they’re surprised to be summoned.

They’re tempting me to return the book to the shelf, but they abruptly flip fast in reverse—stopping at page twenty-four.

Morris Arwyn m. Elizabeth Arwyn (deceased)

Isabelle “Izzie” Arwyn

There are no servants listed, and every person in the line before Izzie’s parents are deceased.

I set down the book and grab another, *The Village Census*.

“Show me every woman in this village who is within five years of age of Isabelle Arwyn.”

The pages in this book don’t dance or hesitate to give me what I ask for. They detach from the spine all at once and circle around me, hovering in the air.

I read the names on every sheet and recall each maiden’s face with ease. I’ve met them all before, bartered their family’s debts, or worse, been forced to sit with their fathers as they were offered to me for marriage.

“You may return to the book,” I command. “Thank you.”

They fall to the ground and organize themselves before finding their places within the spine.

“What exactly are you looking for, Boss?” My right hand, Lafayette, walks into the room. “If you don’t hurry up and tell me, I’ll have to ask the asylum doctor pay you a visit.”

“There’s no need for that.” I turn around. “Tell me how a beautiful girl could live in this village without ever being listed in the records. How she could be here without leaving a single trace of her existence?”

“If she’s a bastard child or an orphan who was abandoned by a spinster, it’s possible.” He strokes his chin. “The only other way is if someone didn’t want to pay taxes on her, but... That’s unlikely. I keep fairly good records, and my list of beautiful girls is complete.”

“It can’t be if the woman I’m searching for isn’t on it.”

“Okay.” He shrugs. “I’m calling the doctor.”

“Maybe she came from another kingdom...” I move toward the end of the shelf, pulling out other books, making other requests.

“Um, with all due respect, and as fun as this little game seems, we’re running out of time, G’aston.” His voice is now faint. “You promised that you would focus on freeing us from this hell more than ever this year.”

“That’s what I’m doing, Lafayette...”

“You should be upstairs, making an effort with the Swan,” he says. “The curse doesn’t just affect you, and if you’d stayed upstairs a little longer, you would’ve seen that you two have a lot in common.”

I highly doubt that. “Did you ask her if she likes to read?”

“I did.” He nods. “She’s not the slightest bit interested in books, so you won’t have to worry about her having an untamed mouth, and her thoughts won’t be polluted with nonsense.”

“Sounds like she has a lot in common with you.”

He ignores my comment. “She also enjoys hunting and looking for new adventures in the woods. Those things alone sound very promising, in my opinion. What do you say?”

I want to tell him she’s a waste of my time, but a sudden applause sifts through the floorboards above.

“Hoorahhhh!” The men exclaim, a sign that someone has ordered a round of drinks for everyone.

“You can request a private meeting with her and her father,” I say.

“For tomorrow?”

“If you insist, Lafayette.”

“I do. Thank you.” He rushes toward the staircase.

I don’t have the heart to tell him that the woman is obviously lying about a love for hunting. Her hands are as dainty as dandelion petals, and her legs are far too wispy for anything other than swimming.

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She's like all the other maidens in this town—willing to say “Yes” to any man with money or prestige—all for the sake of marriage.

Still, just to be sure, I grab one last catalogue from the shelf and return to the tavern.

Amidst the singing and dancing, I move behind my bartering table and unlock the top left drawer.

Pushing aside papers, I uncover one of my rose blooms.

Blush red, it sits still and lifeless, a tell-tale sign that no maiden in this room—not even the Swan—will be much help with the curse.

The petals are supposed to glimmer and sparkle if I ever encounter “the most beautiful and wisest girl,” but I've only witnessed that once.

It was several months ago, when I left one for Isabelle after loaning money to her father. Although he agreed to my terms, he tossed the bloom outside when I left.

While riding around that night, I caught sight of it near their basement window, sparkling and glowing brightly against the stone.

It rolled toward me when I approached, beckoning me to step closer, but I held my ground and watched in disbelief.

It confirmed that Izzie was the girl I should pursue, but that won't stop me from finding out who the other woman is in the meantime.

I need to figure out her name...

A Secret They Won't Share

Belle

Izzie and Father walk through the front door while I'm lighting dinner candles on Sunday. Armed with shopping bags, they laugh in their own little world before noticing me.

"It smells great in here, Belle," Izzie says finally. "What are you making for dinner?"

"A rabbit roast." I set their bowls on the table. "I used Mother's recipe."

"I can still see a layer of dust on the cauldron." Father plops down in his chair. "I also saw dirt on the steps outside, so you'll need to wash those before taking a bite."

"Yes, sir." I nod, grateful that I've already eaten.

"Izzie was approached by a very wealthy seaman today," he says proudly. "Her best catch yet."

"He's a prince!" Izzie squeals. "I believe he said his name was Prince Eric. He's promised to come visit me in a few days."

"She told him to expect a freshly baked apple pie, so I suggest you pluck the best ones before bed." Father shoos me away. "Go do that now."

"Will do." I head toward the door, but he suddenly grabs my arm, squeezing it hard. "Ouch..."

“Why the hell is my rifle out of place?” he asks.

“There was a visitor who came by the other day,” I say. “I thought he was attempting to rob us.”

“Ha!” He laughs, releasing me. “If Izzie isn’t here, there’s nothing of value in this home.”

Izzie, ever the Queen of Complacency, smiles sheepishly.

“I’m assuming it was one of the Yardham brothers?” She frowns. “I’ve already told him no. He’s far too poor for me.”

“Perhaps it was Mr. Ellison.” Father taps his chin. “Maybe he’s come to his senses and tripled his offer.”

“It was neither,” I say. “It was Gabriel Aston.”

“Who?” Izzie and Father utter in unison, their spoons frozen in mid-air.

“Gabriel Aston,” I repeat. “He said there was something important he needed to discuss, but he was too good to leave a real gift like the other suitors.”

“What else did he say?” Father asks.

“I think that was it.”

“Think harder, girl.” He narrows his eyes. “What else did he fucking say?”

“That’s all I remember...”

The color slowly drains from his face, and Izzie sets down her spoon. They turn to look at each other, and their hands begin trembling.

Confused, I wait for them to explain, but they remain speechless. The only sounds are the flames crackling under the cauldron and the wind howling outside the windows.

“Go feed Phillippe, Belle,” Father demands. “Then make sure his horseshoes are secure.”

The word “Why” attempts to escape from my lips, but the crazed look in my father’s eyes keeps it trapped under my tongue.

He looks like he could murder me...

I wrap a shawl around my shoulders and head outside.

Through the window, I watch as Izzie and Father pace the floor, their faces contorting with worry.

Why is she crying?

Phillippe trots over to me and nudges my cheek.

“I missed you too, boy,” I say, watching Father cover his face with his hands. “Have they treated you well since I’ve been away?”

He shakes his head, and I run my fingers across his mangled mane.

“I’m so sorry. Do you know what’s going on in there?”

He neighs as I unravel a knot.

I lead him closer to the window so I can attempt to read Izzie's lips, but Father glares at me and draws the drapes shut.

"Come on, Phillippe." I sigh and lead him to the trough. "Whatever it is, I guess they'll tell me tomorrow..."

When they finally allow me to return, the sun is rising on a new day, and the only words they're willing to offer are cleaning demands.

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A Sudden Goodbye

Belle

Eggs sizzle over the fire in the morning, their sound still far louder than the ongoing whispers between Izzie and Father.

The only sentences I've managed to catch so far are, "I'll need to leave for the fair soon," "You'll need to stand watch," and "Suitor Season still holds potential for you."

I've lost all interest in straining to hear the rest. Instead, I focus my gaze on the view outside the window, watching the trees in the woods sway in the wind.

While I'm dreaming about spending a day under their canopies, their branches suddenly stretch toward the sun in unison, shooting thousands of pine needles into the sky.

They swirl and swarm under the clouds, spelling out two words.

Run, Belle.

I blink a few times. Run from what?

Run NOW.

A second message forms before the needles fall away, and the trees return to their stiff positions.

I scratch my head and pull the drapes shut.

Scooping fried yolks onto plates, I set them on the table and wait to hear the list of chores I'll have the joy of completing today.

"And you'll follow that, understood?" Father says to Izzie before looking at me. "Belle, I'm stopping by a cleaning shop on my trip. I can't find your locket."

"It's in my room."

"Then make haste and bring it to me if you'd like it shined."

"I would." I rush to my room and slide a hand under my bed. Struggling to reach it, I lie on my stomach and spot Gabriel's rose.

It hasn't wilted in the slightest.

Still very much alive, it's spinning around in a slow circle, glowing bright red. And somehow, the bloom has grown two sizes larger since he left.

What the...

Confused, I remove the glass and tug at one of its petals. I try to tear it away, to see how this is even possible, but its stem suddenly recoils. Then it stabs my pinky finger with its thorn.

"Ouch!" I trap it once more, kissing my wound while it returns to form.

I'll deal with you later.

"Hurry up, Belle!" My father calls.

“Coming!” I find my trinket box and pull out my locket before returning upstairs.

“Thank you.” Father snatches it from me before I can hand it to him. “This should fetch a good price.”

“What?” I reach for it, and he holds it up high. “I thought you were simply getting it shined.”

“Oh, please.” He rolls his eyes. “I should’ve taken this from you years ago.”

“Mother gifted that to me!” I say. “Give it back right now or else.”

“Or else?” He raises his eyebrow. “Or else what, Belle?”

“Give me back my goddamn locket.” I clench my fists at my side. “It’s not yours to sell.”

“It is when we need the money.” He opens the clasp and tears out the painted picture of Mother holding me in her arms. “You can have this, though. I doubt any dealer will see value in it.”

My heart falls to the floor with the photo, and I feel the sudden urge to pull out my dagger and stab him in the neck. To watch him bleed helplessly until he can no longer breathe.

As if Izzie can sense that I’m tempted to kill him, she steps in front of me.

“I hope you have a good trip,” she says. “I believe you have a solid plan.”

“I believe so, too, Izzie.” He tucks my locket into his satchel and walks over to the eggs I’ve prepared. He devours them in one bite, completely unfazed that he’s

wounded me in the worst way.

For the very last time...

Tears well in my eyes, but I take a deep breath to prevent them from falling.

“When I return,” he says, heading toward the door, “I better hear that you minded your manners and stayed out of trouble, Belle.”

When you return, I won’t fucking be here. “You will, sir.”

He embraces Izzie in a long hug, muttering, “I love you so much. Be safe and take care of yourself,” and then he leaves without saying anything else.

An Unwanted Return

Belle

For the next several days, our house holds no warmth, no light.

Whenever I attempt to start a fire, Izzie snatches the firewood from my hands and clucks her tongue.

“We can’t.” She insists. “No one can know we’re here.”

Too angry to ask why, I’ve spent most of my time in the basement, using Gabriel’s bloom as a light so I can read.

Somehow, it can sense when I need it to glow brighter and when I don’t need its help at all. And today, I discovered that it can hear and understand me.

When I said, “I wish Father had taken you to sell instead of my locket,” it sunk its thorns deep into my palm, drawing blood until I apologized. And when I said, “I’m sorry,” it pressed a petal against my skin to clot the drops.

After reading one more chapter, I thank it for the light and return it to the jar.

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I walk upstairs and mark a new “X” on our wall to keep track of Father’s trip. Then I suck up my pride and look over at Izzie.

Slumped on the chaise, her eyes are glued to the pages of an old book.

How many times can she possibly read Snow White?

“Father should’ve returned by now, don’t you think?” I ask.

“Not necessarily.” She flips a page. “It’s only been four days.”

“It’s been six, Izzie.”

“What?” She shuts the book. “Are you sure?”

I nod, pointing at the wall. “Tomorrow will make seven. I’ll check the tavern in a few.”

“No, no, no. There’s no need for you to do that.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“You don’t need to go there at all.” She presses a hand against her chest, and her face pales as white as a ghost.

“Um...Do you think we should go search for him, then?”

She jumps off the chaise without answering my question.

Hastily pulling open her chest of drawers, she tosses clothes onto the floor like a madwoman.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god...” She mutters to herself, rummaging through box after box.

“Pick up all my things and stuff them into my largest satchel, Belle,” she demands.

“Then you need to prepare two lunch pails for me.”

“Izzie, what exactly are you—”

“Now.” She turns around, glaring at me. “Save whatever sarcastic remark you’re tempted to say and do it now.”

“Fine.” I oblige and smear butter atop two sweet loaves before tucking them inside a pail with fruit. Even though she’s behaving like an utter bitch, I make a third pail and add cheese for good measure.

She undresses and redresses, tying and retying her favorite cerulean ribbon around her ponytail, wiping away tears with the back of her hand.

When I’m done packing all her things, she’s full-on bawling.

“Why me?” She cries. “Why?”

A small part of me wants to console her, but I’ve played nice enough this week. Hopefully, she’ll stop soon so that I can read the rest of my book in peace.

After buckling her shoes, she walks over to me and places her hands on my

shoulders.

“I’ve never said this before, but I’m sorry I didn’t stick up for you as much as I could’ve over the years,” she whispers. “I should’ve protected you from Father’s wrath more ... I know that deep down you hate him and you’d be ecstatic if he died, but I won’t be.”

“Then why are you speaking as if he’s already dead?”

“He just never understood you.” She shakes her head. “You’re so damn difficult to love at times.”

“Is this conversation going somewhere, Izzie?”

“Although I’ll never be able to forgive you for turning down Prince Charming that day, I can understand why you did.”

“Can you really?”

“Um hm.” She presses a kiss against my forehead. “You feel unworthy of love because you know that no man will ever love a classless, unsophisticated woman like you.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “That’s exactly the reason.”

“I know. I’ve read about it.” She hugs me so tightly that I can barely breathe, and while she tells me how life as a spinster “won’t be so bad,” I insert her into my dragon-burning fantasy. I smile as the fire reduces her body to nothing but ashes as well.

“Well, that’s enough of that.” She finally pulls away from me. “Since I’m his

favorite, I'll go look for him alone with Madeline, okay?" she says. "If it takes me too long to return, you should come look for me."

"I think we should reverse roles, Izzie. You're not that good on horseback, and you don't know your way around the woods."

"I'm smart enough to figure it out." She pauses. "Do you think there are spiders in the woods? If so, is there a way that I can avoid them?"

I stare at her blankly.

"I'll just scream if I see any," she says. "That'll scare them away."

I refuse to waste any sarcasm on her.

"I'll prepare some water gourds for you," I say, heading outside.

Filling them, I screw the tops on tight before walking to our second horse, Madeline—the one Father took from me and gave to Izzie—and secure them on the saddle.

"You're well aware that my sister is an idiot, Madeline," I whisper against her neck. "Take the path I always show you and send me word through the birds if she encounters trouble."

Madeline nods as Izzie bursts through the door.

Without saying another word, I help her onto the saddle and adjust her bags. I even offer her a pair of gloves, so she won't feel insects crawling over her hands.

"Goodbye, Belle." She wipes a stream of tears away. "Wish me luck."

“I’ll come look for you if you don’t return in two days,” I say.

“Make it four.” She jerks the reins. “Take care.”

Madeline gallops toward the woods, and when I can’t hear the hooves hitting the ground anymore, I head inside and light a fire in the hearth.

The following morning, loud clanging in the kitchen stirs me from my sleep.

I guess Izzie found Father after all...

Rolling off the bed, I wrap a scarf around my face and take a deep breath. I grab a teacup from my window and vow to get through today without letting either of them under my skin.

“One day I won’t live here anymore,” I mutter, pushing the door open.

“Good morning, Belle.” Gabriel smiles at me from across the room, and I drop my cup to the floor, shattering it to pieces.

“Did you sleep well?” he asks, standing to his feet.

He walks over to me before I can utter a word, and it’s more than clear that he’s far too big for this cottage.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I ask. “You’re trespassing...again.”

“Is that what you think this is?” His lips curve into a slow, sexy smile that temporarily disarms my every thought. I attempt to look away, but the sight of his muscles straining the fabric of his white shirt is even more overwhelming than the sight of his perfect mouth.

“You’re a pretty heavy sleeper,” he says, tilting my chin up with his fingertips. “You didn’t stir in the slightest when I came in, which means any man in the village could simply barge inside and have his way with you. That’s not very safe.”

“The front door was locked, three times over.”

“Was it?”

“Yes.” I swallow. “It was.”

“I didn’t notice.” He stares into my eyes for several moments, as if he’s attempting to find answers within my irises. “Your name is Belle, is it not?”

I swallow, trapping the word “Yes” under my tongue. From the wicked tone of his voice, this doesn’t seem as if it’s a “friendly visit” like before.

Completely caught off guard by seeing him again, I ignore the frantic beating in my chest and search for something else to say.

“The man of this house and I have an arrangement,” he speaks first. “I’m only here to collect my part of the deal and I’ll be on my way. If you can point me in the right direction, I’d appreciate it.”

“I’ll pass.” I shake my head and step back. “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“It’d be in your best interest if you did.” He steps forward. “Where is he?”

I slide a hand under my nightgown, reaching for my dagger, but it’s not there. I run my hand against the back of my thigh, in case it shifted in the middle of the night, but my fingers grasp nothing but an empty holster.

Gabriel lets out a low laugh, pulling it from his pocket. “Looking for this?”

“You touched me while I was sleeping?”

“As much as you’d probably enjoy that, no,” he says. “You talk in your sleep, which is also not safe. You mentioned the dagger, and when I asked you to hand over your weapons, you kindly complied. I have your knives and your hammer, too.”

“You’re far more psychotic than I thought you were before.”

“What else have you been thinking about me?”

“Nothing.” I roll my eyes. “The man you’re looking for isn’t here, and I don’t know anything else.”

“Okay, then.” He doesn’t look the slightest bit convinced. “Then let’s talk about you. What kingdom did you come from?”

I don’t answer.

A blue-suited henchman suddenly walks through the front door, humming to himself.

“Okay, Gabriel! When do you plan to admit that this other woman was a hallucination and...” The rest of the sentence stalls on his lips.

He blinks a few times once he notices me, muttering, “Impossible...”

“What kingdom?” Gabriel’s attention is still on me, but I withhold my words.

I’m anticipating when he steps back so I can lunge for an empty wine bottle and crack it over his head.

“Have it your way, Belle.” My name sounds foreign, yet perfect on his lips. “But just so you know, there will be consequences if you don’t answer my next question.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Gabriel.”

“You should be.” He smirks. “I’d hate to show you my other side so soon, since we’re getting along well, but I can, if that’s what it takes.”

My palms sweat at the thought of the rumors I’ve heard about his ruthless business dealings. How no one in this town would ever dare to disrespect or cross him for fear of disappearing. How certain villagers call him “a vicious beast” behind closed doors.

“How long have you been living here?” he asks.

Silence.

“Do you work for other families or is it just the Arwys?”

Silence, again.

“I’m not a fan of repeating my questions, Belle.”

“I’m not a fan of hearing them, so we’ll both win if you stop.”

His henchman snorts, and Gabriel shoots a death stare in his direction.

“Sorry, Boss...”

“I’ve asked around the village about you and gotten nothing,” he says to me. “Don’t you find that quite strange?”

“It’s as strange as you repeatedly trespassing.” I try to look away from him, but I can’t. He’s far too captivating.

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“The only person who vaguely remembers you is a fruit vendor, but I’m not sure that I can trust anything he says since he’s still dealing with the consequences of stealing from me.”

“The second my father returns, I promise to splatter your brain all over this floor, so you can learn the consequences of breaking and entering.”

“Mr. Arwyn is your father?” He raises his eyebrow. “Does that mean Izzie is your sister?”

My cheeks flush red at my rushed admission.

“Are you his by way of another woman? Or did your parents decide not to make a record of you to avoid paying taxes?”

“That’s none of your business.”

He nods and gestures to his henchman. “I guess you were right, Lafayette. So, since he’s your father, I think you know exactly where he is, and I’m giving you five seconds to tell me.”

“I really don’t know,” I say. “The last time I saw him, he...” My voice locks in my throat as I remember how Father acted the day he left, how his goodbye felt more than final.

And there was all the whispering he and Izzie did the night before...

Izzie's rush to leave alone, to keep the house as dark as possible, makes a lot more sense now.

She knew that they weren't coming back...

"Time's up." Gabriel says, and my plan of cracking a bottle over his head instantly dissolves as ten more henchmen file through the open door.

"Check the basement and check every loose floorboard in the bedrooms," Gabriel bellows. "Now."

They follow his command, knocking portraits off the walls and toppling every piece of furniture. They storm the basement steps and sounds of destruction follow.

"There's no one down here, Boss!" a henchman calls. "Nothing under the floorboards except photographs and writings!"

The veins in Gabriel's neck swell, and he clenches his jaw.

"Okay, look, Belle. I'll ask you one more time," he says, speaking slowly. "Where the fuck is your father?"

"I don't know."

"Fair enough." He hisses. "I don't have any more patience, so I'll take you."

"Take me where?"

"You'll find out soon enough." He snaps his fingers, and one of his men places a leather satchel on the table. "Fill that with whatever you need and be ready."

“For what?”

“Our trip to Hell.” He looks me up and down. “I’ll retrieve you at dawn. You can make yourself useful by leaving a letter for your father and Izzie, in case they do return while you’re away.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Did you hear me asking?” His eyes blaze with rage. “Does it sound like you have a choice?”

I can only stare at him, feeling helpless.

“I thought so.” He turns away from me, walking out of the house, and his men follow.

The door slams shut behind them, and I hear his deep commands from the other side.

“Stay here and guard the door,” he says. “Make sure she doesn’t take a single breath outside until I return.”

“Yes, sir.”

I peer out the peephole and watch a lone henchman pace on our steps for hours.

When the moon rises, he slumps against the door, resting a rifle in his lap.

I wait until I’m sure he’s sleeping and stuff everything I value into my own satchel...even the rose bloom.

Heading to Izzie’s bedroom, I climb through her window and let go of the pane once my feet hit the grass. I wander toward the back of our house, plucking as many apples

as I can from the orchard, and then I run toward the fields and into the woods.

If they want to make me disappear, I'll disappear on my own...

Worth the Risk

Belle

I have to tell my book friend goodbye...

My heart is reeling at the thought of it, but I can't dare leave him hanging like I did the last time.

He means too much to me.

The sky's clouds are looming low and threatening rain—an omen that I should avoid returning to the bookstore at all costs—but my mind is already made up.

I peer through a clearing in the woods that overlooks the village and wait for the town square's morning bell.

Ring! Ring! Ring!

I pull a scarf over my face and make my move.

Weaving between the vendors and villagers, I look both ways before slipping inside the store.

“Good morning, whoever you are!” Mr. Lorimer calls from the back. “I'll be with you after I find my glasses!”

I don't bother responding.

I rush to my usual bookshelf and grab *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, flipping to the last page.

He's already written me back?

* * *

I'm very sorry to hear about your father's cruelty again. Would you like me to deal with him for you?

I can. Just let me know...

Once I do that, can we finally meet in person?

Also, you were right about this book.

I hate it.

Pick something else.

—Your Only Friend

Although nothing would make me happier than seeing my father suffer, it's far too late for that now.

I appreciate your offer, and even though he deserves it, I'll have to pass...

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Something in my life has changed recently, and I have to go away for a while.

If you see this note, meet me in the Whispering Woods. I'll be wearing a red scarf and sitting near the misty brook that's half a day away from the village.

If you come and you don't like what you see, leave.

I'll never know the difference, and I'm honestly not sure if you'll read this in time anyway.

—You're Only Friend, Too

I slam the book shut and steal a copy of Hamlet from the wall before running out of the store.

With my heart racing a mile a minute, I head toward the woods again, leaving this life behind once and for all.

Not So Fast

Gabriel

Lafayette is sleeping on the steps when I return to the Arwyns' home, a rifle perched on his lap.

"Lafayette?" I push his shoulder. "Lafayette?"

“Oh, shit.” He jolts awake and stands to his feet. “Uh, sorry. I was just napping.”

“Is she still inside?” I snap, frustrated.

“Of course,” he says. “I checked every hour on the hour. She’s in her bed.”

I walk past him and push the front door open, heading to Belle’s room.

“It’s time to leave.” I knock on her door. “The quicker you come with me, the better.”

She doesn’t make a sound.

I knock again, a bit harder this time. “Come to the door now or I’ll be forced to knock it down.”

Unsurprisingly, she doesn’t comply, and I give her a full minute before forcing the door open.

Her room is empty, save for a note on her pillow.

Fuck You, Gabriel.

The Whispering Woods

Belle

Hours Later

My mother’s locket held a secret compass in the second chamber. Its brass needle shone under the darkest skies, keeping me safe and in control on the days I ventured away from home.

Without it, I am utterly lost.

I've been stumbling through the woods for what feels like forever, attempting to remember all the paths I took before, but every direction looks the same.

The only thing I've accomplished thus far is coming full circle.

Leaning against the stump of an oak tree, I let out a weary sigh and mentally recount my steps.

For some strange reason, the trees around me haven't whispered a hint or offered help. Their leaves have yet to rustle with a message in the wind, and they're as still as a frozen lake, serving as nothing more than a beautiful backdrop.

"Why are you all so silent now?" I ask. "You told me to run, and I did. What now?"

They give me nothing.

I sling a satchel over my shoulder and pull out my mother's old notebook, flipping to the last page to reread her notes on all the kingdoms.

* * *

If you ever need to escape, head for the Fourth Kingdom. The people there are kind and open to vagabonds and strangers, and I've heard nothing but good things about its Yellow Brick Road.

* * *

It lies beyond the Twisted Rivers, and the moss on the oaks will grow on their south side if you're close.

* * *

The swallows will know the harmony from the lullaby I sang to you as a child and will lead you the rest of the way.

* * *

It's pointless to check the moss on the oaks ahead of me; I haven't traveled long enough to be anywhere near the realm of the Fourth Kingdom.

I've yet to come across a stream, let alone a river.

Returning her notes to my bag, I decide to make this clearing a temporary shelter for the night.

I stand up and snap a few branches for firewood, but something large moves through the bushes in the distance.

It sounds too small to be a bear but too large to be a rodent.

I collect more firewood, but the 'something' moves again, rattling the leaves near me.

It gets closer and closer, and I stand still, waiting to see what direction it's coming from, but then I hear a familiar deep voice behind me.

"I'm impressed with how far you've traveled in a day," Gabriel breathes against my neck. "Beyond impressed, actually."

I slowly turn around to face him, too stunned to speak. He's dressed in all black, sporting a line of smeared war paint under his eyes.

“Going somewhere important?” He raises his eyebrow.

“No, I...” I stutter as someone presses the cold barrel of a gun against my back. “I was just stretching my legs.”

“After I specifically told you to stay home and wait for me?”

I swallow as more men—at least twenty—slip through the shadows behind him. Their arrows and guns are all aimed directly at my head, and my heart tumbles to the ground.

It knows I’m trapped.

“It looks like you’re trying to get away from me,” he says. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“I think that’s more than obvious...”

He narrows his eyes at me, and I narrow mine in return.

“Here’s the thing, Belle.” He lowers his voice and grabs me by the waist, stilling me in place. “You belong to me now. You’re one-hundred-percent mine, until I get what I need in exchange for you.”

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“Let go of me,” I try to pull away from him, but he only tightens his grip.

“If I tell you to do something from here on out, you’ll do it without hesitation,” he whispers into my ear. “If you try to run away from me again, I’ll order my men to shoot you in the back.”

“Tell them to do it now,” I say. “I fully intend to slash you in your sleep.”

“Good to know, since I’ll never let you see that.” He tightens his grip even more, stealing my breath. “Say, ‘I belong to you, Gabriel.’”

“Never.”

“I’ll give you one more chance to obey me.”

“Give me a million and the results will be the same.”

“Belle—”

“I left that ‘Fuck You’ note behind for a reason.” I spit on his hand, and he lets me go. “Did you have a problem reading it, or do you struggle with comprehension?”

“I see how you’re going to be.” He clenches his jaw. “You’ll walk for this entire journey unless you come to your goddamn senses. Everyone else rides on horseback...”

A Daunting Journey

Gabriel

Later that Night

Werewolves howl in anguish from afar, warning weary travelers to stay on the protected paths that glimmer with moon dust. They're hungry and searching for fresh flesh tonight, but I'm not concerned about being their prey.

I've never been their type.

"Hey, uh, Boss," Lafayette whispers from his horse. "It's almost been a full day."

"And?"

"Don't you think you should, um... Let our lady prisoner onto a horse now?"

I look over my shoulder, spotting Belle walking between two of my most trusted riders. She hasn't lost a step the entire day, and while a few of my men have requested that we take brief breaks for relief, she hasn't begged for anything once.

Sensing my stare, her emerald green eyes meet mine.

She lifts an imaginary dagger to her throat, mouthing, "Don't sleep."

I smile as she mimes other threats, and I can't help but notice how other men are stealing glimpses of her, too.

Her mouth is definitely going to be a problem for me, but I can't deny that her beauty is utterly unparalleled.

"I think she's more than fine," I say, turning around again. "When she stops being

defiant and tells me who she belongs to, I'll let her onto a horse."

"But Boss—"

"She's fine." I refuse to entertain the subject anymore. "Drop it."

"Okay..." He twiddles his thumbs. "Well, um, how many days do you think it'll take us to get to the castle this time?"

"Depends," I say. "We need to catch Mr. Arwyn and Isabelle first. I don't believe either of them got that far."

"You sure about that?"

"One-hundred-percent." I tighten the reins on my horse—Mauricio—and command him to pull ahead.

Now is not the time to second guess my plan, and the last thing I need is one of my men overhearing the uncertainty in LaFayette's voice.

We've failed at ending this curse time and time again, but I'm confident that this time—the seventeenth—is the charm.

It has to be...

The trail ahead curves and bends past Swan Lake, winding through rows of white-roofed elf homes that overlook their hidden caves. It's a path I know all too well, and yet, no matter how many times I follow it, it feels longer.

Ahead, a bronze door shimmers under the canopy of an oak tree, marking my first stopping place.

“Hold, Mauricio.” I command, and his hooves halt in the dirt. Patting his side, I hop off the saddle and knock on the door.

“Yes?” The door opens, revealing a pale-faced woman dressed in an ivory gown.

“We’re starting another journey,” I say. “Let’s go.”

“What? Now?” She peers behind me as my men move behind my horse. “You said I wouldn’t have to help you again until you were sure you’d found the right girl.”

“I am sure.” I narrow my eyes. “And you’re not in a position to question me about anything. Ever.”

“Last time I checked, you’re the reason we’re all cursed.”

“You’re just as much to blame as me...” I step closer. “Or have you forgotten exactly what happened that night?”

She groans, still staring at the men, looking as if she’s about to risk my rage and refuse to come along. But then her eyes widen at something in the distance.

“Is that the girl?” she asks.

Huh? I turn around, spotting Belle as she slips through a reed bed, slumping to the ground. It’s her first sign of weakness.

“No.” I shake my head. “She’s my prisoner. I’m using her in exchange for the real girl.”

“She’s so beautiful...” She leans against the frame. “None of the other girls you’ve ever tried looked like that.”

“Those girls are all irrelevant,” I say. “Some of them didn’t even get this far into the journey.”

“I wonder why...” She purses her lips. “Oh, wait. It’s because you’re a ruthless asshole who doesn’t know what true love is.”

“I’m done wasting time with you.” I groan. “How long will it take you to prepare for this trip?”

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“A while, since it’s such short notice.” She looks up at the sky. “I have to finish something important before I leave.”

“Anything my men can help you out with?”

“Yes, actually.” She picks up a handful of smooth white stones and presses them into my hand. “I’m baking cakes for two children who are currently wandering the woods. They’ll need the crumbs and these stones to find their way home, and I’ll never be able to live with myself if they get eaten by the witch. Can your men find them and lead them here?”

“Do they have names?”

“Hansel and Gretel.”

“Fine,” I say. “Make dinner for all of us, too, while you’re at it.”

She slams the door in my face.

A Drop of Defiance

Belle

My feet are bleeding.

The tips of my toes are cracked, and my ankles are so worn and torn that they resemble the old pages of a book.

Too stubborn to ask for a reprieve on a horse, I sink my calves into the mud and rip aloe leaves from a floating reed.

Tearing the blades open to expose the cool green gel, I smear the liquid all over my fingertips.

When the mud has somewhat numbed me, I lift my left foot and press a hand against my broken skin.

“Ahhhh...” I bite my lip and hold back tears as the aloe stings the open wounds.

Behind me, I hear Gabriel’s men whispering through the bushes.

“You think Gabriel will let us have the girl when we reach the next full moon?” a deep voice says. “He has to give us something to keep us going.”

“I don’t see why not,” a huskier voice responds. “She’s merely a prisoner to him. She has no true value to us, except in the final exchange.”

“Whenever he gives the go-ahead, I get to have her first. I’m sure she’s tight.”

“If I don’t beat you to it, you mean.”

“Maybe we can have her at the same time. She has more than one hole after all.”

They laugh in unison, and I suck in a slow, unsteady breath.

I have to get away from these people...

Heavy footsteps sound to my left, and Gabriel peers through the thicket. Looking as gorgeous and evil as ever, he seems annoyed at my presence.

“We’re starting again soon,” he says. “You need to—”

“Get up. I know.” I pluck another aloe leaf. “Can you spare me a moment until I finish tending to my wounds, please?”

“What wounds?”

“I can handle them myself.” I try to turn away, but it hurts too badly.

He glances down at my feet, watching the blood spew onto my hand. A wave of guilt washes over his face, and he tears off fresh leaves before moving closer.

“You’re doing it wrong,” he says, his voice soft. “Do you know that?”

“I do a lot of things wrong, apparently.”

“Running your mouth is the only thing I’ve noticed so far.” He eyes my feet again. “Let me help you.”

I’m in far too much pain to protest.

He kneels and gently opens the leaves, wrapping their smooth edges around my feet one by one, crafting makeshift shoes.

He stares into my eyes the entire time, looking as if there’s something he wants to say, but only silence stretches between us.

When he finishes, he slides his hands under my thighs and lifts me over his shoulder, carrying me out of the reed bed.

Amidst a chorus of whispers from his men, he places me on his horse before sitting

behind me.

“Belle, this is Sola,” he says, gesturing to a young woman on the horse next to us. “She’ll be your personal maiden until this journey is over. She’ll look after you, and you need to obey her every command.”

“How much longer will this ride take?” I can’t help but ask.

“As long as it takes.” He grips the reins, forcing the horse to gallop forward.

Halfway through the night, when my eyelids are drooping, and my feet are finally feeling relief, I pretend I don’t feel Gabriel securing an arm around my waist and breathing in the scent of my hair.

An Unexpected Bargain

Gabriel

Two Full Days Later

“What if he did come to see me?” Belle whispers against my chest. “Did I miss him somehow?” “Did he not want me?”

I listen as she continues to talk in her sleep, as wisps of her red hair flutter against my face.

I have no idea what the hell she’s talking about, but I much prefer these words to her earlier whispers of “Fuck Gabriel. Don’t ever drop your guard around that bastard again.”

“Please let us stop and rest, Sir Gabriel, please!” one of my men shouts from behind,

interrupting my thoughts. “I know you can hear me! We need a break!”

I don’t stop or dare give in to his request.

Not now.

Not ever.

“Are you determined to drive us mad until we all drop dead?” The man is still shouting. “If so, let us know, so we can decide whether another trip with you is worth it.”

I immediately halt.

“Turn around, Mauricio,” I command, facing my men.

I’m prepared to deliver a speech about how time is of the essence and how only the weakest of soldiers would stop now, but they do look seconds away from dropping to their graves.

“Who is the one complaining about this journey?” I call out. “Show yourself.”

No one steps forward.

“Who was speaking?” I raise my voice. “Don’t make me ask again.”

Tobias, a grey-haired man at the rear, rides his black stallion closer.

“It was me, sir,” he says. “I was simply expressing how everyone else feels.”

“I see... Is there anything else I need to know about your feelings?”

“I don’t understand why the girl is here, sir.” He gestures to Belle. “If she can’t help us to break the curse, she’s just another mouth to feed, dead weight.”

“This girl is collateral for the real girl,” I say to him. “When she’s served her purpose, she’ll no longer travel with us.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes.” I narrow my eyes. “Anything else we need to discuss?”

“We’re hungry and tired.” He crosses his arms. “Can we at least hunt for something to eat?”

A loud round of thunder roars in the distance before I can respond. The surrounding trees sway violently and whisper—a clear sign that someone deep in these woods is moments away from being devoured alive.

Still awaiting my response, my men pull balsam blooms from their pockets. The whispering is bound to get worse and stuffing the blooms into their ears always dulls the worst of whatever comes.

“We can set up camp here for a short while,” I say. “Be prepared to move the moment I say so.”

“Thank you, sir.” Tobias nods, and the rest of the men sigh in relief.

I jump off Mauricio, and Belle’s eyes flutter open with confusion and curiosity.

For a split second, I’m tempted to taste her bright red lips, and I almost forget that she’s my prisoner.

“Here.” I pull a handful of balsam blooms from my pocket. “I meant to offer these to you earlier. You’ll need them.”

“For what?”

“So you can sleep through the trees’ whispering tonight.” I gesture around as they speak louder. “I’m sure you’re suffering already.”

She raises her eyebrow. "I don't hear anything."

The trees behind me shake so loudly that their cones fall to the ground like rain.

Belle doesn't flinch in the slightest. She doesn't even look their way.

What the hell?

"I'll keep them just in case." She tucks them into her sleeve and jumps off the horse.

"If you were smart, you'd let me go now."

"Oh?" I cross my arms. "And why is that?"

"Because you're clearly overvaluing what I mean to my father and Isabelle." She steps closer to me. "You're better off offering them something else."

"I already offered them a loan," I say. "When people don't pay me back, they can choose to lose someone else they love or their lives. They'll make the right choice when I find them, you just don't know it."

"And you don't know them." She hisses. "Your men say I don't have any value to you anyway, so you're wasting your time. Unless you have an ulterior motive."

"What exactly would that be?"

"Maybe you're desperately trying to trick someone into teaching you how to read. Then again, if you've made it this far in life without knowing how—"

"Stop talking," I cut her off. "I don't let go of the things I own that easily, and the moment you accept that, the better off you'll be. If you don't want to accept it, I'm happy to punish you in other ways."

Her face reddens, and she lifts her hand, swinging it back to slap me, but someone grabs her wrist from behind.

Sola.

“Whoa, whoa, Miss Belle!” She gasps. “That’s a good way to get yourself hurt. I don’t think you can take him.”

“You should let her try.” I smile. “I think she’d put up a pretty good fight.”

“Please let me try...” Belle seethes, raising her other hand.

I take off my weaponry belt and let it fall to the ground. Then I motion for Sola to let go of Belle’s hand.

“Let her have me,” I say. “I’m intrigued.”

“We need to prepare our sleeping space, sir.” Sola shoots me a “stay focused” look and tightens her grip on Belle’s wrist, practically dragging her away from me.

Belle’s emerald glare remains on me until she disappears behind a thicket.

“We need to talk,” Lafayette steps to my left. “A raven has returned with news you’ll want to hear.”

“Good.” I motion for him to follow me far away from the camp. “What is it?”

“There was a sighting of Mr. Arwyn and Isabelle. He says that one is farther than the other, but...” He holds up his hand, pausing at the terrible singing that’s a little too close for comfort.

Slinging a gun over my shoulder, I squint through the focal lens, but I don't see anyone nearby.

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The singing becomes louder and more unbearable by the second, the forlorn hymns of yet another lost and lovesick prince.

How are they all this incompetent?

“Let’s handle him first.” I head toward the singing, and Lafayette follows me.

The man’s shadow appears first, casting itself high and wide against a stone wall, and the instant clarity in his lyrics stops me dead in my tracks.

Tonight, tonight, my plans I make.

Tomorrow, tomorrow, the baby I take.

The queen will never win the game, for Rumpelstiltskin is my name...

The man is far from a lost and lovesick royal. He’s the second bane of my existence, wickedness in its purest form.

Still haggard from a lifetime of deceit, he’s dressed in tattered fabric, and his yellowed teeth have been sharpened into fangs.

“Well, well, well!” His soulless eyes meet mine. “We meet again, Prince of the Damned.”

“His name is Prince Gabriel or Sir G’aston to you, filthy swine,” Lafayette hisses. “You will bow down and address him properly.”

“Or else, what?” He scoffs. “He’ll send me to his nonexistent dungeon? Banish me from a kingdom that is no more?”

“Bow, now...” Lafayette warns.

“I think I’ll save my brittle old back for real royalty.” He spits on the ground. “Last time I checked, he hasn’t been a prince for decades, but he has aged quite nicely ... Have I missed the celebration of a certain spell being broken? I would’ve shown up to the party.”

I grit my teeth.

“Aww, that’s too bad, so sad,” he says. “But do you know what? I am willing to call you whatever you want, since we can’t seem to stay away from each other. Perhaps we can strike a bargain?”

“You’d need to have something I want for me to be interested.” I look over at the ragged knapsack behind him.

I’ve ripped it open several times over the decades, only to find golden thread and hay.

“Let’s save ourselves the usual waste of time, shall we?” I say. “Put out your fire and move your camp elsewhere. The last thing my men want to hear is your horrendous singing.”

“You should consider my bargain first.”

“I won’t ask you to move out of my way again,” I say. “Kill the fire and walk away, Rumpelstiltskin.”

“You’re searching for a beautiful woman named Isabelle Arwyn.” He tosses ashes

onto the fire, instantly smothering its flames. “You also want her father, correct?”

I say nothing, and his ugly laughter fills the night air.

“I know exactly where they are right now, Prince Gabriel.”

“So do I.” Lafayette crosses his arms. “Keep packing your shit.”

“They’ve moved on since then,” Rumpelstiltskin says. “They’re a lot more conniving than they let on, kind of like me. I’m actually quite impressed with their plans.”

Lafayette and I exchange glances.

“What the hell do you want this time?” I let out a weary sigh.

“Protection.” He holds out his hands. “Double what you gave me last time.”

“Tell me where the girl and her father are first.”

“No, I want the protection before you fuck me over.” He smiles. “To be safe, you know.”

“He’s full of shit...” Lafayette whispers. “Don’t trust him.”

I’ve never trusted him, but I can’t afford the risk of him being right. That, and he’s been right about things the last five times we’ve met.

Sliding a hand into my coat, I pull out two rose blooms and hold them out for him.

“They reached the Eighth Kingdom.” His eyes gleam. “With the beast.”

“That’s impossible.”

“They made it there by mistake.” He snatches the blooms from my fingertips. “The old man will soon be held in a dungeon for trespassing, and the girl is a half day away from finding him there. At the rate you’re traveling, I’m sure you’ll reach them in fifteen sunsets or less, but... You might be too late, given your situation. Your cursed life isn’t that bad, is it? You could definitely live like this forever...”

I grab him by the neck, lifting his entire body from the ground. “If you’re fucking with me about this, these next few breaths will be the last ones you ever take.”

“What exactly do I have to gain from lying?” His smug smile makes me squeeze his neck tighter. “I quite enjoy running into you every so often and seeing you in pain. It’s become my favorite entertainment.”

I drop him as hard as I can.

Coughing, he takes his time gathering his belongings, and Lafayette stares at me in utter agony.

“It’s not too late,” I whisper to him. “Don’t look at me that way.”

“Oh, it’s far from too late.” Rumpelstiltskin slings a bag over his shoulder. “Miss Isabelle Arwyn is the wrong girl.”

I knew he was fucking with me.

“Let me guess.” I regret letting go of his neck. “You’ll tell me who the right girl is after we make another deal?”

“I would, but only if I knew.” He sighs, looking utterly genuine. “But this girl you’re

after won't help you break any parts of the curse. She's not the one, Gabriel."

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“How do you know that?”

“Because I know a princess-in-waiting when I see one,” he says. “I scam them for a living, remember?”

He turns on his heel without another word, without offering another bargain, and I wait until he disappears.

“Pull out our map, Lafayette,” I say, not believing any of the parting words I just heard. “Let’s find the quickest way to the Eighth Kingdom.”

“Right now?”

“Right fucking now...”

A Wicked Detour

Belle

I can’t sleep.

Between the bonfire’s crackling and the loud snores from the troops, it’s impossible. Even with balsam blooms packed tightly inside my ears, the noise is far too overwhelming.

Pushing off a heavy blanket, I gently move Sola’s arm from around my waist. She’d said, “My job is to remain attached to you at all times,” when she pulled me away

from Gabriel, but I thought she was joking.

I cough a couple of times to ensure she won't wake, and then I slowly stand to my feet. Stretching my legs, I walk around the fire and spot something gleaming atop a soldier's boot.

Moving closer, I squint until I can make out its full shape.

A dagger.

Nervously, I move in front of the man and stoop low while he continues to snore.

I slowly slide my hand over his shoestrings and rest my hand against the blade. Ignoring the frantic beating in my chest, I look over my shoulder before grabbing it and tucking it under the band of my pants.

Looking around the fire, I calculate that I could slit two or three throats without detection, but that would be pointless. Gabriel has the only compass among us, and I have no doubt that his men are entirely loyal to him. They'd find me with ease if I attempted to escape today, and they'd probably burn me on a pyre, if he asked them to.

Wait another day. Just one more day.

"Belle?" Sola moves behind me. "Belle, how long have you been awake?"

Shit... "Not long." I turn around to face her.

"Is something wrong?"

"You mean, besides the fact that I'm being held against my will?"

“Yes.” She smiles. “Besides that.”

“I’m fine. I just uh...I need to relieve myself and I wasn’t sure where to go.”

“Oh, I see.” She points ahead. “Down by the bank.”

“Alone?”

“Unless you give me a reason to watch you...” She eyes me suspiciously, but her expression slowly softens. “Why do you hate Sir Gabriel so much?”

“I don’t hate him. I despise him.”

“But why?”

I give her a blank stare. I don’t have time to list the numerous ways he’s stumbled onto my shit list long before our first encounter.

“Give me one reason, then,” she pleads.

“He’s a pompous, arrogant bastard who thinks that everything in life has to go his way just because he’s been blessed with the face of a god.”

“So, you’re attracted to him?”

I give up...

“Okay, I’ll stop.” She smiles sheepishly. “He’s not that bad if you get to know him. He can be quite sweet and charming at times.”

“He threatened to shoot me in the back if I ran away, Sola.”

“You threatened to slit his throat while he was sleeping.”

“He would deserve it.” I shrug, and she laughs.

“I’ll boil some tea leaves for when you return,” she says, pulling a worn copy of Macbeth from under her arm. “You like to read, right?”

I take the book from her hands without answering, running my fingers along the frayed pages.

“I always bring a few books with me on journeys like this.” She pats my shoulder. “It helps the time move faster, makes me feel like I’m revisiting with old friends.”

I hold back a sigh, brushing away the thought of my old book friend.

“Read a few chapters after you finish relieving yourself,” she says. “Take your time.”

I more than plan to...

I’m not sure how long my fingers have flipped through the pages or how many words I’ve devoured, but I force myself to pause my reading at the end of the first act.

Pretending like I’m standing in the village bookstore, I pull the feathered pen from the book’s spine and write a note to my friend, as if he’ll actually see it someday. As if no time has passed, and he’ll meet me in the woods and tell me that he wants to be together forever now.

I was wrong about this story...

You were right.

Want to pick the next one?

—Your only friend, too

The moment I shut the book, Gabriel's deep voice sifts across the bank. I strain to listen to him, as he's not speaking English. It sounds like a variant of Latin.

Crouching low, I move toward his words.

“Invenire puellam pulcherrimam et sapientissimam in tota terra... noctes liberabo.”

I can only interpret “beautiful girl,” “land,” and “dark nights,” and he seems to be repeating the strange phrase over and over again.

When his voice is so close that I can detect his presence, I gently push aside the grass to see if he's sleep-talking, or, worse, attempting to read.

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The final blade gives way, and I suck in a breath at the seductive sight in front of me.

Gabriel isn't sleeping at all.

He's standing under a cascade, completely naked, letting the waters fall over his body.

With his eyes shut and his head tilted back, he repeats his words as water travels down his sleek black hair to his chiseled chest. He flexes the muscles in his back, revealing a perfectly symmetric line of ink marks that mar his skin.

I swallow as I watch him, feeling my heart flutter with every move he makes, every word that falls from his full and defined lips.

Eager for a better view, I balance my body on top of a rock.

He runs a hand through his dark hair and turns to the side, and I can't help but lead my gaze lower and lower, and...

My entire face heats, and I take a step back. I've seen plenty of naked men statues around town, but their cocks aren't that huge.

They're nowhere near as thick either...

He suddenly moves from under the cascade, slipping behind a bush.

Emerging moments later, wearing pants and his coat, he leaves his shirt unbuttoned.

“How many full moons are ahead?” he calls out to someone. “Hello?”

“Three, give or take.” Lafayette moves from somewhere and takes a seat across from him.

I lose my balance and stumble off the rock, falling flat on my face. Scared he’ll catch me, I immediately jump up and peer through the grass.

“Did you hear that?” Gabriel stands, looking in my direction.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“I’m pretty sure I just heard someone...” He walks toward me, peering through the grass, nearly spotting me, but a raven darts above his head and flies around him.

“It was just a bird,” he says, turning around.

Relieved, I step back and head toward the camp.

Don’t run yet...Not yet.

A sickening harmony in the distance catches my attention when I’m halfway there.

It’s nothing more than a faint whistle, but every note is unnerving and grating. I can’t help but follow its ugly tone.

I hide behind a tree each time the tune dies down, quickening whenever it begins again.

Glancing up at the branches as I move, I hope to catch a glimpse of whatever bird is responsible for this cacophony, but I see nothing.

After several stops and starts, the whistling slows and reveals its worst harmony yet. The crackling firewood seems to have silenced it.

I peer around a trunk and see a man in tattered clothing, dancing as if he's drunk. The wayward whistles are falling from his lips, not a bird's, and I spot something familiar hanging from his neck.

My mother's locket.

Enraged, I slump to the ground and grip the handle of my new dagger, determined to make him give it to me at any cost...

Making Haste

Gabriel

The shortest route to the Eighth Kingdom stares at me from the ground in all black. Perfectly outlined on blached sheepskin, it winds and weaves through the most treacherous parts of the woods, but it leaves space for stays at my former castle.

"Perhaps I should design an alternative option?" Lafayette looks down at his work, swallowing. "Maybe we can find an option that bypasses The Dead Dragons' Lair."

"Why would we want to do that?"

"Because, you know, some men may not want to cross a sea of dead dragon skeletons."

"The skeletons belong to the men they've burned over the centuries, Lafayette." I crouch down and run a finger over their cave symbol. "The dragons are very much alive."

“Yes, well...” He wipes a handkerchief over his brow. “I’m afraid of them, sir. I don’t want to die.”

“So, now you’re okay with remaining like this?” I ask. “Wandering around the woods and slipping into kingdoms you don’t belong to for all of eternity? Never getting to see your wife and children again?”

He looks away from me, shaking his head.

“I thought so.” I step over the map and place my hands on his shoulders. “The two of us are cursed to live forever, Lafayette. Along with Sola. We’ll never truly die.”

“What about everyone else?”

I don’t answer.

“Gabriel?” He narrows his eyes. “What about everyone else?”

“You can make one more draft tomorrow,” I say, stepping back. “I won’t have to make a decision on The Dead Dragons’ Lair until days from now anyway.”

“Gabriel, listen to me...”

I don’t bother.

I can’t.

The slim chance of finally being normal again, returning to a life I can control, means too damn much to me.

“Rump thinks we’re chasing the wrong girl anyway.” He lets out a nervous laugh.

“Shouldn’t we take that into consideration?”

“Rump also thinks that he’s the most beautiful creature to ever walk the earth.” I roll my eyes. “I don’t think it’s wise to use him as our guiding light on anything.”

Ignoring the worry in his eyes, I grab the edges of the map. Rolling it tightly, I tuck the scroll under my sleeve and order Lafayette to get ready.

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Without another word, I return to the camp and cock my gun toward the sky, firing four shots into the air.

My men jump to their feet with weapons drawn, and it takes them a few seconds to realize that it's me who pulled the trigger.

"Change of plans," I say. "We need to leave now. Make haste."

They don't protest or argue, and I summon Mauricio.

"Um Gabriel?" Sola rushes over to me. "When you say 'now,' how much time is that exactly?"

"Spare me your wordplay today, Sola," I say. "Belle needs to share a horse with you for this next leg. Keep her distracted when we reach the disputed lands."

"Belle isn't here anymore...She's gone."

"What?"

"I took my eyes off of her for a few moments so she could relieve herself, and I guess she ran away."

"How long is 'a few moments?'"

"I thought you didn't want to play any word games."

“How fucking long, Sola?”

Her face pales as white as the moonlight while giving me the answer.

“She couldn’t have gotten far.” She avoids my gaze. “Her only option is moving backward.”

“How the hell did you lose her?”

“I really thought we were having a bonding moment and she didn’t seem like the runaway type. Please don’t hate me.”

You’re lucky I can’t kill you...

“Tobias?” I call out. “Tobias!”

“Yes, sir?” He looks over his shoulder.

“Keep your eye on Miss Sola until I return.” I hop onto Mauricio. “Show her exactly what the fuck it means when I say, ‘Don’t let her out of your sight.’”

“Yes, sir...”

Dancing in the Moonlight

Belle

The first time I “saw” a naked man, he was a hero who lived between the pages of a romance novel. His beauty unfolded through a series of flowery descriptions, with phrases like ‘sinewy muscles,’ ‘hazy, rich eyes,’ and ‘a jawline carved in stone.’

The author wrote that the heroine in question ‘longed for the man’s touch’ after just one glance, and that the mere thought of his body ‘clouded and controlled her mind’ for days.

I used to think those lines were utterly ridiculous, a way to stretch the story’s pages and distract the reader from the real plot, but seeing Gabriel naked erased all my past reflections with ease.

I did long to see the rest of him, and I wanted to know what it would feel like if he pulled me under that cascade with him.

Stop it. He wants your sister. Not you...

“Tonight, tonight, my plans I make!” The dancing man’s raspy voice cuts through my thoughts, slamming me into reality.

He’s been dancing for what feels like forever, completely undeterred from the night’s cold snowfall.

Even while building a small fire for himself, his singing and movement have yet to miss a beat.

Plucking an apple from the ground, I lie in wait between bites. I refuse to let the freezing downpour or my body’s shivering deter me.

That locket will be mine again.

I toss my sixth apple core to the ground before the man finally slumps against a stone.

He’s fooled me before by standing up to dance again, so I count backward to make sure he’s finally done putting on a show.

Five, four, three, two...

I push the snow off my shoulders and make my move.

Rushing toward his fire, I step directly in front of him and withdraw the dagger.

“Do what I fucking say, and I won’t kill you,” I keep my voice firm. “Don’t make any sudden movements.”

“Come again, Beautiful?” His lips curve into a smile. “What did you say to me?”

“Keep your mouth shut and listen.”

“I’m afraid I’ve never been quite good at that.” He’s still smiling. “A woman who looks like you doesn’t belong anywhere near this part of the world. Are you in need of some directions?”

“Give me that locket around your neck. Now.”

“Give you?” He laughs, tucking it under his shirt. “I bought this locket fair and square, but if you want it badly enough, we can make a deal.”

“I told you not to move.” I hold the knife steady, but he stands anyway.

The sinister look in his eyes as he steps forward gives me pause, and the hairs on the back of my neck slowly stand one by one.

A cold and harsh wind suddenly blows between us, silencing the flames of his fire.

“What’s the point in buying something I like if I can’t keep it?”

“I don’t care that you bought it, it’s mine.” I hold my ground. “The deal is me not murdering you once you hand it over.”

“Here’s an even better deal.” He pulls a tattered cerulean cloth from his pocket. “I’ll consider giving you this instead since I believe it belongs to someone you might be looking for. Then again, it may be the last that’s left of her.”

My heart drops once I recognize Izzie’s favorite hair ribbon, that in my desire to get away, I’ve forgotten that she’s probably stumbling around these woods lost...or dead.

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“You’ve seen her?” I reach for the ribbon, but he holds it high and out of my reach.

“Ah, ah, ah.” He clucks his tongue. “Now it’s your turn to offer something of value to me.”

I say nothing.

“A long kiss from those pretty lips and a few touches will suffice,” he says. “And then, perhaps, I won’t kill you.”

He steps closer, pushing a few matted strands of hair away from my face. “What do you say?”

“Sure.” I shrug. “Close your eyes first.”

He looks as if he’s about to oblige for a moment, but then he presses his hands against my chest and pushes me. Hard.

The force sends my body flying against the trunk of a tree, and an excruciating pain radiates through my spine.

Undaunted, I stumble to my feet, holding out the dagger once more.

“Foolish, foolish girl.” He moves behind a red stone, laughing.

“Step into the light,” I say. “Come back.”

“You’re about to regret testing me.” His laughter rings out against the night, echoing through the forest, and then it stops.

The only thing I can hear is sap dripping from the branches above and branches moaning under the weight of snowfall.

Slowly walking toward the red stone, I prepare to attack, but a lone wolf steps from behind the rock.

His grey and white fur glistens under the moonlight, complementing his sapphire blue eyes.

I swallow, hoping he’ll walk past me.

I stand as still as ice, not blinking and barely breathing.

Walk away. Please walk away...

My hopes of him forgetting my existence dissolve when three new wolves appear.

No, no, no...

The tiny man’s laughter rises again, this time from a distance, and the alpha wolf licks his lips. His eyes glow greedily as he bares his oversized fangs, but I’m too delusional to surrender.

“Back up,” I say firmly, sucking in a breath as two more wolves appear. “Back the fuck up.”

I step back, making stabbing motions with my blade, but the pack moves forward. Matching me step for step.

They gradually break away, circling me, and my foot catches on a frozen stump.

Screaming, I fall backward onto the snow, dropping my dagger. I try to get up, but I'm far too slow.

The wolves are now within arm's distance, growling and snarling, so close that I can feel their warm breaths on my skin.

As if he's entitled to the first bite, the alpha wolf stands over me and opens his mouth wide.

I shut my eyes, giving in to my final fate.

"Get the fuck off of her." Gabriel's voice cuts across the air, rendering us all still.

A split-second passes and I peer through my lashes, watching Gabriel push the wolf away from my body with his bare hands.

The pack quickly diverts their attention toward him, seemingly unbothered by the gun he's slinging around his shoulder.

Swinging it three times, he stabs one wolf in the eye with the barrel before shooting a bullet between its eyes.

Its final whimper and collapse don't deter the rest of the pack from gathering around Gabriel's legs.

Their growls are now in sync, the rhythm so ferocious and loud that it sends owls flying from the trees.

I wobble as I stand to my feet, my fingers trembling as I pick up my knife.

Gabriel fires three shots into another wolf's face and grabs the alpha by the neck, throwing his body against a tree.

The sickening crack of his spine echoes throughout the forest, and they all stand frozen in shock.

He cocks his gun again, immediately sending the remainder of the pack running wild in different directions.

They never glance my way.

Gabriel slings the weapon over his shoulder as he storms toward me, his eyes filled with rage. "What part of, 'I'll shoot you in the back, if you run away from me,' did you not understand?"

He doesn't allow me enough time to answer.

"Before I tell you how you'll be severely punished for this, feel free to say thank you for saving my life, Gabriel," he says. "That would be nice."

"Thank you." I swallow. "For saving my life."

"Good girl." He looks stunned by my compliance. "Now, say, I belong to you."

I say nothing.

"It's not that difficult, Belle." He closes the gap between us. "Say, Gabriel, I belong to you."

"I'll always despise you."

“I don’t believe that in the slightest.”

“Then you clearly haven’t been paying attention.”

“I honestly think that if circumstances were different, you’d want me.”

“I still owe you a fight, remember?” I refuse to give in. “I’m still holding a dagger in my left hand.”

“I can see that.” He smiles. “I’m not threatened.”

Unable to come up with something sarcastic to say, I stare into his eyes.

“Do you really hate me?” he asks, cupping a hand around my neck.

“That’s what I said.”

“Thoughts of being with me haven’t crossed your mind once?”

“Not at all.”

“So, why were you watching me bathe naked under the cascade?” His voice is low.

“Tell me.”

“What?” My cheeks flush red. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

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“I saw you in the grass,” he says, strumming his fingers against my neck. “Did you like what you could see?”

“I’m not sure what delusion you’re under,” I say, flustered, “and I know it’s hard to believe, but every woman you meet doesn’t want you.”

“Do you?” He runs his fingers through my damp hair and my breathing hitches.

“I’m not the one you’re interested in,” I say. “Remember?”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

“I should let you know now that my sister has never ever liked you.” I deflect. “If we find her alive, she won’t want anything to do with you.”

“In that case, I don’t feel so conflicted anymore.”

“About what?”

He crashes his lips against mine, forcing me to drop my weapon to the ground. He wraps his other hand around my waist, pulling me flush against his hard chest.

“Keep your eyes on mine,” he whispers against my mouth. “Let me watch you like you watched me...”

“Ahhh.” I murmur as he slips his tongue deeper into my mouth, obliterating everything I’ve ever read about kisses in books.

My heart is beating so loudly that I'm certain he can hear it because I can't hear the words he's whispering against my lips.

His kiss is slow and demanding, relentless but controlled.

His blue eyes have yet to leave mine, and I can't bear to look away. Without thinking, I reach up and wrap my arms around his neck.

"Fuck..." he says, gently pushing them away. He tears his mouth from mine and trails his lips down my neck. Then he unbuttons the top of my shirt and presses more kisses against my chest.

I moan with every flick of his tongue, every soft and sensual bite from his teeth. My legs are weakening by the second, and he's tightening his grip on my waist.

By the time he returns to my mouth, I'm too entranced to think about what I'm doing. I'm savoring every second like I know this is our first and last time.

As if he's temporarily mine...

When he finally pulls away, we're both utterly breathless.

"We need to forget this never happened," he pants. "It was just a moment of weakness for me...Are we clear?"

"I...I..." My tongue swells under the vowels, and I can barely speak. My vision blurs next, and I can see two Gabriels staring at me now.

"Belle, are we clear?" he asks again. "Can we agree this moment never happened?"

Tears prick my eyes, and my knees lose what's left of their strength.

I collapse onto the ground.

Gabriel stoops over me, shaking me and yelling. “Belle? Belle?”

I can’t see or hear anything else.

My world is descending into darkness.

As the Petals Fall

Gabriel

“You made me waste my second kiss...” Belle slurs against my chest, her lips as pale as stone.

One taste of her mouth has driven me to the brink of insanity, and I desperately long to taste it again, but not when she’s clearly suffering from sudden winter shock.

Then again, this may be a sign for me to stop while I’m ahead and focus on Isabelle.

“Who was your first kiss?” I ask, placing my coat over her shoulders. “Belle?”

“Prince Charming from the Second Kingdom.” She struggles to open her eyes. “It was awful, and I was saving my next one—a real one—for my book friend.”

“Book friend?” I trail a finger against the blue veins in her neck and quietly command Mauricio to move a bit faster.

“Yes, my book friend.” She smiles weakly. “We connected through words all the time. No offense, but a nonreader would never understand.”

“Okay.” I roll my eyes. “You can stop talking now.”

“He’s everything you’re not, and the moment I get away again—because I will—I’ll find him and apologize profusely for wasting my lips on you.”

A part of me is tempted to toss her, her mouthiness, and her blatant denial off my horse, but a bigger part of me that I can’t explain has been intrigued since the day we met and I can’t bear to let her go.

If only you were the right girl...

The Rules of the Game

Belle

Where the hell am I?

I can feel silk sheets covering my skin and something warm pressed against my forehead. I try to open my eyes, but my eyelids won’t budge.

Breathing slowly, I attempt to sit up, but it’s no use. My legs are numb, and I have no control over my hands.

I’m starting to believe that I’ve ascended into the heavens, and the werewolves devoured me alive.

“She ate a poisoned apple, probably more than one.” Gabriel’s deep voice shatters that idea. “You need to draw the rest of the poison from her stomach by nightfall.”

“I will.” Sola’s voice follows. “Are we still making good time on this trip?”

“Yes, but it’s not thanks to the two of you.” Gabriel heaves a heavy sigh. “Come get me when she’s fully recovered.”

“We’re not leaving her for the wolves when she wakes?”

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“We should,” he says. “But no. We’ll camp here in the dwarves’ quarters until she’s better. Lafayette found a new route, so we have a little more time.”

“Good to hear.” She sounds relieved. “That’s very kind of you.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

“Wait one second, Gabriel.”

“What else do you need?”

“There are two deep red marks on her neck, and others on her chest. I don’t think these came from eating the apples.”

“What’s your point?”

“They look like kisses.” She lowers her voice. “Very passionate, primal kisses.”

“I have no idea how she got those...”

The next time I come to, I’m naked and sitting against the jagged edge of a warm spring. Although the air smells like fresh rain, the sun hangs alone and high in a cloudless sky.

Mint leaves and jasmine blooms are floating in the waters around me, and someone is running a brush through my hair.

“Try not to move too much, Belle.” Sola whispers into my ear. “You haven’t regained all of your strength yet.”

I open my mouth to speak, but my throat aches in pain.

“You shouldn’t try to talk either.” She wades in front of me, completely naked as well.

“Just use your head,” she says. “Do you remember anything about the past five days of traveling? After you were rescued?”

It’s been five days? I shake my head, and she shoots me a sympathetic look.

“Hmmm.” She presses a cloth against my shoulder. “You have to promise to listen to me from here on out, okay?”

I nod.

“You can only eat the green and yellow apples in the forest,” she says. “Never, ever trust the red.”

As if she can sense me trying to ask why, she presses a finger against my lips.

“It’s impossible to know which of the red ones are poisoned by the Evil Queen,” she says. “She’d take great pleasure in killing a pretty girl like you, so don’t give her the satisfaction. You would’ve died if Gabriel hadn’t sucked a good chunk of the poison out of your chest.”

He did what?

My eyes widen, and she laughs while trailing a hand down my neck. “I’m being

facetious, Belle. I know he kissed you here.” She moves her hand above the swell of my right breast. “And here ... Am I wrong about that?”

I nod, and she laughs again.

“Fair enough.” She wades behind me and picks up the brush, resuming the care of my tresses. Then she whispers, “For what it’s worth, he’s checked on you multiple times every day. I think he likes you...”

Enchanted No More

Gabriel

Something isn’t adding up...

No birds have sent word of any villagers searching for Isabelle or her father, and the trees’ whispering network has yet to confirm that anyone cares.

Usually, when I hold someone for a debt—no matter how small—the outrage over my retribution spreads like wildfire within hours.

Belle’s kidnapping is over a week old now, and the deafening silence surrounding it is more than concerning.

Is Mr. Arwyn really her father? Did she make that up?

The more I think about her, the more I wonder if she knows something darker about him and Isabelle. If she’s been a part of their plan to get away from me all along.

My mind can only wander so far, though. My conspiracy theories are incessantly interrupted with memories of her perfect and tempting mouth. Even though she

“claims” she hated it.

“You made me waste my second kiss...”

“Please tell me that we’re leaving this godforsaken place in the morning,” someone complains outside my cabin window. “I’d even settle for a midnight departure through a storm at this point.”

“I’m hoping to hear the same,” another voice says. “The dwarves are nice, but they can’t build a ceiling for shit.”

“Or a decent bed either. Half my body hangs off the damn frame.”

I hold back a laugh and move toward the cabin’s back door, stepping outside.

When I’m sure no one is watching, I open my satchel and pull out my dreadful mirror. I’d planned not to use it—to show the old hag that I could handle the final leg of this journey and curse on my own—but my pride is costing me time.

Swallowing it, I hold it in front of my face.

The glass instantly sparkles and gleams, and the haggard woman’s face settles in its center.

“Well, well, well. Look who’s come crawling back to me...” She tosses her head back and cackles, revealing her revolting, toothless smile. “I was beginning to worry that you didn’t love me anymore.”

I resist the urge to stuff her back into the bag.

“Spare me your usual speech today,” I say. “I just need you to show me a few

things.”

“Invenire puellam pulcherrimam et sapientissimam in tota terra.” She gives it to me anyway, sending familiar chills down my spine. “Et si te amare contigerit, te et omne tuum genus e tenebris tuis noctes liberabo.”

Before I can tell her what I want her to show me, Lafayette bursts through a thicket, stumbling to the ground.

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I almost move to help him, until I smell the strong stench of alcohol pervading his skin.

Laughing, he struggles to gain balance. “The dwarves discovered a new diamond mine since we last came here, and they promised to let me keep whatever I find. Want to see?”

“No.”

“Of course, you do.” He pulls two glimmering stones from his pocket, holding them out for me. “Even if we have to return to the village without success, I’ll be rich.”

“Good to see that your priorities are in order,” I say. “You’re supposed to make sure I have the right news about the moon.”

“I already found that, Your Ungrateful Grace.” He scoffs, putting away his riches. “The next full moon is in four nights. At the rate we’re going, we should make it to the iron castle in plenty of time.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re not welcome.” He points to my mirror and steps backward. “I’ll let you return to being a masochist. Tell that old bitch I said, ‘Thank you’ for ruining my life.”

“You’re more than welcome, Lafayette!” she responds, and he throws up his middle finger before walking away.

“Show me the girl.” I stare into the glass once he’s disappeared.

“Which girl?” The hag’s lips curve into a smirk.

“You know who the fuck I’m talking about...”

“The girl you kissed over and over when you thought no one was watching?” She tilts her head to the side. “That girl?”

“The girl. The prettiest one in all the kingdoms.” I await her instant compliance, but she gives me nothing.

“Show me Isabelle Arwyn.” I grip the handle as tightly as I’d like to squeeze her throat. “Now.”

The surface of the glass shifts to pitch black, and then a crouching Isabelle gradually comes into view.

Tears are falling down her face, and her hand is sliding through a place I can’t quite see.

The glass brightens by the second, and the scene shifts back, giving me a complete view.

Isabelle is holding her father’s hand through a dungeon’s iron bars, and I’ve seen that room enough to know exactly where they are.

So, they made it deep into the Eighth Kingdom...

“I think we might’ve made a mistake, Izzie.” Her father coughs. “G’aston wouldn’t have been so bad as your suitor for a little while.”

“He’s not a prince, Daddy.” She shakes her head. “That’s the only way we can possibly guarantee our futures. His regular, basic wealth would never be enough, and he only wanted me for my looks. You said so yourself.”

“I think he admired your smarts as well,” he says. “But I meant that we should’ve asked him for more money to borrow. Or hell, given up Belle as part of the deal.”

“Do you think she’s doing alright?”

“I hope she isn’t.” He coughs again. “I told an old friend that he could stop by and have whatever was in our house, Belle included, if I didn’t return in a week. Whatever he’s doing with her is no longer my concern, but I’m sure it’s Hell on earth. He’s beaten both of his former wives half to death.”

“What?” Izzie’s face pales, and I want to believe I misheard what he’s said about Belle.

“She’s ruined our lives one too many times, Izzie,” her father says. “Her selfishness has done nothing but cause me pain, and your mother only coddled her with that ‘Be your own person’ bullshit before she died. She deserves everything she’s about to get, and I hope she’s miserable for the rest of her undeserved life.”

“You don’t mean that, Father...”

“I do.” His voice is cold. “We’d been living in the guest quarters of a palace if it weren’t for her. “

Izzie is silent for several moments, but she keeps her hand locked in his. “I agree, Father. If only she’d learned to keep her mouth shut, we’d both be living much better lives.”

Okay, enough of this shit.

“Show me the roses.” I command the mirror, and Izzie and her father dissolve into the glass, trading places with a dimly lit room.

“No, no,” I say. “The roses in my basement. Not this.”

The scene doesn’t change, though. Instead, the mirror takes me deeper into the room, revealing the destruction I’ve avoided for decades.

Broken frames cling to the walls, their images tattered from someone clawing at them over the years. “Someone” who is just as pained and tormented as me.

In the far corner, next to the balcony’s entrance, a black and red rose sits trapped under a frozen glass jar. Its intertwining petals glow faintly in the darkness, and as much as I want to look away, I can’t help to count the ones that remain.

Whereas my roses grow with time, the one in this room approaches its death with each passing day. It’s also far more accurate and painful to accept.

One, two...Seven...Twelve...Thirteen.

Despair settles in my chest.

Over fifty others have fallen since I last checked years ago, and there’s no rhyme or reason at the rate they fall.

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“Is there anything else you need to see?” The hag returns to face me, her expression slightly sympathetic. “Some of your best customers are anxiously anticipating your return to the village.”

I may never return... “I’m fine.”

“I think you’d like to see what they’re saying about you.”

“Then you’re sadly mistaken.” I prepare to put her away, cursing myself for ever giving in and using her.

“What about this, then?” She speaks before I can stuff her into the satchel. “Would you like to see this instead?”

Against my better judgment, I stare at the glass until a new image appears, and I’m suddenly transfixed by the sight of Sola bringing a cup of tea to Belle.

Dressed in an all-white silk gown, she’s sitting in bed with a teacup while Sola talks to her between sips.

“Do you need anything else?” Sola asks her.

“Another book, perhaps.”

“You’re already finished with the one I gave you yesterday?”

She nods. “I read it as slowly as I could to savor it.”

“Well, sir Gabriel has plenty of books that he keeps,” she says. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to let you read one if you ask, especially since his marks are still on you.”

Her cheeks turn red, and she takes a long sip from her cup.

“Sleep tight, Belle.” Sola walks to the door. “I’ll tell him that you’re feeling a lot better tomorrow afternoon.”

She leaves the cabin, and Belle immediately slips from under the covers. She walks over to the small corner desk and pulls a sheet of paper and an inkwell from a drawer.

Scribbling furiously, she pens a short letter before reading the words aloud to herself.

* * *

Dear Sola,

* * *

Thank you for your hospitality during this journey.

I’ve never had many friends, and I’m honored to know what ‘friendship’ feels like.

* * *

Please tell Gabriel that I am grateful for his care as well. Especially these past few days...

* * *

I know this may not make much sense to you (or anyone else, for that matter), but I

lost something that means the world to me. It was a gift from someone I love very much, someone I still think about every day, and I'm willing to die to get it back into hands.

* * *

Please don't take this personally, and please don't come looking for me when you wake.

* * *

I'm gone.

* * *

Belle

What the fuck?

A Watchful Eye

Belle

Sola opens the cabin door at the first hint of dawn, tiptoeing to my bedside to ensure that I'm still sleeping. Then, just as she's done for the past couple of days, she sets a copper kettle atop the small stove and whispers, "Be back with your morning tea."

Waiting for her footsteps to fall away outside, I silently remind myself that I can't afford to stay here another night. I have to stick to my plan.

Get up, get dressed, grab whatever you can, and put the note on your pillow.

The moment my feet hit the floor, a lamp illuminates the room, and I freeze like a deer in a hunter's light.

Gabriel is shirtless in the corner, glaring at me, his lips pressed in a firm line.

"Allow me to save you the energy, Belle," he says, his voice deep. "Get back in the bed."

"I can't." I shake my head. "I have something I need to retrieve."

He taps his fingers on his knee, and then he slowly stands. "What's so important that you're willing to risk disobeying me again?"

I don't tell him. I just stare.

"I would ask you this question again," he says, "but I already know how that conversation will end."

"With you assaulting my lips and thinking that I liked it?"

"I know you liked it." He moves closer to me. "Tell me what you're looking for."

I bite my tongue before the truth can slip from my lips. He wouldn't understand.

"I'm worried about my sister," I say instead. "The dancing man had her hair ribbon, and I don't want anything to happen to her."

"Your sister is fine. Trust me," he says. "Is that all?"

"I'm worried about my father, too..."

“Why?”

“Because he’s my father.” I feign offense. “I don’t think I should have to explain more than that.”

He looks into my eyes as if they’ll reveal more than I’m willing to say, but there’s nothing there.

“You shouldn’t worry about him.” His voice is firm. “You shouldn’t be concerned with your sister either.”

“That’s quite ironic coming from the person who is hell-bent on finding them.”

“Because they still owe me.” He warns. “Whether they like it or not. Nonetheless, get back in the bed and wait until I say it’s time to leave.”

I don’t move a muscle, don’t even bat an eye.

He joins me in the silent stalemate, and the more seconds that pass, the more memories of him kissing me resurface.

I’m torn between giving in for another taste or clawing the gorgeous blue eyeballs from his beautiful skull.

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As I'm weighing the pros and cons of those options, he slips an arm around my waist and pulls me flush against his chest.

His mouth quickly claims mine, and he runs his fingers through my hair.

He's kissing me more passionately than he did before, taming my tongue with deep strokes that nearly make me lose my balance.

Biting down hard on my bottom lip, he whispers words I can't comprehend, and I can only shut my eyes.

He slides a hand down my sides and grabs the hem of my nightgown. Then, slowly pushing the fabric up to my thigh, he slides his fingers between my thighs.

"Ahh...Gabriel..." I moan as he presses his thick thumb against me.

My eyes flutter open at the unfamiliar pleasure, and he gently uses the pad of his fingers to strum and tease my lower lips.

"Shhhh..." he whispers when I moan his name again.

I can't be silent to save my life. I've never been touched like this, never knew my body could feel such pleasure.

He suddenly slips a finger deep inside me and muffles my scream with another dominating kiss.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

“Sir Gabriel?” A deep voice calls from my cabin door, and Gabriel pulls away from me.

“Yes?” He groans.

“Some of the troops want to ask you a few questions about the new route.”

“I’ll be right there.” He sighs, and I wait for him to resume kissing me, but he doesn’t.

Instead, he takes a step back.

“Get back in the bed,” he says. “You’ll need the sleep for the final leg of this trip. We’re almost at the end.”

Pulling something from his pocket, he gently places it on the desk before heading to the door.

“And Belle?” He looks over his shoulder.

“Yes?”

“Don’t try to leave me again.” He slams the door shut, leaving me alone, and I wait a few seconds before seeing what he’s left behind.

It’s my mother’s locket, perfectly shined anew.

The Rose Lives On

Gabriel

For the next two nights, we travel as one.

No one utters a word, not a single soul complains.

Despite a brutal rainstorm that nearly drowns our horses and a brief battle with an idiot who calls himself The Dark Huntsman, our collective focus hasn't wavered.

Far ahead of us, miles away but within sight, lays our final destination: An old and abandoned castle on a hill.

Where I used to live...

Belle rides at my side, on her own horse, instead of sharing one with Sola. She's avoided looking at me since we kissed in her cabin, and she's ignored me whenever I've tried to offer her some of my food.

When we approach the edge of a clearing, I pull Mauricio ahead of the group and signal for everyone to stop.

"I'm sending a flock of birds ahead to check on things at the castle," I say. "We'll wait here until they return with news or until the sun dips under the horizon, whichever comes first."

Nodding in agreement, everyone dismounts from their horses.

As Belle climbs down, I spot something red in her satchel.

The rose bloom I gave her when we first met.

It's not sparkling or giving off the glow like it did for Izzie long ago, but I can't bring myself to care.

There has to be another way for me to handle this...

"Why are you staring at me, Gabriel?" she asks.

"Am I not allowed to do that?"

"Not anymore." She shakes her head. "I need you to stop."

"Come again?"

"I would prefer if you stopped talking to me unless it's absolutely necessary, so I can stop thinking about your mixed signals."

I furrow my brow. "Mixed signals?"

"We've reached the part in your story when you're about to go after who you really want, right?"

"You know what? You can continue ignoring me for the rest of the day," I say. "Tomorrow, I hope you'll focus on the last 'signal' I gave you."

"I can't go back and forth with someone who is chasing someone else." She gives me her 'I-have-a-dagger' look, even though I know she doesn't. "I refuse to get my hopes up or like someone who isn't all there for me."

"Is this your way of finally admitting that you like me?"

"No, I..." She stutters and her cheeks flush red. "That's not what I'm saying."

“It sounds like it.” I slide my hand inside her bag and pull out my bloom. “Why did you keep this?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “I like it, especially when it sparkles and moves sometimes.”

What? “Define sometimes...”

“Whenever I’m alone or reading,” she says. “It hasn’t done it in a while, though. It probably isn’t a fan of you being around.”

“I doubt that.” I smile, returning it to her bag. “I’m personally shocked you didn’t throw it away after I left that day.”

“It’s the only gift I’ve received in over a decade,” she says.

“You mean, outside of birthdays and holidays?”

“No...” She shakes her head. “After my mother passed, my father never celebrated anything on my behalf. And, of course, no suitors ever offered anything to me either. I mean, not like they knew I existed, but still. It really was my first gift, even if it was from you.”

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I tilt her chin up with my fingertips. “Have I really been that terrible?”

“Yes.”

I slide a hand inside my coat, plucking a few more blooms from a stem before handing them to her.

“You should’ve told me that sooner,” I say. “I would’ve given you something else on that day as well.”

“Manners, right?” She smiles. “Submission?”

“If you’re secretly the submissive type, you should let me know now...” I watch as a blush creeps across her cheeks. “I was referring to an actual gift.”

“Well, whenever we find my sister, you can give me a goodbye one before you let me go. That’ll make things right, I think.”

“Belle...”

“Gabriel.” She forces a smile and steps back. “Sola is waiting for me near the back. Goodbye.”

“Goodnight.”

A Hidden Kingdom

Belle

I've always been taught that our world only has seven kingdoms, but there have always been rumors about an undisputed eighth. Through folktales I've gathered through the villagers' gossip, they mused about an "awful, forgotten place" and made up stories about a hostile beast who devoured anyone who dared to visit.

The stories ranged from the unbelievable to the truly absurd, but as I stand in the middle of an abandoned causeway, I'm determined to spend my night writing down all the tales I remembered.

Not because they were right, but because they were wrong.

Dead-ass wrong.

The golden gate ahead of me bears the words, "The Ninth Kingdom," and the imposing castle behind it is far more threatening and gloomy than anything I've ever heard about the abandoned one in the eighth.

Sheathed in dark grey stone, its walls are covered in overgrown ivy, and the inside holds no light.

A faint layer of fog floats over its towers.

My borrowed horse whines and stomps his hooves against the cobblestone, begging to be led away from this place, but I can only stroke his mane.

"There, there," I whisper. "I don't like this place either..."

"This is where we'll strategize our attack on the Eighth Kingdom for the next two weeks," Gabriel stands in front of us. "If you're not prepared to die to bring this

kingdom back to life, to restore things as they should be, leave now and don't ever come back."

Silence.

No one retreats.

"Good," he says. "There's a village of Forgetful Maidens over the yellow hill. Each man can invite up to two each as long as you vow to take them back in the morning."

"Hoorah!" "Fuck yes!" "Finally!"

As if that's all they need to hear, the entire troop turns around with glee and rushes away.

Lafayette and Sola move past us toward the castle, keeping their whispered conversation private. My horse abandons me and follows them.

Gabriel's eyes meet mine, and he reaches for my hand.

"I'll show you to your room," he says.

The interior of the castle is trapped in a distant, faraway time. With all its windows covered in dark, floor length drapes, the flickering candelabras that hang on the walls offer the only light.

Marble dragons, gargoyles, and beasts, guard the entrance of every corridor, and if it weren't for Gabriel leading the way, I'd feel unwelcome stepping any further.

The regal and plush furniture that fills every sitting room is in perfect condition, without the slightest hint of dust clinging to their fabrics.

It's as if the owner walked away yesterday, leaving everything behind.

Desperate for conversation as we descend the grand staircase, I rack my brain for a question.

"Do you know the person who lives here?" I ask.

He looks down at me, a slight smile on his lips. "I do."

"Should we worry about him being upset that we're staying for such a long time?"

"He's more than okay with it, trust me." He tightens his grip on my hand. "You can venture anywhere you like on these grounds, except for the north wing."

"What's in the north wing?"

"Death." He narrows his eyes. "Don't go there. Ever."

I nod and he waits a few moments before resuming the tour.

"Four men will remain under your window at all times," he says. "Two will guard the door and follow any move you wish to make, but they'll keep as much distance as they can."

"I see. So, you won't be talking to me anymore while we're here?"

He doesn't answer, and it slowly settles in that I'm officially here as his prisoner, not a guest.

"Sola will attend to your needs as usual," he says. "She'll probably give you a better tour than I ever could. That's the one thing she used to do for me when I..."

His voice trails off and he doesn't finish that sentence. Instead, he leads me over to the bed and finally lets go of my hand. "Do you have any more questions?"

"Am I allowed to venture outside?"

"No," he says, his voice firm. "You can only roam the castle, and you're only allowed to visit the gardens and outside areas during the daylight."

"Could you at least give me a few books to read since it sounds like I'll be stuck here for a while?"

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“I would,” he says, looking torn between kissing and abandoning me. “But I’d hate to give you any more mixed signals.”

“Are you admitting that you like me?” I throw his previous phrase at him.

“I’ve liked you from the moment we met,” he says. “Even though I’m not supposed to...”

Silence.

For a moment, he looks as if he’s tempted to slip into bed with me, but he steps back.

“Dinner will be served soon,” he says. “I’m sure the servants in the kitchen would love to have you for company.”

“You’re not coming?”

“No,” he says, looking outside the window. “Not tonight. Perhaps the day after tomorrow.”

“Are you going someplace else, then?”

He doesn’t answer.

He just stares at me as pain and agony etch over his face, and then he leaves my room.

A Broken Crown

Gabriel

At SunFall

I'm standing outside on my balcony, smoking a cigar and watching Belle in the western tower. Wearing a bright red dress that falls in waves, she's twirling around her room, making me question things all over again.

I've had to make several adjustments to my plan ever since her father and sister revealed who they really are, but the elements still feel amiss.

I keep wondering how my rose could ever sparkle and glow for her at all. Let alone "sometimes."

Unless...

"I like the way that dress looks on her, too." Sola hands me my bag. "I sewed it years ago."

"I'm impressed." I turn around to face her. "The full moon will be up soon. I'm leaving shortly."

"Would you like me to go with you?"

"What for?"

"I'm sure you could use the company." She forces a fake smile. "Right?"

"I'll be fine. Two nights away as always, more if the full moon decides to linger for

longer. That's always the plan."

"Yeah." She nods. "Speaking of the plan, Belle won't split a hundred ways."

"Excuse me?"

"I like her, don't get me wrong, but it's deeper than that with you," she says, stepping closer. "I'll never forgive you if you renege on what you're supposed to do, just because of your feelings."

"Don't be absurd, Sola." I roll my eyes. "I'm fully aware that she's only here because she serves a purpose."

"Are you sure about that?"

"You're not allowed to question me about anything."

"I've seen the way you look at her," she says, pressing me further. "You've never looked at any woman that way."

"Did you catch the part when I said, Don't be absurd?"

"I've been holding my tongue since you went after her alone and made us all wait additional nights until she felt better. If she were anyone else, you would've come up with another plan to move forward without her."

"You know what? I'd like to get ready for my night away in peace," I say. "Close the door on your way out."

"You promised that you'd do everything to help me see my friends and family again." Her voice cracks. "Don't throw our friendship or your mission away over

some woman you barely even know.”

I say nothing while she wipes tears from her eyes.

“You promised me, Gabriel. You promised everyone.”

Sighing, I place my hands on her shoulders. “I still swear on my life to keep that promise. Can you make sure Belle remains under watch at all times while I’m gone?”

“I will,” she says, nodding. “All of our lives depend on it...”

A Bastard’s Ball

Belle

Three nights later

“Ohhh my godddd...Ahhhh...Ahhhh!”

Loud moans and murmurs sift under my door in the middle of the night, knocking me out of my sleep.

They’re more intense and drawn out than they were the night before, and from what I remember, they didn’t stop until long after dawn.

Pushing a blanket off my body, I grab a candelabra and open my bedroom door.

“What do you need, Miss Belle?” A guard immediately stands to his feet, his eyes red-rimmed and weary.

“I’m a little hungry,” I say. “I want to grab something from the kitchen.”

“Tell me what it is and I’ll have someone get it for you.”

“Please let me get it myself...” I beg. “If I wanted to escape, I doubt I would try running through the front door.”

He taps his chin a few times, considering.

“There are guards outside my window, too,” I continue pleading my case. “I’m not a threat for escaping...I just need to eat something.”

He turns his head away from me, clearing his throat. “Bring me a cake when you return.”

I nod and move past him.

Using my free hand to grab the staircase’s railing, I hold out the candle to illuminate my path in the darkness, following the moans and murmurs.

I stroll far past the kitchen, through a hallway of sullen, silver soldiers, until I reach a room hidden behind floor-length velvet drapes.

Letting out a breath, I grab the cord to pull one side open, and my jaw slowly unhinges and falls to the floor.

The room is full of naked men and maidens, and their bodies are sleek with sweat as their bodies writhe all over the furniture.

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In the corner, a pianist strums her fingers against the keys as a trooper slides into her from behind. On their left, a woman sits on all fours, moaning as she takes one soldier's cock in her mouth and another between her legs.

There's an undulating pleasure here, an unashamedness that's turning me on, and I can't look away. I envision myself and Gabriel taking one of the couples' places, kissing his mouth with my red-stained lips, straining to hear his commands as he grips my hips.

Right ahead of me, the oldest soldier—Tobias, grips a redheaded woman's hips and pulls her onto his cock. She buries her head in his neck as he controls her every move.

I watch her body contort in absolute pleasure, and his dark eyes meet mine.

Smiling at me, he rubs a hand against the woman's back. Then he extends it toward me.

“Want to join me?” he mouths. “I'll be gentle...”

I shake my head and let the drapes fall into place.

Rushing away, I head down the hall and swipe two cakes from the kitchen before running up the staircase. Before I can make a left to return to my room, Gabriel steps in front of me.

“The best route out of the castle is behind you.” He smirks. “You're going the wrong

way.”

I nod, too breathless for a retort.

“See, Boss?” The guard from earlier moves between us, taking one of the cakes from my hands. “It’s just as I said. She came back.”

“I can see that, Anthony.” Gabriel rolls his eyes. “Spare us a few moments alone, please.”

“Yes sir.” He walks away, stuffing the cake into his mouth, and Gabriel presses his hand against my forehead.

“Something wrong?”

“I stumbled someplace I wasn’t to be,” I say. “I don’t think I was supposed to see those things.”

“Excuse me?” His lips turn up into a small smile. “What things?”

“The ones going on in your ballroom right now.” I pause. “For the record, as um, intriguing as it looks, I’ll never let your men do those to me.”

He glances down the steps, and the sounds climax again.

“I can assure you that I’ll never allow them to do any of those ‘things’ with you,” he says, smiling. “But if you ever wanted them from me, I’d never want to share you afterward.”

“Is that supposed to excite me?”

“You tell me...” He steps forward, running his fingers through my hair, setting all my nerves on edge with ease. “Does it?”

I don’t answer that. “Find what you were looking for while you were gone?”

“Not exactly,” he says. “Have you missed me?”

“No.”

“You’re not a very good liar, Belle.” He doesn’t push the issue. “Did anyone give you a tour of the entire place?”

“They showed me mostly everything, except the study.”

“What about the library?”

“What?” I suck in a breath, stunned. “You have a library? Where?”

“I’ll show you.” He slides a hand around my waist, pressing his palm against the small of my back as we walk down a long, winding hall. “This used to be my favorite room when I lived here.”

I look up at him, confused. “When was that?”

“A very long time ago.”

“Were you a servant boy to the owner, then? What all do you know about the eighth and ninth kingdoms?”

His eyes meet mine, but his lips never part to answer my questions. Instead, he points out the paintings that line the walls and tells me his favorites.

When we reach the end of the hall, he makes a left and stops in front of two huge grey doors.

My heart races in anticipation, my fingers itch to touch spines, and I'm dying to know how his room compares to the bookstore in the village.

"I'm not sure I should show you this room," he says.

"Then don't, I'll show myself." I grab the door handle, but he laughs and grips my hand.

"I need to slip inside and turn on the lights first." He smiles. "Alone. Then I have to make sure a few things are in order before I let you inside."

"Gabriel..." I narrow my eyes at him. "If this was all some type of twisted ruse, and there's nothing in this room, I swear—"

He presses his fingers against my lips mid-sentence. "I'm not lying to you. Give me a minute."

"Okay." I step back, and he slips inside the room.

Light seeps under the door seconds later, and several loud thumps follow.

Before I can call out and ask if he's okay, he returns with a velvet blindfold.

I cross my arms, ready to refuse it, but he moves behind me and gently ties it around my head anyway.

"Is all this really necessary?"

“Yes...Take five steps forward,” he whispers into my ear, and I quickly oblige.

“Three more,” he commands.

I risk a fourth, but my foot hits the air and I lose my balance.

“I said three for a reason.” He laughs, grabbing my waist from behind. “You’re at the top of a staircase.”

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“Yes, well, if only you would let me see that, I could probably...” I stop talking as he gently pulls the blindfold away, and my eyes widen in disbelief.

Ahead of me lies a colossal room that rivals any private library that I’ve ever read about in my books. Spread across three levels stacked high with overflowing shelves, there are enough books to keep me entertained for a lifetime.

Overcome with awe, I rush down the staircase and move toward a case that’s flanked by a white piano.

There are multiple hardback editions of every book, and I can’t help running my fingers against the embossed titles.

Near a bright red parlor chair, a stack of books sits atop an ornate glass table. Their spines are coated in a stark white, and their titles are woven in gold.

Macbeth. A MidSummer’s Night Dream. Ulysses. Oedipus Rex.. Romeo & Juliet.

A small pang forms in my chest at the memory of my old book friend, but I force myself to push it aside.

Let him go, Belle...

“I have other copies of those,” Gabriel says. “They’re on the shelf near the hearth.”

“Noted.” I look around the room again. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Do you just have all these books for show, or do you actually know how to read?”

“I know how to fucking read.” He looks amused. “I would’ve never started collecting books if I didn’t.”

“You and my sister will be a perfect match, then. Warning, though, she collects more than she read.”

“I don’t want to discuss your sister,” he says, changing the subject. “You can take whatever books you want from this room while you’re here, minus the books on that table.”

“Are they your personal copies?”

“They’re first editions that I was planning to give to a friend,” he says. “She loved reading as much as I did, but we never had the opportunity to meet in person.”

“Why not?”

“She didn’t think it would be appropriate.” He picks up one of the books, flipping through the pages.

“She probably heard all the rumors about you.” I smile. “Smart decision.”

“Funny. She never knew my name, though.”

“Wait a minute.” I raise my eyebrow. “How were you friends with her if you never met?”

He looks as if I've stepped on a nerve, so I think of a way to change the subject.

"We wrote notes to each other in the margins of books," he says. "It was a joke at first, but she kept writing me back."

"What?" My entire world shifts under my feet and I suddenly can't breathe.

"I don't think she was ever planning to give me a real chance..." He's talking to himself more than me right now. "She turned me down whenever I brought it up."

I squint at the note that sits next to the book stacks. It's a simple, "You deserve nice things," and the words are penned in the distinct handwriting that I've come to love.

There's no way...

"She also preferred tragedies over romance for some odd reason."

"This can't be true." The words tumble out of my mouth as I look over at the spines again, rereading their titles, feeling my heart fluttering wildly.

"I found that to be odd as well," he says. "I felt like I could tell her anything in my notes. Well, almost anything."

"How long exactly were you writing her?" I ask, still not wanting to accept that my book friend has been with me this entire time. That it's him.

"Over two years...I always signed off my letter as—"

"Your Only Friend," I interrupt him. "And I was Your Only Friend Too..."

He immediately looks up from his book.

Tears prick my eyes as I watch him come to the same realization as me, and my heart is seconds away from jumping out of my chest.

“For what it’s worth, I did try to meet you.” My voice is faint. “I told you where to meet me, and what I’d be wearing.”

“I know.” He steps closer to me. “I missed you because I was kidnapping someone else that day....”

“Well, I guess that’s the end of that mystery, then. I guess I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions about you after all.”

“Belle?” he asks, slipping an arm around my waist, pulling me so close that my breasts are flush against his chest.

“Yes?”

“Stop talking.”

He pulls me down to the carpet, his lips owning mine, tears falling from my eyes. I can feel his cock hardening between us, and I slide my hand over it, but he doesn’t make a move to do more.

“I’ll fuck you later,” he whispers. “I have two years worth of kissing your mouth to make up for first...”

Panting, he rolls me on top of him. “Is there anything else I need to know about you?”

“The first book we read together was *The Hayweather*,” I say. “Do you have the version with the sheets that reveal what happens on the honeymoon?”

“That’s what you want to ask me about at this moment?” He grins. “Some missing book scenes?”

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“Mr. Lorimer takes all those sheets out for the women readers. Only a man can claim them, and I’ve always wondered.”

He smiles, still not answering me.

“I don’t see what’s so funny.”

“I had no idea he kept the pages from you.”

“Well, he did, and I would like to finally read them if I can. I don’t think that it’s fair that you keep that part of the story to yourself.”

“I’m not sure if it would be right for me to offend your feminine sensibilities.”

“Let me see the damn pages.”

He lets out a low laugh and rolls me off him. Helping me to my feet, he walks over to a shelf.

Then he pulls me down into a chair and sets the book on my lap, flipping to the proper page. “Read the scene aloud to me.”

“Gladly.” I find the place where I last read and clear my throat. “Once the door was shut, he walked over to the maiden’s chair and slowly kneeled before her. He slid a hand between her thighs and angled his head against her...”

I blink a few times, feeling my cheeks redden at the next lines.

Her soaking wet slit, yearning for a taste of her lips, her swollen clit.

“Continue reading, Belle,” Gabriel says. “I’d like to hear the rest.”

“You’ve already read this part.”

“And?” He smiles. “I’m intrigued by what you’ll think about it.”

“No, um...” My eyes widen as the lines become progressively more obscene. “I think I’ll just read this later and ask you how real it is after. Do you have a first edition copy of um—”

“Read the rest,” He commands.

He spreads my legs, pushing the dress up as I continue to read.

“He blew against her, kissing her lips like a gust of wind,” I read, and Gabriel buries his head between my thighs, blowing a kiss against my clit.

I suck in a breath before continuing. “His tongue caressed her and...”

He slides his tongue over my lips, kissing me like he was kissing my mouth. My back arches off the chair, just like the heroine’s, and I drop the book to the floor.

Gabriel keeps his hands planted on my thighs, locking me in place. Gently humming as he devours me, the vibrations from his mouth send tremors up and down my spine, and I grab onto his hair.

“Gabriel...” I say his name as he slides two fingers inside of me while still sucking my clit. “Gabriel, slow down.”

He doesn't dare. His kisses come faster, harder, and it's too much all at once.

My entire body shakes uncontrollably, and I scream at the top of my lungs, letting go of his hair.

When I finally come to again, Gabriel is scooping me into his arms and carrying me up the staircase.

In the Morning

Belle

The next time I open my eyes, Gabriel is lying next to me in bed, running his fingers through my hair.

His mouth meets mine in a soft kiss, and he whispers against my lips. "Would you like me to grab another book with scenes you might've missed?"

"Maybe." I can feel my cheeks heating. "Does it always feel like that?"

"You'll have to tell me..." He presses his mouth against my neck and trails his kisses lower, rendering me useless for the rest of the day.

Conflicted Hearts

Belle

Harsh sunlight streams through my window the following morning, burning my exposed skin.

Wanting to feel Gabriel's lips on my body again, I roll over and reach for him, but he

isn't there.

Confused, I slip out of bed and step onto the balcony. I walk over to my door and push it open, waiting to hear a guard's voice.

It never comes.

No one is holding watch, and the corridors below are eerily silent.

Remembering the route from yesterday, I return to his library and walk between every shelf in search of him.

It's odd that he didn't say something before leaving this time...

I select a blue-covered book at random and read the first few pages on my way to the kitchen.

Sola is humming and twirling around between attending to trays of tea.

"Good morning, Sola," I say.

"Morning?" She stops mid-twirl. "It's the afternoon, Belle."

"Oh. Good afternoon." I clear my throat. "Have you seen Gabriel today?"

"He's in his study, I believe."

"That's in the north wing, right?"

"It is," she says, crossing her arms. "Why?"

“I’m just curious.”

“Then get un-curious.” She pats the seat next to her. “Let’s discuss what you’d like to do around the castle today instead...”

Hours later, after I’ve walked through the rose gardens for the umpteenth time and read fifteen chapters of my new novel, Sola finally leaves me alone.

Looking up at the north wing’s tower, I spot Gabriel through the window. He’s pacing fast, talking to someone I can’t quite see, and then the lights suddenly darken.

Intrigued, I return inside and make a quick left, tiptoeing up the lone silver-coated staircase that I was never given access to.

When I reach the top, toppled chairs and old furniture are blocking the east side, so I head west.

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The candles in the hallway don't offer much light, and the oversized frames on the walls don't look anything like the other ones around the castle.

They're all photos of a family—a man, wife, and two kids—but the faces of the children are torn so badly that I can only make out their inky black hair color.

No frame is immune to the damage, and the owner has made it more than clear that this is exactly how he wants them to be seen.

A bright red light seeps under a door down the hall, and I turn the door handle—pushing it open.

Inside the room is stuffed with beautiful rose blooms, similar to the ones Gabriel gave to me.

They part a pathway for me as I approach, sparkling and twisting with my every step.

Stunned, I pick up one, twirling its stem between my fingertips, bracing myself for a stab.

It only glows brighter, though.

I pick up another, carrying them both over to the balcony to watch them under the moonlight.

How is this even possible?

I gently tug at one of the bloom's petals, but it doesn't give way at all.

Instead, it hardens under my touch and shifts into stone.

The other rose follows suit.

"Fine..." I carry them both inside and return them to their places.

Moving further into the room, I push aside a toppled chair and notice more tattered family portraits.

As I'm pushing back a shred of canvas that reveals a piece of the young boy's smile, Gabriel's voice comes from the other side of the door.

Walking over, I gently push it open.

Red-faced with puffy eyes that reveal he hasn't slept since he left me, he's clutching an ornate mirror.

"Show me again." He glares at it.

"Show you what?" A raspy voice in the glass answers.

"The most beautiful girl in all the kingdoms..."

The raspy voice laughs. "It's the same as what I've shown you before. Nothing is different."

"Fuck you." He clenches his jaw and sets down the mirror.

Before I can blink, he picks up a lamp and slams it onto the ground—shattering it to

pieces.

He knocks everything off his desk.

Enraged, he pulls portraits off the walls and slumps down to the floor, cursing and yelling at the top of his lungs.

I start to step inside to console him, but someone grabs my hand from behind and pulls me away.

Sola.

“You can’t fucking be here.” She hisses.

“There’s nothing—”

“You can’t be here.” Anger flashes in her eyes and her change in demeanor stuns me into silence. “You’ll kill us all.”

What? “I don’t understand how I could do that.”

“You don’t need to.” Tears fall down her face as she drags me farther away from Gabriel. “I should’ve known better than to trust you being alone.”

She snaps her fingers, and two guards appear ahead of us, ready to lead me away.

I wait in my room for Gabriel to knock on my door, but he never comes.

Instead, when I walk over to my balcony, I watch him and his troops leave.

They return at sunrise, but he never returns to me.

It's True After All

Belle

I'm officially burning a hole in the bedroom floor with my incessant pacing and waiting. I've never longed for anything as badly as another touch and kiss from Gabriel, and I'm honestly willing to say, "I belong to you," if it means I'll never have to suffer through this agony again.

Sola has unfortunately evolved into a warden overnight, and she's only let me leave the room to relieve myself.

While she watches from close range...

Tonight, she's being "lenient" and allowing me to spend the night in the library.

The moment the henchman shuts the door, I read one more chapter from Chaucer and slip behind a shelf Gabriel showed me.

It's a stairway that leads to the kitchen, so I stand and wait until the voices of the staff cease.

Pulling a cloak over my head, I press my back against the dim wall and slowly make my way back to the north wing, then to the study.

Slipping inside, I shut the door behind me, and the rose blooms sparkle once more.

"Gabriel?" I call out. "Gabriel?"

No answer.

I move forward into the office where I last saw him, swallowing as I take in all the damage.

The mirror remains atop the desk, glimmering.

Gripping its handle, I stare into the broken glass—wanting to see what made Gabriel so upset, but nothing happens.

“Show me the girl,” I say, repeating his words, and suddenly the handle heats and a fog covers the glass.

An elderly woman in a grey hood appears, and a smile spreads across her face.

What the hell is this thing? I watch as she tilts her head to the side and taps her hairy chin.

“Who are you?” I ask. “Are you the girl?”

“Not at all, Beautiful.” Her eyes gleam. “I’m someone who is about to have some fun. Tell me what you want to see.”

Confused as to what she means or why she’s trapped inside this glass, I decide not to overthink things.

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“I’m looking for my friend, Gabriel. Could you tell me where he is?”

“I could...But that’s such a basic request.”

“He’s who I want to see.”

“Oh, I’m sure he is.” She softens her tone. “I’m sure he needs to mar more of your skin with kisses, correct?”

“Could you please tell me where he is?”

“Ask me for something else first, someone else you’d want to see again.”

I roll my eyes, ready to put her down and resume looking for Gabriel on my own, but she speaks again.

“How about your mother?” She asks. “That one is on me.”

“I know what her tombstone looks like,” I say, feeling a sudden ache in my chest.

“No, thank you. I appreciate—”

I stop talking as her face dissolves into darkness, as the glass shows my mother walking inside our kitchen, holding a pink blanket in her arms.

Me...

“You’re so beautiful, Belle,” she kisses my forehead. “Don’t you ever let anyone tell

you any differently...” She begins to sing the lullaby that’s inscribed on the back of my locket, but the haggard woman returns before she can finish the first line.

“Now.” She smiles a toothy smile. “Where were we?”

“I—How did you—”

“It’s a long story,” she says. “Anyone else you’d like to see perhaps? Someone alive, preferably.”

I consider asking about my father, but that feels like a waste of an opportunity. The memory of Izzie’s tattered ribbon crosses my mind, and I sigh.

“Show me my sister,” I say.

The glass sparkles once more and the handle grows warm. Glittering stars dance around the frame, and then a grand staircase appears at its center.

Izzie is standing at the top of it, dressed in a floor-length white dress. Her hair is pulled high in a bevy of curls, and golden pins are shining atop her freshly cut bangs.

“She’s a princess?” I whisper, but then the scene shifts to a shadow on the other side of the staircase.

At first, it appears to be a stack of brown winter coats, but then the stack begins to move, and it bears...teeth?

A hideous beast roars at the top of his lungs, startling the hell out of me.

I drop the mirror to the floor, and my knees buckle beneath me.

Where the hell is this?

I pick up the glass, but the image is long gone. My fingers tremble as I clutch the handle tighter.

“Tell me where my sister is.” I blurt out.

The glass remains flat and unchanged.

“Now.” My voice cracks. “Tell me where she is now.”

Wind whips against the windows, and the mirror serves me nothing except my pained reflection.

Although she’s been an awful older sister, she doesn’t deserve to be anywhere near a beast.

I have to tell Gabriel...He’ll help me find her.

“Show me Gabriel,” I demand, and her face reappears.

“There’s no need for that. He’s right outside the castle. I’ll send word for the wind to show you the way.”

“Why can’t you just show me?”

“Because...” She tosses her head back in violent laughter. “What would be the fun in that?”

Her eyes nearly bulge out of her skull and she’s frothing at the mouth, so I place her face down on the desk.

Rushing out of the study, I make my way outside and into the courtyard.

Four guards stand in front of the gate.

I toss a coin in their direction, and they look up at my balcony.

“You two go check on the girl,” one of them says. “I’ll stand guard by the front door.”

They scatter and I wait until their footsteps dissolve into the night. I slip through a hedge and find myself in front of a moat.

Sighing, I start to turn away, but a gust of wind blankets my body, carrying me forward.

I start to turn away, but roots wrap around my feet.

“Trust and follow me,” the wind whispers. “He’s this way.”

“Okay...”

The roots release their hold on me, and I move forward.

On the edge of the cliff, a shadowy figure stands and stares at the moon.

“Hello?” I ask. “Hello?”

The figure doesn’t turn its head to answer, and I move closer, halting when the moonlight shows his full form.

A beast.

He throws his head back and roars.

The wind stops, leaving me bereft of any help, exposed and defenseless.

The ground cracks under my feet, and I look down to see that I'm standing atop a frozen lake.

It cracks again and the snapping echoes across the silent night, forcing the beast to turn around.

His wild and rage-filled eyes meet mine and I stumble backward. I rush to my feet and run as fast as I can.

It's no use.

The beast tackles me from behind and my face hits the ground.

He growls against my back, and I scream.

"Let me go!" The ice continues to crack beneath us. "Please let me go!"

He flips me over, and I prepare to face death all over again.

"Why are you out of your room at night?" Gabriel's voice falls from the beast's lips. "I told you never to roam the outdoors unless it was daylight."

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“Gabriel?”

“Why do you make things so fucking difficult, Belle?”

My response is swallowed by the lake as I’m pulled under.

Cruel Intentions

Belle

When I regain consciousness, I’m sitting in front of a stone hearth. My foot is loosely bandaged and propped on a stool. A tray of biscuits and tea await on my right.

Sola and Lafayette stand far away from me, their faces expressionless.

“Do you think she saw him?” Sola whispers.

“Of course, she saw him.” Lafayette scoffs. “I should’ve known this plan would never work from the start.”

“You helped him to write it...”

“What exactly is he planning to do with her now?” He shakes his head. “Her family clearly doesn’t love her enough to care about getting her back, and now that she knows what he is, she’ll definitely run again. We’re double screwed.”

“Don’t say that...You don’t know that for sure. Wait, what was that about her

family?”

While they whisper, I attempt to lift my right arm, but it's far too heavy. I look at it, swallowing in horror at how swollen and raised my skin is.

My left arm looks even worse.

“I need you two to leave Belle and I alone for a moment.” Gabriel's voice is suddenly behind me. “We need to talk.”

“At this point, do we really need to leave?” Lafayette crosses his arms. “Why can't we all sit around and listen?”

Gabriel lets out a soft growl, and Lafayette quickly scurries from the room.

Sola walks over to me, adjusting the blanket before leaving us alone.

His footsteps hit the floor and he steps in front of me.

As a beast. Not Gabriel.

“You really are a beast.” I croak, taking in the sight of him. “How can you be...How is it possible?”

He ignores my comment and sits on the stool in front of me.

Grabbing a fresh set of aloe leaves, he sighs. “You're determined to be defiant until the day you die, aren't you?”

“No...” I wince, anticipating roughness from his fur, but he's gentle. “I was coming to look for you, to tell you that my sister is in trouble. She's a princess somewhere,

but I think there's a beast—another beast—that's about to kill her.”

“He's not going to kill her,” he says, his voice soft. “He's going to attempt to make her fall in love with him.”

“What could possibly make you think that?”

“Because he's my twin brother...”

Splitting the Curse

Gabriel

My last two words hang in the air.

Belle stares at me in confusion and disbelief while I continue addressing her injuries.

We sit in silence as the sun rises outside the windows, and my talons slowly shrink and transform into fingers. The fur on my back disappears, and I can feel my entire body slowly returning into the man I prefer to be.

Her eyes widen as she watches me, and I brace for her to scream again, but she remains silent.

She stares at me for a long while, tilting her head to the side.

“Do you still talk to your twin brother?”

“No.” Just the thought of his existence is enough to send me into a rage. “We haven't spoken since we were cursed, but if I'm being honest, his punishment is far worse...He's a beast all the time. He doesn't ever get a reprieve like I do.”

“Okay... Well, do your henchmen and troops know about it?”

“They know some,” I say. “But they can never know about the creature I turn into on full moon nights.”

“Why not?”

“Because they could never understand anyone who is different from them.” He pauses. “It’s common for troops to rest when we reach a full moon, so that’s always worked in my favor.”

“Well, just so you know...” She pauses. “I think you look better as a beast,” she says.

“Come again?”

“I would still like you if you had to remain that way...” She stares into my eyes. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Stop lying.”

“It doesn’t.” The look in her eyes is genuine. “It doesn’t change anything about you, really. You’re still my book friend, and it makes more sense that people call you a vicious beast behind your back.”

“Who calls me that?”

“Me.” She smiles. “And a few others I won’t dare mention.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I make sure the final bandage is tight. “I’ll carry you to your room now.”

“Wait.” She shakes her head. “Tell me about the curse first.”

“It’s a very long story, Belle.”

“Good.” She stares at me. “Those are our favorite types to read together...”

Two Unkind Princes

Gabriel

Several Years Ago

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, my brother Charlie and I hosted lavish parties for only the most beautiful people in our land.

The Eighth Kingdom.

Maidens and men came from miles away to enjoy nights full of passionate sex and endless drinking in our private ballroom.

These events were invite-only, and I made it my personal mission to screw as many maidens as possible—to use sex to dull the harsh pain of losing our parents at sea.

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With the two of them long gone, we didn't feel the need to listen to our staff's warnings about the consequences of our vices, and if any of them dared to challenge us, we locked them away in a dungeon for months at a time.

The only exception to this rule was Sola, our annoying cousin, who was the only other living family member we had.

Her job was to make sure whoever she let inside was "someone you could see on a wall of royalty."

It was always that simple, and she almost always complied.

But she fucked up on one particular night...

In the middle of a storm that was ravaging homes and toppling trees every second, she took pity on an old, haggard woman who knocked on the door.

As if this woman was actually someone worthy of being in our presence, she treated her to a cup of tea and offered her new clothes.

Then she brought her down to our party.

"Oh wow!" She sat behind a harp, pushing two maidens away. "This party is far more interesting than I thought."

"Well, that's good to know since you weren't invited," I said, signaling for the music to stop. "Who let you in here?"

Sola raised her hand, whispering, “She needed a warm place to stay for the night.”

“And that’s not our problem.” Charlies rolled his eyes.

As if she wasn’t interested in our conversation, or the fact that she was in the wrong, the woman stood up and moved to the middle of the dance floor.

She twirled around under the sound of her own humming, shutting her eyes and acting as if she owned our palace.

My brother and I exchanged “What the fuck?” glances.

When she finally stopped, she realized she was all alone on the floor and my brother and I commanded our guards to take her to the dungeon.

“No, wait. Please!” She begged. “I only request a few nights of hospitality, Your Graces. I will be forever grateful. I can offer you both a special gift in return if you agree.”

“You’re wearing a necklace made of wet forest moss.” Charlie laughed. “I doubt you have anything of value to offer us.”

“Please.” Tears pricked her eyes. “You shouldn’t determine a woman’s worth by what she wears...or what she looks like.”

Annoyed with her intrusion, I snapped my fingers and again ordered the guards to carry her away.

“Let this woman wither away to ash in the dungeon,” Charlie said. “Feed her nothing and block the sunlight.”

As two guards rushed to grab her shoulders, she transformed into a beautiful goddess. A vision in bright red, with a crown of roses atop her head.

The entire ballroom fell silent, and we both gasped at the sudden sight of her beauty.

No other woman I'd ever seen had ever held my gaze like she did.

"It is you two, and not I, who will wither away." She wielded a mirror from her hip. "You've subjected your entire kingdom to cruelty and lewdness, and I only came to see if you were as awful as the rumors from the Whispering Woods have said."

"You can stay the night," I said, suddenly remorseful. "We take everything back."

"I agree." Charlie offered a small smile. "We shouldn't have turned you away so easily. We're sorry."

"Not as sorry as you're about to be." She held up a mirror, and within seconds the entire ballroom froze to stone. Every guest's expression forever immortalized, their moves stuck in time.

"Wait, please." We begged in unison. "Let us make this up to you."

"You don't have anything of value to offer me." She recited Charlie's previous harshness verbatim, and before he could step closer and ask for one more chance at forgiveness, she casted a dark spell.

"You will remain here in the darkness for the rest of your life, and you will become the spitting image of what resides in your heart."

Our fingers suddenly transformed into talons, our pearly white teeth stretched into yellowed fangs, and dark fur erupted from every pore of our skin.

“You will both die here, alone and ugly, for that is what you deserve, and your entire rule will soon be forgotten.” She stepped closer as we writhed under the pain. “No one will ever know your cruel kingdom existed.”

The windows of the castle shut, and the room was now so dark that we could no longer see her.

“Of course, because I am much more kind than you,” her voice suddenly softened, “I’ll leave a caveat for you. You can kill each other if you like—the one who stays alive will have his life restored, but you’ll give up your bloodline. Or, if you can find a woman who looks past your disgusting appearance and...”

She laughed mid-sentence. “No, allow me to change a few things. I want you both to suffer differently as one of you, Charlie, is far more cruel than the other. And I want your pathetic little kingdom ripped in two...”

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Like You This Way

Belle

Gabriel doesn't leave me on the next full moon.

He allows himself to transform into a beast in front of my eyes, locking the two of us in his bedroom.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he patiently answers all my questions about his past.

Even if I've asked them several times before.

"I wasn't joking about still liking the way you look as a beast," I say. "You should kiss me before the sun comes up."

"It'll be up in a minute." His laughter fills the room. "I'll have to do that to you another night."

"Scared you might leave a mark?"

"Scared you might like it a little too much."

The first ray of sunlight hits his head before he can say another word, causing his fur to dissolve into his usual black hair.

Fascinated, I watch as he becomes human again, and then he moves next to me in

bed.

“You don’t want me like this?” he asks. “Only as a beast?”

“I think I could settle having you this way for my first time...”

“You’re settling?” He smiles and runs his palms against my sides as more sunlight streams into the room. “Is that really what you meant to say?”

“Absolutely...”

He lets out a low laugh and trails his hands down my nightgown, gently pinching my nipples through the fabric.

Gently lifting it from the bottom, he pulls it over my head.

I watch his every move and my entire body tenses in anticipation—so much so that my legs begin to tremble.

He presses his hands against them, staring at me as he darts a tongue against my thighs.

“I won’t hurt you,” he whispers. “I’m just going to own you for a while...”

His eyes command me to stay focused on him as he takes his time moving his seductive, wet trail upward, and my breathing slows with every wanton kiss.

“Ahhh...” I moan as he swirls his tongue around my left nipple. He gently traps it between his teeth and sucks on it until my back arches from the bed.

Again, and again, and again...

Then, as if his mission is to torture me with even more pleasure, he repeats the same rhythm on my right nipple.

Harder, harder, and harder...

I wrap my arms around his shoulders when his mouth finally latches against mine, but he slowly pulls away from me.

“Wait...” he says.

He unfastens his pants and tosses them to the floor. He pulls off his undergarment next, and I swallow as his huge, thick cock juts out toward me.

I reach out and cup my hand around it, and he places his hand around mine. Guiding me to stroke it up and down, letting me feel it harden even more under my palm, he smiles at me with every touch.

“Still settling?” He teasingly whispers before moving on top of me. Spreading my legs apart, he runs a hand between my thighs and groans once he feels how wet I am.

“Look at me,” he says, his voice soft. “Look into my eyes...”

I oblige, getting lost in his blue seas as he anchors my hips.

“Grab onto the metal behind you.” He gives me another command, but I don’t follow it.

“Belle.” He leans forward and bites down on my bottom lip. “Grab onto the metal behind you.”

I obey that time, swallowing as I feel him press the head of his cock against my

soaking wet slit.

With my eyes still swimming in his seas, he slowly slides his cock inside of me. My fingers cling to the metal and I suck in slow breaths as I take every inch.

When he's completely inside me, he growls softly in my ear. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?" He traps my earlobe between his teeth. "Tell me the truth..."

"I promise."

"Good girl," He pulls out of me all at once and I suddenly feel bereft.

I'm about to ask him what the hell he's doing, but he slides inside me again—all at once—and I cry out in a mix of pleasure and pain.

I immediately let go of the metal and grab onto his back, scraping my nails against his skin with every deep and demanding stroke.

The bed creaks against the motion, echoing against the room amidst the sounds of our slapping skin.

"Belle..."

"Gabriel..." I can barely say his name.

"Fuck..."

His mouth finds mine again, and while his kisses obliterate all the ones he's given me

before, his cock controls my entire body with its hard and penetrating rhythm.

I try to say his name again, to tell him I can't hold on for too much longer, but it's no use. His lips have yet to leave mine, and I'm struggling to breathe.

The sensation of him owning me in two places is all too much, and before I know it, he's muffling my screams with a kiss that takes the last of my breath away.

I instantly come apart beneath him, and I feel him stiffening and pulling out shortly after.

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As I'm struggling to catch my breath, he rolls off me, pulling me against his chest.

Oh my god...

We lay panting in silence, both drenched in a slight sweat. He runs his fingers through my hair, kissing me in between breaths.

"Is something wrong, Belle?" he asks finally.

"Yes, Gabriel," I say. "Something is very wrong."

"I'm sorry." He looks into my eyes. "Did I hurt you?"

"No."

He raises his eyebrow. "Then what is it?"

"The problem is me..." I can feel my cheeks heating. "Something I want."

"I'm listening."

"I would very much like for you to do that to me again..."

"I see." He smiles. "Later?"

"No, now."

A Changing Tide

Belle

I stare at Gabriel as he stands on his balcony.

I'm tucked under the silk sheets of his bed, unable to shut my eyes for more than a few minutes at a time.

As amazing as he feels inside me, the moment he isn't, my mind races with questions and uncertainties, and I can't seem to shut them off.

Slipping out of the sheets, I rush across the room and outside, moving in front of him.

"What are you up thinking about right now?" He kisses my forehead. "Books?"

"I'm wondering if I'll be able to handle watching you kiss my sister or watching her fall for you like I have."

"I see." He laughs. "Pretend like I asked you something else, then. I was hoping you'd mention a story."

"I can't dive into any fantasies when reality is this bleak," I admit. "You'll have to be with my sister or find another way to break the curse, right?"

"I have no interest in anyone except you." He silences me with a kiss. "Just you, Belle."

"I can't help you break it," I whisper. "You know that, right?"

"I don't." He kisses me harder. "And I don't care..."

Before I can say another word, he pulls me onto a stone bench and pushes up my nightgown.

All my thoughts are quickly forgotten.

The Details

Gabriel

The following afternoon

* * *

“Invenire puellam pulcherrimam et sapientissimam in tota terra. Et si te amare contigerit, te et omne tuum genus e tenebris tuis noctes liberabo.”

I hardly ever say the curse as a whole, preferring to utter only the important parts, but after telling Belle everything, I feel the need to face it once and for all.

I hold up the mirror and recite the words as I first heard them.

Immediately, the woman appears in the mirror, but she's not pretending to be the haggard woman like before. She's the goddess who cursed me.

“You forgot to put on your face today,” I say. “I prefer you the other way.”

She just stares at me.

“Are you broken or something?” I tap the outer frame. “Do I need to repeat myself?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Not at all.”

She dissolves from view, and Belle appears in front of me. Wearing another red dress while dancing in the kitchen with my staff, she's smiling and laughing.

What the hell?

"Why are you fucking with me today?" I ask, feeling an ache in my chest. "I asked you to show me Isabelle Arwyn."

"No, you asked me to show you the most beautiful and wisest girl in all the kingdoms." Her voice is firm. "Belle is both. Izzie only had the first quality."

My blood boils. "You've known this the entire time?"

"It's not my fault you never paid attention to the details."

"So, the spell is broken then?" I shrug. "I have feelings for Belle."

"Your feelings don't matter. She has to love you in return..." She warns. "And don't you dare mention that part to her, or else it'll never work."

I consider shattering her glass to pieces, once and for all, but I can't bring myself to do it.

"Show me the rose again," I say. "The one my brother and I share since I need to be overly specific today."

"I would love to." The cheeriness in her voice tells me all I need to know before it ever appears.

Droopy and lifeless, its stem is brown instead of a usual bright green.

There are two petals left, one red and one black, and I'm officially out of time and options.

Screw the curse. One of us has to kill the other to survive...

"Lafayette!" I call out, and he immediately appears in my doorway.

"Yes, sir?"

"Assemble the troops," I say. "We storm the Eighth Kingdom tomorrow."

"Tomorrow afternoon or tomorrow evening?"

"Why does the time matter?"

"Well, it's just so soon, you know?" He avoids my gaze as he taps his chin. "Everyone seems to be enjoying this relaxing stay, and you and the Belle girl are getting close, and—"

"What aren't you telling me?" I interrupt him.

"Nothing." His face gives that lie away. "I just want to know the time so I can see if everyone will be back...And by 'everyone' I mean Sola—who thought this was a very good idea, by the way—and..."

"Sola and who?"

"I forget the girl's name." He's paling by the second. "Is it Ella?"

"Belle?"

“Yes, Belle.”

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I stand to my feet. “You have five seconds to tell me where they fuck they went.”

Finding Another Way

Belle

The Eighth Kingdom lies at bottom of a hill, tucked between a green river and an abandoned village.

The castle at its center is covered in overgrown rose vines, and from where Sola and I are standing, the causeway looks as if no one has crossed it in years.

“Are you sure about this, Belle?” Sola looks over at me. “You’re confident this can work?”

“No, but if I told you otherwise, you wouldn’t have come.”

She lets out a sigh. “You’re wrong...I would do anything to see my family again.”

“Where are they exactly?”

“Inside that castle,” she says, pausing. “They’re all frozen in stone...”

“Not for long.” I pull the reins on my horse, commanding it to ride down the hill as Sola follows.

From what I’ve gathered about the curse from Gabriel, there’s a way that he and his

brother can break it without killing each other, without both rushing to beat the final petals from falling.

At least, I hope I have this right...

We move across the fog-covered causeway in silence, shooting looks at each other as the cobblestones creak beneath us.

The front gate bears a golden sign with the Kingdom's name, but there's small print underneath it:

* * *

Our kingdom welcomes all nomads in search of a home.

* * *

Love,

The King & Queen of Roses

& our sons, Prince Gabriel & Prince Charlie

* * *

Hopping off the horse, I tie him to the gate and run my fingers along the engraved words.

"Come on, Sola." I motion for her to follow me under the arch. "Let's see if we can find a way inside."

“We?” She looks over her shoulder. “I um...I’m not sure if I should go inside. It’s been so long, you know?”

I clasp her hand and pull her alongside me.

As the sun falls behind us, we walk around the grounds—looking up at every opening, but there are no signs of life.

When we reach the east wing, Sola points to a candelabra flickering in a window.

The arms of the candelabra sway and move, and I’m tempted to write it off as nothing more than an illusion, but a woman in a beautiful golden dress suddenly picks it up and twirls around a room.

Izzie?

I watch as she laughs and dances without a care in the world, and my heart begins to ache.

I’d believed Gabriel when he said that she was more than fine, that I shouldn’t be concerned about her in the slightest, but seeing her so close and oblivious to what’s at stake hurts far too much.

I could easily accept being abandoned and forgotten by my father, but not by Izzie...

Pushing aside the pain, I pick up a handful of stones and throw them at the glass.

“Start throwing, Sola,” I say.

She obliges, and her first rock cracks the window, forcing Izzie to halt her twirling.

“Izzie!” I throw another rock—shattering the full frame to pieces—and Izzie presses a hand against her chest. Then she steps onto the balcony.

“Izzie!” I jump up and wave my arms. “Down here!”

She moves closer to the edge, slowly looking around.

“Izzie!”

Her gaze finally meets mine, and her eyes widen. “Belle? Belle, how did you get here?”

“Can you let us in?” I yell.

She hesitates for a few moments.

“It’s important, Izzie!” I call out. “Please.”

“Stay right there,” she says. “I’ll be there soon!”

Sola shoots me a concerned look, but she doesn’t say a word.

We wait for Izzie for what feels like forever, and she finally bursts through the set of doors ahead of us.

“Oh my god, Belle!” She rushes toward me, pulling me into a hug. “I can’t believe you’re not dead!”

“What?”

“This place is a long way from home,” she says, letting me go. “I’m just...surprised

you made it all the way without running into wolves or anything. Again, how did you know where to find me?”

“We can talk about that later.” I roll my eyes. “We need to discuss something important.”

“Did Gabriel ever come back to the house? What about one of Father’s old friends?” The words are flying from her mouth. “I’m so confused and lost.”

“Gabriel did come by.” I grit my teeth. “He kidnapped me, actually...”

“Oh, wow.” She doesn’t sound the slightest bit concerned, but the look in her eyes confirms she knew all along what would potentially happen. “That’s so awful. So, you’ve found a way to escape and be with me here?”

“No. I—” I bite my lip, not wanting to tell her too much. “I just need a few moments to speak to you.”

“After I give you a tour of my new life!” She clasps my hand, pulling me forward. “You too, Belle’s little friend. Come with me.”

When we make it inside, a silver serving tray—seemingly under magic—rolls over to us and prepares two cups of tea.

“How amazing is that?” Izzie smiles. “Wait until you see how all the dishes dance and sing for us at dinnertime tonight.”

“Izzie...”

“This is the happiest I’ve ever been in my life,” she says. “Father is happy living here, too. Want to visit him in the east wing?”

“No.” I reject the serving tray’s tea. “I need to talk to you about the curse that Gabriel and his brother Charlie are under.”

“I’m vaguely aware of it.” She narrows her eyes. “You can call him Beast for now, though. What about it?”

“There’s a way that Beast and his brother can return to their normal lives and get everything back,” I say. “But you and I would have to work together to make it happen.”

“I’m listening...”

“So, about the wilted rose with its final petals...” I let out a breath. “It doesn’t have to come down to a fight to the death if true love doesn’t break it first.”

“I am in love with Beast,” she says. “And he loves me.”

I don’t dare ask why the curse isn’t broken if that were true. Instead, I try a different approach.

“You’re a beautiful princess, Izzie, and no one will ever be able to take that away from you.” I pause. “However, for the good of the kingdom and to restore things to

how they used to be, you'd have to give up your chance at ever becoming one in real life."

"What?"

"Gabriel would more than likely be the head of the kingdoms at the end of the spell being broken. It's um...How their parents wrote it in their will before they died, and Beast would be—"

"A nobody."

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Sounds like it." She steps back. "Sounds like you're asking me to trade in my happiness so you can have something that you never wanted. Something that you don't deserve."

"You're not interested in saving him, Izzie?"

"Of course I am."

"Then let me explain the loophole, Izzie." I place my hands on her shoulders, trying to keep my voice soft. "There always is in your fairytales, remember? I found one, and although you won't be a princess, you'll still get to be with him forever, okay?"

"Fine, Belle." She sighs. "Just wait for me on the causeway above the moat, okay?" she asks. "I'll send two of my servants out there to entertain you while I change into something else, okay?"

"Okay."

I watch her walk away and lead Sola outside.

“I don’t trust her, Belle,” she whispers. “We should return to the Ninth.”

“We should at least let her hear us out.”

“She doesn’t look the slightest bit interested...She looks offended and disgusted that you’re even here.”

“She may be selfish, Sola, but she’s not my father. She’ll at least listen. After all, it affects—” I stop mid-sentence when I hear loud squawking in the distance.

The sounds are far too loud to be seagulls or a flock of drunken fairies, and they would never fly this close unless there was a war.

Looking up, I scan the skies, seeing nothing but clouds.

“That’s strange...Anyway, Sola, I think we can get through to her. It’ll just take a long conversation.”

“In that case, I don’t think we’ll live long enough to have that with her.”

“Huh?”

She squeezes my hand so hard that I yelp in pain. “Look up again, Belle.”

I oblige, spotting two gigantic shadows flying beneath the clouds. Their squawking shifts to screeching, and they slowly stretch a set of massive wings.

Are those dragons?

They suddenly cut through the white wisps—confirming my worst fears—before flying straight toward us.

What the fuck?

“Belle, move!” Sola knocks me into the moat, and I feel the heat of the dragon’s flames against my back.

I attempt to scream and swallow water, and Sola grabs my hand and pulls me down deeper.

Looking up at the surface, I see flames continuing to hit the water, and I feel like I’m moments away from drowning.

Sola pulls me under the drawbridge and pushes me up through a gap for air.

She pats my back as I choke up water, whispering words I can’t quite comprehend.

As the dragons continue to circle the moat, I look up and spot Izzie watching the scene from a tower.

The look on her face further confirms all I need to know.

She’s not giving up a chance at being a princess for anyone...

The dragons fly by once more, lower this time, and Sola pulls me under again, leading me toward the causeway.

When I’m able to resurface again, I realize I’m not alone. Tobias and the other soldiers are cramped under the space, too.

“Are we free to break the curse my way now?” Gabriel says on my left, and I can’t tell if his tone is amused or furious.

I know better than to answer his question, though.

It’s rhetorical.

“I admire you for trying to help me, Belle,” he whispers. “I have to handle this alone, though. Stay here.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to protest. Instead, he clears his throat and addresses his men. “Just as we practiced, gentlemen. Take no prisoners and leave the beast to me...”

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He slips from under the bridge, and within seconds, the slashing of swords and fired gunpowder conduct an awful symphony.

One Final Petal

Belle

Rounds of thunder are roaring like ferocious lions, and lightning is dancing across the skies. Pained screams and moaning are only feet away, and I can still hear swinging swords and gunfire in the castle.

“I think we may need to get comfortable staying the night here,” Sola whispers, rocking back and forth. “We’ll find out who won in the morning, I guess...”

I sigh. “What happens to your family if Gabriel doesn’t win?”

“I’ll have to learn to live without ever seeing them come to life again.” She buries her head against her knees, sobbing softly.

I shake my head and look out from under the bridge. I know better than to ask her to come with me, so I slip from under the covering and follow the sounds of gunfire.

Pressing my back against the stone walls, I pick up a sword from a dead soldier’s belt and slowly make my way inside the castle.

Every piece of furniture lies overturned and destroyed, and the staircase ahead is crumbling piece by piece.

Gabriel's soldiers are completely oblivious to my presence, focusing instead on fighting a swarm of metal statues that are striking on Beast's behalf.

Getting on my knees, I crawl down a dimly lit corridor in search of Gabriel.

It's still not too late to fix this...

When I reach the end of the hall, I find myself facing a broken staircase, so I grip the railing and start to climb.

I'm halfway up the steps when something hard and hot lands next to my foot.

Stunned by the shot, I turn around and wield my sword.

"Izzie?" My jaw drops as she struggles to reload a rifle. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Preventing you from getting in the way of what's mine." She glares at me. "Get the fuck out of the castle now and I won't kill you."

"You truly are an evil bitch..."

"Start walking away now, Belle."

"Being a princess means that much to you?" I ask. "You'd be willing to kill your own sister?"

"A sister who hardly anyone even knows about," She scoffs, inserting the gunpowder the wrong way. "There's never been a record of you, and you know that."

"Izzie—"

“And all these years of your life,” she says, aiming the barrel at my chest, “you’ve never done one thing to make Father consider writing you into the records. You’ve insisted on being difficult and regardless of what happens tonight, I refuse to—”

Sola hits her from behind with a rock, sending her to the ground.

“Run, Belle!” She screams, and I immediately resume climbing the stairs.

I take them all the way to the top, stopping to check rooms each time I hear a noise, but it’s never Gabriel and Beast.

Just random objects and soldiers fighting each other.

When I make it to the top level, I look down and see Izzie regaining consciousness.

Not wanting to waste time, I step outside into the rain.

Standing right in front of me is a wilting rose trapped under glass, with only one rose petal left.

I’m too late...

Before I can make a left, I hear Gabriel grunting around the corner on my right.

“Did you really think I would let you win?” A deep voice says, growling. “You’ve lost your fucking mind....”

“It doesn’t have to be this way.” Gabriel’s voice follows. “We’ve both been hurt by this fucking curse, Charlie.”

“One of us has been more hurt than the other...” Charlie hisses. “Look at me, and

look at you.”

I round the corner, watching Beast glare at Gabriel with murder in his eyes. Unlike Gabriel’s alternate form, Beast doesn’t stand on two feet; He towers over everything on all fours, and his eyes don’t hold any warmth, only anger.

Gabriel holds up his hands in a slight surrender, a final plea.

“I don’t want to kill you, Charlie. I just want my life back.” Beast steps closer, and then he stops. “Okay...I’ll hear you out.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Fuck no.” He raises his furry fist and punches Gabriel in the face.”

He stumbles backward, falling onto the landing several feet below. Beast grabs onto the edge of a tower before jumping down to join him.

“Stop!” I yell. “Please don’t kill him!”

Without thinking, I rush down the stone steps—fully intending to get in the way.

“Don’t take this personally,” Beast says, standing over him with a stone. “I can’t live like this anymore... Goodbye, Gabriel.”

Gabriel suddenly kicks Beast in the legs, temporarily sending him backwards.

“Fuck you, Charlie.” Gabriel stands to his feet. “This was never personal. It was both our faults.”

“It was your fucking fault!”

Gabriel swings his fist against Beast's head, but it doesn't make an impact. He returns the blow with ease.

I move closer, balancing my weight as the rain falls harder.

I watch in horror as they trade bloody blows, feeling my heart drop with every step I take.

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“Stop!” I yell. “Please, stop!”

Neither listens to me, and just as Beast is picking up a jagged spire and aiming it at Gabriel’s eye, a bolt of lightning strikes them both.

They fall to the ground at the same time, and the lightning strikes them again.

And again...

When it finally stops, they’re both lying lifeless on the ground and smoke is rising from their bodies.

No, no, no...

Isabelle is suddenly behind me, sobbing uncontrollably.

She rushes over to Beast in tears, burying her head against his chest.

Too stunned and heartbroken to speak, I peel off my drenched coat and press it against Gabriel’s head wounds.

Bright red blood soaks through the fabric, and his lips turn blue.

“Please don’t leave me here alone,” I whisper against his chest. “Please, Gabriel...”

His face pales, and I can no longer feel his heart beating. He doesn’t show a single sign of life.

“I love you,” I whisper. “Please...”

With every second that passes, my sadness evolves into anger as I overhear Izzie. I can't help but think about how she had no issues with me dying, no problem sacrificing me to salvage her own fantasy of being a silly princess.

“I'll be right back, okay?” She cries. “I'll be right back...”

I grip the handle of my dagger and prepare to follow her inside so I can kill her, but Gabriel suddenly grabs my wrist.

“Don't,” he whispers.

“Why not?”

“Because I'm not dead, Belle.” His lips curve into a faint smile.

I glance at the blood spewing from his stomach and hold back a sob. “You're pretty damn close. Stop talking.”

“I love you, too,” he says. “I think I loved you when we were just writing each other in the books, long before I knew who you really were.”

“Please stop saying words.” I clasp his hand. “Just stop.”

“I love you, Belle...” He repeats anyway, and then his eyes roll to the back of his head.

I immediately burst into sobs and lay against his lifeless chest.

Someone touches my shoulder from behind, but I don't make a move to look.

I can't.

I tilt my head to give Gabriel a final goodbye kiss, but steaming raindrops start to fall from the sky. Each one stings my skin, and I'm forced to move away from him.

The moment I stand, his body is suddenly pulled backward and up into the air. Like someone is pulling his strings from above.

Beast's body moves next, and they both spin in the air as the rain and clouds give way to a clearer, storm-less night.

The fur that covers Beast's body slowly dissolves into human flesh, his overgrown talons and yellow fangs shrink into fingers and all-white teeth.

A golden crown descends from the skies, stopping above Gabriel before pressing itself atop Gabriel's head.

They're lowered to the ground together, and I stare ahead at them both in utter disbelief.

Are they alive?

Below, in the castle, I can hear shouting and loud music, and Sola suddenly grabs my hand from behind.

"I think it's broken," she says. "I think it's over..."

"For everyone?" I ask, still not seeing signs of life in Gabriel. "Or just the others? Who wins?"

She doesn't answer me. She walks over to Gabriel and presses her hand against his

head.

His eyes immediately flutter open, and he smiles at her.

“You know,” he says, “I think I can finally forgive you for letting that stranger into the castle.”

“In that case, I won’t forgive you for being such a pig back then.”

“He was influenced by me, but I don’t forgive him either...” Beast says from behind, standing up. He reaches for Sola and pulls her into a long embrace.

Blinking, Gabriel stares at me for several moments before moving toward me.

“Belle...” He pulls me into his arms. “I meant what I said about loving you.”

“So, it’s broken now? How? Is she just...letting you both live?”

“I made an arrangement with her,” he says softly. “She didn’t accept it, so I’m guessing she had a change of heart...”

“What type of arrangement?”

He shakes his head. “It’s not important. I need to be honest with you about something.”

“I’m listening.”

“I’m not sure you’ll be okay with the terms that come with a life in this kingdom with me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’d like to marry you,” he says. “But that means you’ll have to serve as my temporary princess, and ultimately my queen.”

I still.

“Just say yes, Belle,” he says. “For once, don’t make this more difficult than it has to be.”

I hesitate a few moments. “Yes.”

He presses a kiss on my forehead and grabs my hands before standing to his feet.

Beast, admiring his human hands against the stone, is staring at the celebrations below.

Gabriel clasps my hand and leads me over to him, waiting for him to look at us.

“Just because the spell is broken doesn’t mean we have to speak,” Beast says. “I’m still mad at you about—”

“I’m sorry.” Gabriel interrupts him. “I should’ve stopped your parties long ago, and I could’ve prevented you from being so cruel to strangers.”

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“No, you couldn’t have. I was the worst one between us, after all.” Beast smiles and gives him a side hug. “I see you have our father’s crown now, though...”

“And I intend to keep it.”

“Of course, you do.”

“You can keep your previous title as a prince,” Gabriel says to him. “But the king’s crown, the throne, and the site of the Eighth Kingdom will become part of the Ninth as it used to be. And it will all belong to me.”

Beast rolls his eyes, but he extends his hand. “Fair enough, brother.” Then he looks at me. “Take care of him for me.”

“I will. What about Izzie?”

“Izzie left me,” he says. “She only wanted a prince. If she really loved me, the curse would have been broken. She was only pretending.”

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm sure I can do better." He motions for me and Gabriel to follow him to the edge of the tower.

Izzie and my father are stuffing silver and expensive wares into their bags.

“We need to get the hell out of here and fast,” Izzie says. “There’s no happily ever

after for me here.”

“I think we have more than enough to make bargains until we reach someplace nicer.” My father holds up a golden clock. “Are you sure the Beast is dead?”

“Saw him get struck by lightning and bleed out with my own eyes.” She doesn’t even shed a tear. “I was so close, Daddy. So close.”

“I know.” He pats her shoulder. “The next one will be the charm.”

“Belle is still up there,” she says. “If you want to say goodbye.”

“Ha! Good one.” He mounts his horse, and she follows suit.

The two of them ride down the steps and to the causeway, straight into the woods, never once looking back.

“Like I was saying...” Beast shakes his head and walks away. “I think I can do better.”

“Lafayette?” Gabriel calls.

“Yes, Boss?” He moves forward, juggling a child on his hip. “What do you need?”

“Don’t let Isabelle Arwyn and her father get too far,” he says. “Have them brought to me for punishment.”

“Two steps ahead of you. Four troops are waiting for them in the woods.”

He nods. “Thank you.”

“Punishment?” I look up at him. “What are you planning to do?”

“Make them pay you back for all the shit they put you through,” he says, his voice flat. “Or they can pay their debt back to me with day labor by building me a new bridge by themselves. I’ll let them choose.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I say. “They’re bound to hurt the wrong person eventually and get in trouble.”

“They already did.” He narrows his eyes. “You, and that hurts me.”

“But Gabriel—”

“Shhh.” He kisses me. “I’ve wasted enough of our time together on your sister. It’s time for us to focus on our own happily ever after...”

Tale as Old as Time

The End

BELLE

Eight weeks later

The space behind the grand ballroom is full of bright red roses that are waiting to be plucked and hung for this morning’s wedding ceremony.

Staff move in and out of the room, fluffing the tendrils of my hair, powdering my face, and massaging my shoulders to relax me.

The growing roar from the crowd outside is causing knots in my stomach, and I’ve

done everything in my power to drag out my first appearance.

I'm not ready to be a queen...

"Do you think you could tighten my corset a bit more, Sola?" I move in front of the floor-length mirror.

"If I pull the strings any tighter, you'll pass out and miss the ceremony."

"Does that mean you won't do it?"

She laughs and moves behind me, adjusting the diamonds around my neck. "You look stunning, Belle. It's like you were always meant to be right where you are."

"Do you think Gabriel will be upset that I chose not to wear a white dress?" I ask. "I can still change into another one if you think red is inappropriate."

"Red suits you very well." She smooths my curls with her hands. "I think he'd be surprised if you wore white."

"I would be." His deep voice is suddenly behind me.

"See?" Sola presses a quick kiss against my cheek before walking away.

Gabriel's eyes meet mine in the mirror, and he strolls over to me, placing his hands on my waist.

"You're not supposed to see the bride before the wedding," I say. "I heard that somewhere."

"You didn't mention that this morning when we were in bed." He smiles. "And

you've never followed the rules a day in your life."

Unsure of what to say to that, I stare into his eyes.

"I wanted to make sure you weren't attempting to get out of this," he says, kissing my shoulder. "I'm sure you're tempted to run away."

"I would never."

"You would." He trails his finger along the back of my corset. "Are you reconsidering marrying me?"

"No, it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

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“In all the books I’ve read about weddings, it’s the beginning of the end.”

He shoots me a confused look.

“Everyone roots for the queen to fail, while hoping a princess will come and take her place,” I say. “We’ve read twenty books just like that, remember?”

“I think you should start writing your own books,” he says, amused. “I’d rather read those anyway.”

“Do you mean that?”

“I do.” He reaches for my hand. “And I also mean that it’s time for you to forget all the other stories you’ve read. I’ve told you time and time again, that it’s just you and me for the rest of my life. Besides, the quicker I introduce my queen to the kingdom, the quicker we can return to the library.”

“You’ve already bought new books?”

“I bought a new chair.” He smirks, leading me toward the crowd. “And I have a huge stack of other books with pages I’d like you to read aloud to me.”

“For just tonight?”

“No, Belle,” he says, kissing me one last time. “Forever.”

Happily Ever After

Epilogue

BELLE

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One Year Later

Gabriel is sitting in his favorite chair in our library, holding our son in one hand and the pages of my first book in the other.

He swore to be finished reading it by this morning, but it's nearly sun fall and he hasn't said a word to me about it.

Two days is more than enough time...

"Well, Gabriel?" I ask, looking over at him. "What do you think of it so far?"

"Hmmm." He taps his chin. "I'm honestly not sure what to say."

"We should send for the doctor, then. Something must be wrong."

"I have several thoughts, actually." He smiles. "I'm just uncertain which one to say first."

"I'll listen to them all."

"Okay." He shuts the book and places it on a table, moving our son to his other hand.

"I thought you wanted your first published book to be a fairytale romance."

"It is," I say. "Hence, the words 'princes,' 'princesses,' and 'all the subjects lived happily ever after.'"

“In that case, I think the story could benefit from a few changes.”

“Like what?”

“You only need one princess and one beast,” he says. “You’ll have to cut the younger sister, even though she’s my favorite character.”

“That’s me.” I narrow my eyes. “You want me to cut myself from my own story?”

“This isn’t a biography, Belle.” He smiles. “It probably would help if you took yourself out of it anyway.”

“In that case, I’ll take out your character, too. Maybe I’ll make you the villain.”

“I would prefer that, honestly.” He stands and walks over to me. “Leaves more room for interpretation.”

“Why does Izzie get to stay as the main lead? How is that even fair?”

“Because it’s the only way she’ll ever become a real princess...between the pages of your book. And she still deserves every ounce of pettiness you have to serve.”

I can’t argue with that...“If I make all those changes, no one will ever know the truth about our love story.”

“It’s none of their business anyway.” He tilts my chin up with his fingers, kissing me. “But you don’t have to take any of my advice. It’s not like I’m your favorite book friend who devours books every day and knows what the hell he’s talking about.”

I immediately pull a scroll from a drawer and wet a fresh pen. “What else do you suggest I add?”

“Enchanted castle, talking objects, a different take on the rose.” He kisses me. “And a dedication page for your beloved husband.”

“Does my beloved husband want to help me retitle the book from The Other Belle, then?”

“He does.” He nods. “Call it Beauty & the Beast...”

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THE END, AGAIN