

A winter forest scene with snow-covered evergreen trees. In the lower-left foreground, a figure wearing a dark green, hooded cloak stands with their back to the camera, looking into the woods. The ground is covered in a thick layer of snow, and the trees are heavily laden with snow. The overall atmosphere is quiet and mysterious.

Beauty & the
BEAST

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Beauty and the Beast

A Timeless Fairy Tale
By: K. M. Shea



a Take Out The Trash! Publication
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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1: Once Upon a Time](#)
[Chapter 2: A Holiday](#)
[Chapter 3: Free to Walk](#)
[Chapter 4: Dressing for Crutches](#)
[Chapter 5: Prince Severin, the Gardener](#)
[Chapter 6: The Invasion](#)
[Chapter 7: Sickness and Health](#)
[Chapter 8: A Discussion of Princes](#)
[Chapter 9: A Beastly Curse](#)
[Chapter 10: Stranded](#)
[Chapter 11: To Protect](#)
[Chapter 12: Love and Squirrels](#)
[Chapter 13: The Plot of Arcainia](#)
[Chapter 14: The Intelligencer](#)
[Chapter 15: Partners in Life](#)
[About](#)

Chapter 1

Once Upon a Time

The servants of Chanceux Chateau would have screamed if they could when the stained-glass skylight in the little hall shattered, and a young woman fell through the ceiling with the broken glass. She dropped like a twisting cat and landed with an ominous crack.

A footman and one of the grooms reached her first. She was passably pretty, but plain, wearing the muted colors of a villager. Her breathing was ragged, and her face was tight with pain. “NO!” she screamed when the groom tried to roll her on her side.

The footman and groom leapt backwards. They thought for sure she was unconscious, but the young lady opened and rolled her eyes. She didn’t cry, but she clenched her cloak close to her body with shaking hands.

The groom inched back to her side and extended a cautious hand to her skirt, intending to remove bits of glass that were digging into the cloth.

“Don’t,” the young lady whispered. “My leg—,” she broke off, hissing in pain.

The groom turned helplessly to the footman, who was already signaling a chamber maid to fetch the staff physician.

Hesitantly, the groom crouched at the girl’s side and nudged glass away from her.

“What happened?” a voice growled.

The footman lunged to his feet and hurried to stand in front of the chateau’s lord, gesturing at the broken skylight—where night lurked like a pool of black ink—and then to the fallen girl.

The groom stood as well and bowed to the lord, but he sank back into a crouch when the lord dismissed him.

The groom carefully scooted around the girl’s body, brushing glass away as her breathing came in pained but steady gasps.

“Duval has been called for? Good, he may see to her and send her on her way,” the lord said, his voice the lowest of baritones.

The footman hesitated and pointed to the skylight and a hall door before lifting his hands in a plea.

“I do not care if it is late. She shouldn’t have been skulking around the castle,” the lord said.

The groom stood and waited until he had his lord’s attention before he gestured at the intruder’s leg.

“Fine. Put her in a bedroom for tonight. She leaves at dawn.”

The groom bowed and happily returned to brushing glass away from the intruder/guest. He accidentally nudged her leg when he tried to extract a large shard of red glass from under her cloak.

The girl screamed. It was an utterance of mindless pain that seemed to be squeezed from her heart. “My leg,” she groaned, clenching her eyes shut and finally throwing her arms wide.

The chateau lord turned to the footman. “Shut her up and move her. Immediately!”

The groom almost fell as he tore across the hall to the steward and castle lord like a frightened colt. He frantically slapped his arm before pointing to the girl.

The castle lord sniffed the air, but he need not bother. Even in the dim torchlight, he could see the blood spilling from lacerations on the girl's arms. He growled and stalked to the injured intruder, entering the ring of torchlight.

The girl opened her eyes when she heard him draw close. When she saw him, her mouth opened, but nothing came out. Her terror was a sharp scent in the air, and her whole body trembled.

The chateau lord was a beast. He had the head of a black cat. His nose was flat, and his teeth were too big for his mouth and poked out of his lips. He had pads on his fingers and palms like a dog, and his finger nails were more like claws—which extended as the frightened girl shivered.

He was broad shouldered like a massive dog, and his legs were like the hind legs of a cat. Instead of bending forward on knees, his legs curved back and gave him a swaying gate.

He was covered in black fur, but the worst of it was his eyes. His eyes were amber, and the pupils were slitted like a mindless beast.

The chateau lord ignored the reaction and picked her up like she weighed no more than a corn husk.

Sound finally ripped through the girl's terror. She howled as the lord carried her—jostling her leg. Her eyes rolled back, and she fell silent when she fainted.

The chateau lord glanced up at the hole punched through his ceiling. "She fell from there? It's a surprise she's alive," he said as he left the little hall, his nails clicking on the floor as his servants scurried around him like fleas.



Once upon a time, there was a handsome prince who was cursed by an evil witch. No.

Once upon a time, there was an illegitimate prince—the son of the King—who was sentenced to insanity by a wicked witch and was rescued by the curse of a beautiful enchantress.

The fairy tale was a stark reality for those who were connected to the crown of Loire. To everyone else it was a fable, a tale told to teach children morals. Elle had fallen straight into the fairy tale.

The pain woke Elle like a starved animal.

She remembered chasing after the villagers who were poking around the castle and stomping through the gardens. She had just followed them out of the rose garden and had leapt from one piece of the castle's sloping roof to the next. But it was black, and Elle miscalculated her landing. Instead of hitting shingles she hit glass and plummeted straight through. She didn't remember much after that besides pain and a beastly shape.

Someone touched her leg, and Elle groaned.

When she finally opened her eyes, there were three people in her room: a woman stood at a fireplace on the far end of the room; a second woman stood at the door, and the third person in the room was a man who was nodding at her bare leg.

The bedroom was posh, better than any room Elle had ever stayed in. It smelled woody, probably from the pile of herb roots the man was grating and stirring into a large bowl.

Elle rubbed her nose, pausing to consider the bandages wrapped around her arms. The gesture drew the man's attention, and he straightened up and smiled at her, giving Elle the chance to see his face—or what little of it wasn't hidden. A black mask edged in blue partially covered his forehead, swooped down over his nose and cut off just above the lips, running across his cheeks. It was too dark to see what color his eyes were, but he smelled like the herbs in his concoction.

The man hefted a slate in the air, holding it steady for inspection.

You broke your left leg when you fell. I already set it with some aid. I am preparing a pack of Comfrey herb.

Elle stared at the words for a moment before looking him in the eyes and lying. "I cannot read."

Elle's words caused the woman by the fire to tumble across the room. She threw herself in a wooden chair that was placed at the bedside, across from the man—who was presumably some sort of barber-surgeon. The woman behaved more like a hunting hound, eagerly wriggling in her chair, than the lady's maid she was very likely to be based on the fine cloth and elegant cut of her dress. Both she and the maid at the door wore masks identical to the man's, although theirs were edged in the maroon shades of fine red wines.

The barber-surgeon let his mouth hang open in dismay as he looked back and forth from Elle to the slate. He wiped away the words and wrote something new on it with chalk before showing the slate to the lady's maid and the woman by the door.

One of the women covered her mouth in a gesture of horror. The other whipped out a small slate and began writing on it.

Elle briefly closed her eyes; the pain was incredible. Her leg throbbed and ached with a fierceness Elle thought only torture could deliver. The cuts on her arms stung and prickled. She tried to clear her mind and think through the haze.

Elle hadn't seen the chateau staff before—she always took the night watch, when everything was quiet, and no one stirred.

The gossiping servants of Noyers—the capital of Loire and home of the royal family—said the illegitimate prince's servants had been cursed along with him. The stable boys claimed they were turned into animals, and the kitchen staff insisted the servants were completely invisible, but Elle put the most stock in her superior's guess. Farand said they had lost their voices and faces. Apparently, he was right.

The shush of skirts scraping across the floor prodded Elle from her musings. She opened her eyes just in time to see the maid leave the room, the door closing behind her.

The remaining female servant—the one that looked like a lady's maid—perched at Elle's side, wearing an eager smile.

Elle gasped in pain when the barber-surgeon began wrapping her leg in bandages that were dripping with the odd-smelling sludge. It was hot on Elle's bare skin, and it oozed, but the bandages were skillfully wrapped.

Elle clenched the blankets on the bed, but the barber-surgeon's hands were gentle. He gave Elle a sympathetic smile, but did not pause in his task.

The lady's maid reached out and patted Elle's hand before retrieving a comb and teasing Elle's black hair out of her face. The two servants worked silently. Elle's unsteady breathing and the crackling fire were the loudest sounds in the room.

The silence was broken a few minutes later by a thunderous voice that stalked towards the room. "—makes sense she can't read. She's an unschooled peasant. That means she is an idiot."

The barber-surgeon plunged his hands in a bucket of water and hastily wiped them clean before he started scribbling away on his slate. The lady's maid at Elle's side did the same, and both of them leapt to their feet and held their slates out when the door was nearly thrown off its hinges.

"I will **not** waste my time again by acting as a translator. Although I will suffer this girl's presence in my chateau, I do not want to see her again," the voice growled before a beast entered the room.

He was a horrifying combination of cat and canine, all death and wildness—although he spoke crisply with careful enunciation. He was no less terrifying to behold now than he was in the few woozy moments Elle was conscious after falling through the ceiling. If anything, he was more alarming, more *wrong* as his hulking body loomed in the cheerful light of the fire.

The maid scurried to his side, but the beast waved her away as he read the slates his other servants held out to him.

The beast—the cursed, illegitimate prince Severin—snarled gutturally in his throat before he turned to Elle, who was sinking low in the bed.

"Your leg is broken. Don't move it or else. Duval will do whatever needs to be done. If you disrespect him, I will have you thrown from the castle, broken leg or not," the beastly prince said. He turned on his hind legs—a movement that was too smooth to be human—and started for the door. The lady's maid at Elle's bedside knocked a stool over as she darted in front of the prince and again held her slate up.

"What is your name?" the cursed prince asked without turning around.

Elle deliberated on her answer for a moment, but hastily spoke when the prince started to growl. "Elle."

"This is Emele. She will see to your needs until your leg has healed sufficiently for you to leave the castle."

He was out of the room before anyone else could push a slate in his direction.

The barber-surgeon—the cursed prince had called him Duval—shook his head as he presented a glass of liquid to Elle.

Elle sniffed it, blinking when the contents burned her eyes and nose. "Alcohol?"

Duval nodded and went back to wrapping Elle's exposed leg.

Elle took a swig of the drink and almost coughed. The alcohol was potent and powerful. The whole glass was going to get her drunk worse than a villager during Christmas time. Elle winced; her leg ached. She supposed being drunk was better than being fully conscious of the stabbing pain. "Bottoms up," she said, toasting the air before tipping the drink back.



When Elle finally woke from her alcohol-induced stupor, the bandaged sludge on

her leg had hardened to a plaster consistency. The barber-surgeon was gone, and light leaked through the top of the heavy, velvet curtains that covered the windows. It was daylight.

The lady's maid from the night before, Emele, was still sitting at Elle's bedside, stitching the seam of a blue gown.

Elle shifted, and Emele looked up to smile at her.

"Morning," Elle said, pushing through the pain to adopt the persona of a meek villager. Emele put her work aside before she pulled back the curtains—letting an ocean of glorious sunlight drift across the walls—and straightened the blankets and pillows mounded around Elle.

"Beggin' your pardon, uh, miss, but I've got questions 'bout my leg. Can I talk to sumone?" Elle asked before Emele briefly disappeared out of the room. A bell rang, and Emele was back.

"Oh, thanks," Elle said, taking the damp towel Emele presented. She wiped off her face and hands before carefully feeling her scalp for slivers of glass. She remembered being blanketed in the jagged stuff when she first fell, but the servants must have swept it all off.

"Um, 'bout my—ouch," Elle said when the lady's maid began attacking her hair with a comb before tying it off with a ribbon. Elle's scalp still stung when Emele fluttered to the door after a bell rang. She returned to the bed carrying a tray.

"Say, can you—," Elle started. She cut herself off when Emele placed the tray on a small end table near the bed.

The tray was filled with scrumptious food. There were slices of cheese, wonderfully spiced meat pasties, turnips, and asparagus that dripped with butter.

Emele smiled and poured Elle a cup of tea as Elle slowly cut into the breakfast, reveling in the excellent food. When Elle realized Emele was watching her with round, curious eyes behind her mask, Elle switched to devouring her food with gusto and a general lack of table manners. Even though Elle shoved huge chunks of turnips into her mouth, Emele seemed pleased as she brought Elle a second tray.

When finished, Elle sipped her tea and lounged in the bed, her stomach happily filled for the first time in weeks. Emele settled into her chair at Elle's bedside, resetting Elle's thought process.

"What I've been meanin' to ask is, what did the barber-surgeon say 'bout my leg?" Elle asked, cringing when she shifted and jarred her aching appendage.

Emele did not respond and instead held up a slate that had the word *cheese* written on it. She picked up the plate that held a few leftover slices of cheese from Elle's breakfast and gestured to it before slowly tracing her finger below the word.

"Cheese?" Elle asked.

Emele nodded and set the cheese down before erasing her slate and writing with chalk.

"Fabulous," Elle muttered. The lady's maid was trying to teach her how to read.

Emele selected a leftover turnip and held up the slate, which was now inscribed with the word *turnip*.

"Turnip," Elle said.

Emele nodded and proceeded to slowly gesture her way through the word, managing to "teach" Elle how to pronounce letters by crawling through words and

making her utter individual syllables.

It was a laborious process, and Elle was thankful when Emele finally fed her a cup of strong alcohol to kill the pain and lull her off to sleep.



When Elle woke up again it, was to the careful ministrations of Duval, the barber-surgeon. He was inspecting the stiff bandages, feeling her leg for additional swelling.

“How long?” Elle asked, her voice crusty with sleep and the last bit of alcohol in her system.

Duval looked up.

“How long am I stuck in bed?”

The barber-surgeon hesitated before holding up two fingers. He waited a few moments and then flashed three fingers.

“Twenty-three?” Elle guessed.

Duval shook his head.

“Two to three?”

Duval nodded.

“Days?”

Duval shook his head.

“Weeks?” Elle yelped, rocketing to an upright position.

The barber-surgeon took a step backwards and nodded.

Elle could do very little except stupidly stare at her leg. Two to three *weeks*? She was supposed to report back to Farand in a week! If he thought she deserted her post, her entire family would pay. Hopefully, whoever was next on duty would notice Elle’s absence and send word to Farand. If they did, and if she was extraordinarily lucky, Farand wouldn’t think she had deserted.

Elle shook her head, too stunned to do anything else. Duval gave her a comforting smile that she did not notice as she collapsed back into the bed.

Duval left as Emele arrived. The lady’s maid carried a strangely shaped pillow, which she set about embroidering when she took up her customary position at Elle’s bedside.

Elle lay still for an hour before she tried moving. Just because Duval said she needed two to three weeks of rest didn’t mean she—Elle bit her tongue to keep from howling. When she moved, the pain ripped brutally through her body. She had to stay stationary; there was no way she could drag herself all the way to Noyers.

Elle closed her eyes in an attempt to smother the tears that threatened to fall.

Emele sympathetically patted Elle’s hand and skirted around the bed like a mother hen stuffed in a puffy pink dress. She roused Elle for tea and a reading lesson, but Elle didn’t have the heart to try.

All the hard work Elle did was for her family, and now because of one stupid mistake everything was going to unravel.



“Enter,” Severin growled when a servant tapped on the door.

Burke, Severin’s personal valet, swept inside with great pomp. The man moved

like a peacock and had the wardrobe to match. Today, he was in prime form as his feathers were displayed with all smugness. He wore ridiculously high-heeled shoes that were tied with a blue ribbon and decorated with bows. His petticoat breeches—which were more puffed than even the most daring fashion devotee wore—floated around him like a skirt. He wore a fine waistcoat and a flowing cravat, all giving him the air of a fashionable idiot, but Severin was not deceived. Burke had the mind of a bear trap.

“What is it?” Severin asked.

Burke slid a wicker basket across Severin’s desk.

The basket held a sewing needle and a small spool of black thread, a black handkerchief, a chunk of crusty bread that had the density of a turtle shell, several long and oddly bent hair pins, a belt knife, and a silver whistle.

“These are all the items the girl carried on her person?” Severin asked as he held up the bright whistle in the dim light. A gift from a lover, perhaps? It was probably the most expensive item out of the bunch as the belt knife had been sharpened so many times the blade was cheaply thin.

Burke nodded.

Severin tossed the whistle back in the basket. “She must be a villager from Belvenes. Give the items to Emele for storing until the girl is able to stand—but confiscate the belt knife.”

Burke dipped forward in an outlandish bow, took the basket, and left.

Severin sighed—the sound was more guttural than he meant for it to be. The girl was a headache Severin didn’t want to deal with. His servants were acting like she was a visiting empress, which wouldn’t have bothered Severin if they ceased their tendency to pepper him with irksome questions about the girl’s health, treatment, and ignorant inability to read.

“One would think they would have as bleak an outlook as I do pertaining to our curse. All those wasted times and raised hopes,” Severin shook his head like a dog, redirecting his thoughts. He needed to go over the notes from his last meeting with his half-brother, Crown Prince Lucien.

Severin found the papers and had read the first paragraph when there was another knock on the door.

“Enter,” Severin said, setting down the papers.

Duval stepped inside Severin’s study, a smile twitching on his plump face as he passed his slate to Severin.

Mademoiselle Elle is resting. She has been informed that she will be bedridden for two to three weeks.

“She can go then?”

Duval flatted his lips at Severin and plucked the slate from the illegitimate prince’s fingers. He meticulously wiped the slate with a handkerchief before writing.

*No. She must stay in **bed** for two to three weeks.*

Severin narrowed his eyes at his castle’s attending barber-surgeon. “How long do you plan for this intruder to stay here?”

Up to six months.

“Absolutely not,” Severin said. “The break in her leg couldn’t have been that bad—the bone didn’t separate much or break through the skin. It shouldn’t take months

for her to heal.”

Duval wrote on his slate.

If you want her to be healed enough to survive the journey back to her village it will be six months.

“Three months. That is all I am giving her. Keep her out of my sight. The less I hear of her the better,” Severin said.

A pleased smile twitched on Duval’s lips, and Severin flattened his cat ears as he wondered if he hadn’t made the exact orders Duval wanted.

“Good evening, Duval,” Severin said before returning his attention to his paperwork.

The barber-surgeon waddled out of the room, closing the door behind him. Severin was only able to get to the bottom of the first page of notes before there was another knock at the door.

Severin dropped his hands—and the notes he held—to the desk with a thump and breathed out heavily—eliciting a growl deep in his throat. “Enter,” he said, his deep voice lowered in warning.

Emele glided into the room with a smile, raising Severin’s ire. “What,” he said, his voice flat and void of questions.

Emele smiled and presented her smaller and supposedly more feminine slate to him.

Your Highness, if you wouldn’t mind coming to speak to Elle—

Severin swiped his paw/hand across the slate, erasing the chalk words before bothering to read them all. “No.”

Emele pursed her lips and took her slate back to write on it some more.

But she’s a lovely girl, and I—

“**No.** I suggest you rid yourself of whatever ridiculous idea you have floating around your frill-infused head. I will not interact with this intruder. Tell the other servants to stop gossiping and hoping.”

Emele moved as if to write again.

“Good night, Emele,” Severin said.

Emele’s shoulders drooped, and she left the room.

Severin’s ears flicked as he listened to the lady’s maid traipse down the hallway. He relaxed and gathered his papers, keeping one ear cocked as he immersed himself in their contents. He was on the fourth page when he heard another set of footsteps.

It was a confident plod, which bespoke much of the walker’s confidence and pushy tendencies.

The hair on the back of Severin’s neck stood on end, and he leapt to his clawed feet. He grabbed a stack of papers and hustled through the study, slipping outside to the balcony. He secured his papers and gracefully climbed over the balcony banister.

Only one person in Chanceux Chateau walked like that, and Severin avoided confronting her at all costs, as he usually came out on the losing side—cursed prince or not.

Severin dropped down to a walkway on the next floor, disappearing from sight just as the door to his study was thrown open.

The footsteps moved around his study before disappearing back into the hallway, making Severin’s shoulders collapse in a sigh of thankfulness.

He had escaped, this time.



Elle briefly opened her eyes and glanced at the door. Emele was there with a clutch of women. Most smelled like food—kitchen maids most likely—but there was a housemaid and two scullery maids.

They stood together, exchanging slates and reading messages as they gawked at Elle like a flock of birds hoping for scraps. The housemaid was forever smoothing her clothes, and the kitchen maids continuously wiped their hands on their white aprons if they weren't writing out a message.

Elle was surprised; even the scullery maids—the lowest of all servants—were schooled in writing, busily trading slates with each other.

Emele smiled when she realized Elle was awake, and began pushing the women out of the room. The female servants smiled at Elle, and the housemaid resisted Emele long enough to curtsy at Elle before she was shoved out of the door.

Emele closed the door behind them and leaned her back against the fine wooden surface, smiling sheepishly. Her mouth formed an “O” shape when she was shoved aside like a kitten as the door was flung open.

A short woman who was plump like risen dough stood in the entryway, bearing a tray on one hand and the door knob in the other. Although she was petite, she manhandled the door shut with enviable strength before waddling to Elle's bedside.

Behind her, Emele, who had been smashed into the wall, slid to the floor before picking herself up and fluffing her hair and extravagant skirts.

The newcomer set the tray down and smiled at Elle. She, too, wore the familiar black mask with maroon edging that all the female servants wore, but she smelled like cinnamon, and her butter blonde hair was covered by a white coif.

Elle studied the woman's jacket and shift. “You're the...cook?” Elle guessed. It was unusual for a woman to be the head cook, particularly in a chateau.

The doughy woman smiled, pleased, and nodded before she removed covers from Elle's dinner tray.

The tray was filled with cheese, venison, pike, minced pies, peas, strawberries, and candied fruits.

Elle stared at the venison—she had never had deer in all her life; it was only a dish for the rich.

The cook soundlessly laughed at Elle's shock and helped her sit up so she could eat.

Past the cook, Emele held up a slate that read *Bernadine*. Elle, suspecting Emele hadn't tutored her yet to a level where she could read names, let her gaze slide across the slate unintelligently, but held the information close.

The cook, Bernadine, conveniently set up the tray for Elle's use and watched her dig in. When Elle looked up from her buttered peas, the cook was studying her the same way she would study a piece of meat while looking for the best cut.

The cook cast off the look and smiled when she realized Elle was staring at her.

Elle uneasily swallowed her peas and mentally reviewed her conduct. Everyone seemed to assume Elle was from the village of Belvenes, which was roughly an hour

walk from the castle. This suited Elle perfectly, as she didn't really want the cursed prince to find out who had plunged through his ceiling. Had Elle acted out of character as a mere village girl?

Elle nibbled on a strawberry as Bernadine and Emele exchanged scribbled messages. When Elle finished eating, the cook took the tray and bustled out of the room.

"Can I sleep now?" Elle asked Emele as the lady's maid fussed with the curtains. The less time she spent awake, the better. Unconsciousness stopped the pain—the pain from her leg, the pain from her arms, and the pain in her uneasy heart.

Emele did not acknowledge the request.

Elle stared at the decanter of alcohol sitting on a chest across the room. Emele parked herself between it and Elle and settled down with her slate.

Elle groaned when Emele wrote *book* on the slate before picking up a leather-bound book. "I don't want to practice reading. I want to sleep," she protested.

Emele held up the book with a resolved smile.

Elle sighed, "Book."

Chapter 2

A Holiday

It was pouring rain when Crown Prince Lucien arrived at the hunting lodge. Severin, having arrived an hour earlier, escaped the downpour entirely and had the privilege of watching his half-brother leap from his carriage and splash to the lodge door.

By the time Lucien entered the lodge, he was drenched. His fine blue waistcoat was soaked, and his petticoat breeches were spattered with mud. But even though he should have looked like a drowned rat, Lucien managed to wear his pricey—ruined—clothes like they were fit for a king—mostly because they were.

Severin slipped his papers out of the packs in which he transported them. “It’s a good look on you,” he said as a puddle collected at Lucien’s feet.

Lucien sourly scrunched up to his face before turning to guards—who were wearing waterproofs—waiting just outside the door. He spoke to them in a lowered tone Severin could barely hear over the rain and gestured outside.

The guards nodded and exited the small hunting lodge before pairing off and setting out on patrols.

“You already had your men search the grounds?” Lucien asked, swatting cobwebs from a chair before he sat. The hunting lodge was a long-forsaken lodge of the royal family’s. It hadn’t seen use in over a decade before Severin was cursed and placed himself in exile at Chanceux Chateau. Since then, the brothers took to handling their joint business at the lodge, keeping Severin out of the public eye and allowing him to keep his post as his brother’s commanding general.

“I did, but another patrol would be wise. Our enemies would dearly love to see both of us killed in one strike,” Severin said.

Lucien chuckled and leaned back in his chair. “I doubt anyone is brave enough to try killing you now, brother.”

Severin shrugged. “What news do you bring?” he asked, setting an inkwell on his table.

“Very little. As long as you are cursed, preparations for our war with Arcainia are limited at best,” Lucien said.

Severin held in a sigh. “I told you: it would not be wise to march against Arcainia. We have been at peace with them for forty years, and they have done nothing to offend us. Why do you insist on going forth with your plans?”

Lucien shrugged one shoulder. “Conquest, expanding our rule. The question is why *shouldn’t* we overtake them?”

Severin rubbed one of his velvet ears. “As I am unfit to lead our armies in this cursed condition, the question is moot point.”

“I agree, so when are you going to break the curse again?” Lucien asked, latching on to the topic eagerly.

“Attempting the same activity multiple times and expecting a different result is not only pointless but insane.”

“No, it is not. All you need is an empty-headed girl to fall in love with you, and the curse is broken. Truthfully, I think that’s the cheapest price I’ve ever heard of for ridding oneself of a curse,” Lucien said.

“She must fall in love with a *beast*, Lucien. You seem to forget that. If it were so easy to get a woman to love me, I would have done it already for my servants’ sake—not that I haven’t tried.”

“But this time, I think I have the perfect candidate. She’s the daughter of a minor noble—and she loves animals!”

Severin looked down at the table and speared a paper with the tip of his claw. “I have new orders for Rangers Twenty-Five, Fifty-Two, and Seventy-Eight,” he said, speaking of Lucien’s elite troops. They were agents of intelligence trained for observations, combat, recon missions, and spying. Although the Rangers technically were Lucien’s, Severin was key in the creation of the organization, and he moved them around like his personal chess pieces—with Lucien’s permission of course.

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” Lucien said.

Severin handed over papers describing the targets and desired information, as well as timeframes.

“It looks agreeable to me, except this,” Lucien said, removing one of the three packets. “Ranger Seventy-Eight can’t be spared right now.”

Severin frowned—which was more of a barring of fangs. “What is he doing?”

“A personal intelligence collection mission for me, although recently we’ve fallen out of contact.”

“Ranger Seventy-Eight is one of our best intelligencers. Please do not tell me you are risking him with plans for your little war?”

“Tempting, but no. It’s a local case. Should I be afraid of betrayal? There’s been no word for a week or two,” Lucien frowned, fiddling with the frilled throat of his white undershirt.

“Track him down immediately. A missing Ranger as knowledgeable as Seventy-Eight is no small matter,” Severin hissed.

Lucien smiled. It wasn’t his pretty one he used for portraits and ladies, but the smug smile he wore when he was about to get his way. “Yes,” he agreed. “Since you can’t use Seventy-Eight, who would you like to send instead?”

The brothers planned for hours, pouring over maps, moving diagrams and arguing army locations before dusk closed in on the hunting lodge.

“What if we move the southern army to Duke Vilette’s for the winter? His people are usually plagued by bandits. I imagine he would welcome the military strength,” Severin said.

Lucien scrubbed at his eyes. “Can’t we be done? We’ve talked strategy and military movements for *hours*. Don’t you have any supply requests from your housekeeper?”

Severin finally set aside his quill pen. “I do,” he said, handing over a packet of papers before he started straightening his materials and packing up.

Lucien sipped at a cup of lukewarm tea, frowning at its flat taste as he paged through his brother’s expenses.

For the most part, Chanceux Chateau was self-sustaining, but there were more exotic goods that had to be bought and imported—like spices, tea, and cloth.

“Did you ruin your wardrobe or something?” Lucien asked as he looked at the budget sheet for cloth and wool.

“No. Why?”

“Your housekeeper is requesting lace, silks, and satins by the yards,” Lucien said.

“Oh. *That.*”

“What is it?”

Severin massaged the back of his neck. “A few weeks ago, a girl fell through the roof of the little hall.”

“*What?*”

“She’s a peasant from Belvenes. She broke her leg when she fell. She’s staying at the Chateau until she recovers enough to walk. Emele and Bernadine have taken a liking to her. I expect the extra cloth is for her.”

“Is she pretty?” Lucien asked, leaning eagerly across the table.

Severin rolled his eyes.

“Is she?” Lucien demanded.

Severin leaned back in his chair, trying to recall the few brief moments he saw the girl. While her eyes were passably pretty, her lips were too full, and her nose was too long for her to be considered a true beauty. Her bangs were jagged, and although her ink-black hair seemed nice enough, Severin was willing to bet his horse that Emele had her work cut out for her whenever she attacked the girl’s mane. “For the lower class, perhaps.”

“Oh,” Lucien said, starting to lose interest.

“Her name is Elle, I believe,” Severin added.

Lucien paused for a moment as if considering something. He opened his mouth twice before shaking his head. “Peasants,” was all he said in the end.

“Is that all for today?” Severin asked, glancing outside the dusty lodge window. It was almost dark, and it was still an hour’s ride home from the lodge.

Lucien waved his hand dismissively. “Yes, yes. I’ll have your order sent to the chateau. Father and Sylvie send their love, of course. They’re both doing well.”

“Your Highness,” Severin said, standing and bowing to his brother in thanks.

“Don’t you have any messages you would like me to pass along?” Lucien asked, still lounging in his dusty chair.

“Please tell Princess Sylvie I am glad to hear she is in good health.”

“And Father?”

Severin blackly eyed his half-brother.

“Sooner or later, you will have to forgive him for fathering you,” Lucien said, folding his arms across his belly as he leaned back in his chair.

“No, I don’t,” Severin said, gliding through the lodge in his animal grace before throwing the lodge door open.

The wind gusted inside, scattering a few leaves across the floor before Severin shut the door behind him.

“Touchy,” Lucien said.



It was the dead of night, and Elle couldn’t sleep. Her leg throbbed; guilt invaded

her thoughts, and the room felt hot and stuffy. She was dying for a breath of fresh air, or for a noise—anything at all to get her mind off the consuming pain that tore at her leg.

“I hate monarchies,” Elle said, fluffing her pillow.

There was a noise at the door, and Elle had a table knife in her hand as the door creaked open.

“Hello?” Elle asked.

No one entered the room, but something padded across the floor.

There was a snorting sort of panting at the foot of Elle’s bed. Elle propped herself up on her elbows, knife still brandished, but could see nothing.

The snorting-breathing continued with the occasional tug on the bed blankets. Elle was beginning to wonder if the chateau was home to a pack of uncommonly large rats when something catapulted itself on top of the bed.

It was a dog. A small dog with a fluffy tail and fluffy ears. Elle recognized it as a papillon—a dog favored by the upper class for its dainty beauty—but it was the fattest papillon she had ever seen. Elle didn’t know a dog could even *get* that fat.

The dog waddled up the bed, his fringe of fur and fat swinging in the air. He snuffled in the blankets as Elle secured her filched kitchen knife back in her clothes.

The dog made his inspection as high as Elle’s face, thrusting his nose in Elle’s ear. His tail wildly wiggled, and the dog turned in a circle twice before arranging itself next to Elle’s head, its fat forming a cushion.

Elle hesitated before she reached out to touch the dog, eliciting excited pig-snorts from it. “You’re...endearing,” Elle said, closing an eye when the small dog whipped its tail in her face. When it finally calmed down, its deep snoring/breathing formed a beat.

The dog didn’t wake up when the man pried a window open with a knife and wordlessly slid inside, dressed entirely in black.

“I apologize for my inactivity, but as you can see, I have been detained,” Elle said as he approached her bed. “I assume you have a message for me?”

“Your absence will be excused until you are fully healed,” he said.

Elle blinked slowly. Did she hear that right? “What?”

“Your absence will be excused until you are fully healed.”

Elle frowned. “What of my family?”

“All of your debts still exist, and you **will** return for duty, but for now you are excused.”

“Did Farand say this?” Elle asked.

“Yes.”

Elle stared stupidly at the expensive coverlet while the man walked back to the window. “So what am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

He shrugged. “Think of it as a holiday,” he suggested. “I will remain on duty. If you should need me, you know the signal,” he said, slipping out of the room.

Elle leaned back in her bed. “A holiday,” she dumbly repeated before a brilliant smile leaked across her lips. “Why not? I haven’t been on one in ages.”

Chapter 3

Free to Walk

When Bernadine came for another visit the following week, Elle was sitting in bed, receiving visitors like a queen. A tall, impossibly thin woman who closely resembled a heron followed in Bernadine's wake, an unpleasant frown twisted on her lips.

"Bernadine, how good to see you again," Elle said, fanning herself with a lace fan Emele had given her for no reason apparent to Elle. "Tell me, who have you brought with you? I'm dying for company, you know."

If Bernadine or Emele noticed Elle's mastery of language increased significantly overnight, they said nothing.

"Your name is...Heloise," Elle said, reading Emele's slate when the lady's maid held it up.

Heloise nodded with a stork-like snap of her head and loomed over Elle. She grasped Elle's chin and waggled her head back and forth, inspecting Elle with narrowed eyes.

Emele raised both of her hands to her mouth before stomping a foot.

Bernadine picked up Emele's oddly shaped pillow and whacked Heloise in the head with enough force to ruin the bun the woman had her hair pulled back into.

Heloise scowled at the cook, who shook a finger at her. Heloise rolled her eyes and released her grip on Elle's chin only to meticulously wipe her hand off on her apron.

Heloise twitched her shoulders and sailed from the room.

"It was nice to meet you, too," Elle called, snapping her fan as Bernadine moved to shut the door and almost closed it on Duval.

The barber-surgeon dodged the door, almost dropping his armload of materials and tools. A kitchen maid trotted behind him, carrying a small pot of steaming water.

Duval smiled—which turned into an apple-red blush when Bernadine affectionately patted his cheek. He set about organizing bandages and comfrey herb roots before he started removing the plastered bandages that encased Elle's leg.

Bernadine smiled slyly and borrowed Emele's slate. She wrote a message on it and showed it to Duval.

The barber-surgeon grated comfrey root into the hot water and considered Elle's leg. Elle leaned forward to look as well, eager to see how her leg looked without the bandages.

Her skin was smooth but the leg was, in Elle's mind, appallingly swollen. It was slightly discolored, but at least it didn't feel like Duval was driving nails through her legs when he touched her.

The bandages on her arms had been removed earlier by Emele. For the most part, the lacerations were healed—only the biggest cuts remained.

Duval turned to look at Emele and exchanged hand gestures with her, drawing a large smile from the lady's maid. The well-dressed woman glided to the head of Elle's bed, still smiling as she picked dog hair off the bed blankets—the fat papillon had