Lessons for the Lost

by KayMoon24

Summary

Once the former Beast, newly human King Adam, alongside his newly wedded wife, Belle, attend various social gatherings featuring the rest of the Disney Royal kingdom, however, as friendships are tangled, secrets revealed, and hints of the Beast's Curse return ever so
slowly...things become uncomfortably serious.

FEATURING: A Disney cast that are real, flawed human characters.

WARNING: THIS FIC CONTAINS HURT AND COMFORT, PAST CHILD ABUSE, DRINKING, CURSING, ADULT SITUATIONS, BLOOD AND GORE, MENTAL ILLNESSES, AND IS BASICALLY NOT YOUR PARENTS DISNEY CHANNEL.

This fic also features Hades, Lord of the Dead, but there isn't really a warning there. He just wanted you to know that. (wink)
PART ONE: To Meet The Prince of Denmark

It wasn't that this Eric fellow was *wrong* to be friendly.

In fact, it was common sense to think that the young man, sitting across the long table from Adam, was undoubtly one of the most *friendly* human beings to ever walk across the face of Denmark.

It was obvious in every movement of his neatly combed hair, his pleasant grin, his unequal ability to laugh without the gulp of the drink dribbling down and out of his own mouth…unlike Adam.

And, unlike Adam, Eric remained polite and courteous, even with his wife out of the room, with no servants to judge them up otherwise, where Adam barely resisted taking the fine toothed fork and lacing it into his own curled hand beneath the embroidery of the table. Pain was familiar to Adam. Pain he could handle.

Small talk, he could not.

"So," Eric began. "Long trip from France, right? Something odd thousand or so kilometers? I've always wanted to sail there myself…” He paused here briefly, and, without warning, he snapped again to attention, pulling himself forward in a much beloved passion for ships and boats and the navigation of them, his blue eyes wide with giddiness. "Maybe one day I'll repay the visit and come to your Kingdom! Lovely in the spring, Belle was telling me. And, Ariel, God, she—"

And the young prince went on. And on. And—*Mon Dieu*, must he, too, be *good* at small talk?

Adam felt positively trapped in his seat. The cushion beneath him was soft, the backing of fine leather quality. The aspired dining room lit red and orange from the large, crystal windows that looked out upon a golden, watery sea. The ocean moved and soaked the sandy beaches below the castle bay like a melting candle, buttery and glossy, with the movement of the waves…

…but, without Belle, without the safety of her guidance, it felt a prison.

Adam sucked in a measured breath.

Eric soldiered on without much cause for concern. Literally, Adam observed.

Clearly, Eric couldn't have actually seen *real* war. But there was a solid, audacious presence to him. If a childish facade. If his blue blood were to run, it would ruin his father's princely rule to conclude a simpleton's game of regal maths. But, there was a way at which Eric sat at absolute attention, relaxed, but alert, that reminded Adam of his own father—and the several blows that occurred every time Adam forgot to sit up straight. With a fixed, closed lipped nod, Adam faintly wondered in what way Eric remembered to appear so effortless.

*Everything* took effort for Adam. Everything, a lesson in tedium until his ears numbed.

*Belle*, Adam chastised himself. It was the least he could do to try.

So, he shouldered himself backwards to keep himself from slouching and the whole bloody chair raked its legs in a loud grating along the floor.

Adam froze, his face draining white. At least he was still seated. He had expected the chair to crack
apart, or splinter, at least, for the sound of his own scrabbling claws along the flooring, but the sound never arrived. He was just...there. Limpless in frustration and absurdity, with a 'proper' prince gawking at him in severe bewilderment. It was an all too recent a memory; at the door during their very first introduction, Adam had forgotten the very idea of what it was to shake hands. How could he? So often he still felt had claws...he could tear the armed guards apart if he didn't keep control...would rip open that fresh-faced lad, standing with his arm outstretched in welcome, from dark hair to throat...dead before he hit the floor...

Truly, to be human now was not much different than when he was beastly. People stared.

People always stared.

It wasn't entirely his fault. The sensation of his overwhelmingly human body, now soft, so easily breakable, his non-largeness, his beastness, had yet to leave him entirely. Often it left him feeling disconnected between brain and limb—clumsier than he ever imagined he could be as an adult. Belle, thankfully, found it quite endearing. His live-in family within the castle walls—between servants and staff and even the gardeners, they could not quiet their snickering.

The seconds flowed mercilessly, and, in his fair, lighthearted way, Eric now looked amused.

"...Are you all right, my friend?"

"I'm fine." Adam barked, half horrified, half damning himself, half considering the distance of the drop from window to sea, and if it would kill him. "I—didn't mean to startle you."

Eric lifted a dark brow, clearly unconvinced, but he kept his politeness. Adam internally shriveled at the evenness in the Prince of Denmark's voice. "I see. Well, don't worry about the floor or anything. It's pretty old. I rather like keeping the bones of the entire castle as original as possible, even with a few pretty scars."

Of course you do, Adam seethed, his brow puckering, his teeth slightly showing, before he slid his lips down once more. It went without saying that Adam had left to rot most of the original pieces of his palace. Everything had to be replaced. Eric was a friendly, but foolish man. Scars aren't pretty.

Adam's fingers twisted together, apart, the nervousness spidering across his face. He picked up the glass before him, placed it to his mouth to sip, and, thankfully, he swallowed with grace.

Eric mimicked the motion, unsure of what entirely to do next. Here, it seemed natural, normal. A quiet-thing for a thoughtful man to enjoy doing. Eric could get away with it.

Could get away with practically anything rude...unlike me. Arh, would his thoughts never cease?!

'Unlike Adam' was a good summary of nearly everything about Eric. The thought laid heavy on Adam's mind, tethering itself firmly to the base of his skull, forming a headache. Why was he here? Why on Earth—Oh. Of course. Belle. Oh course. She wanted company. She wanted to see the world. It was all Adam could do but to not feel joy himself when Belle looked at him, relishing the very idea of a long, romantic journey by sea that had to end....here.

Please stop, Adam continued, his own eyes blank to Eric's, but his mind reaching far, far, away. We don't have to pretend anymore. The women aren't here.

Eric looked ruefully over the man seated before him. The look of pain subtle across Adam's features. Adam looked the part for those newly found in politics for sure—fairly shaven, washed, but his blue eyes held ice in their sockets. Perhaps he had said something wrong? He seemed amiable before, with Belle doing most of the talking...
Ah. So that would explain it.

With a gentle clear of his throat, Eric stood. He pushed his chair neatly and folded his napkin away from his lap, sliding the chair back into place. "Would you care for some air, then?"

Adam held the glass tightly in his grip, pretending it to be a weapon, or a looking glass, or a magical anything, to wisk him away from here.

Belle, he reminded himself. Belle wants this.

With a low, guttural sound, Adam cleared his throat as well. He stood, gave a little formal wave for Eric to continue, and prayed that Belle was sensing his distress. Wherever she was. Perhaps as soon as she was done with that red waif of a woman in the next room.

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Ariel was charming, gorgeous, and, above all, curious. Belle had never met someone with so many questions to all of the books she had ever read. And, without question, Belle was happy to recite, to write down, to recommend the bulk of her small village's authors, among the first few she had just started reading in Adam's—hers—it was getting so strange to say that now—she owned a library—and not just that, but a library bigger than—than many of the fabulous ones in Paris herself!

"I would be happy to send as many copies by sea at once, Ariel. I always wanted a—a sort of get away? Where I could share my thoughts with my friends over books?"

"Like a book club?" Ariel brightened, her eyes warm and clear as the ocean outside. "I would love to write to you!"

"You mean it?"

"Absolutely! I—" Ariel gave a small, bip of a giggle. "I've been told that I can be—overzealous in what I want. Is that okay with you? My writing to you?"

Belle grinned so hard her cheeks felt pinched. "That would be stunning! Everything has happened so quickly—I'm not from a royal family, as you know, so all this bookkeeping and meetings and arranging—it's often overwhelming." Belle chose the word carefully. Her new life was full of wonder and excitement but...there was so much she would have to learn. So much of her life that didn't match the other women she had been told about...royalty after royalty...even as young as Ariel acted, she seemed very at home in her kingdom.

Ariel prodded her gently from her thoughts. "Adam is very," Her lively face seemed distressed as she felt for the right word. "Quiet." Belle felt her insides tighten. Had it been...too obvious?

"He can be very blunt. I hope you can understand if he is rather standoffish. He's actually very sweet." Belle glanced around the airy hallway, the cream and peach of the hand painted wallpaper, the smell of freshly picked flowers from the bay. It was nothing like the Gothic, darken corners she had grown so used to in France.

"Actually, I think he's charming. In his own way." Ariel began quickly. She suddenly seemed nervous, and Belle felt an ounce of pity for if she had said something wrong. Passingly, Ariel gave a wave of her hand and ushered Belle down a long hall and into a brightly lit drawing room. Ariel sat on the sofa and offered Belle to sit beside her. Her long red hair draped along her face, adding to her youth, her frame smaller than even Belle's. Her cheeks turned a sheer shade of pink.
Belle picked at her own fingertips. They sat in silence for a moment, unsure, before Ariel finally found her courage.

"What I mean, by bringing up Adam, is that I just know how it feels to be...out of place—and I was hoping to improve on my language skills by practicing my French. It will be very rudimentary, you know. Nothing important. But a friend is a friend. And, well, Adam seems..."

"Uninterested?" Belle tested, unable to resist what, undoubtedly, everyone in the couple's kingdom might be thinking towards the newly remembered King of Villeneuve and its surrounding provenances. Adam could scarcely pretend to happy to be here. He didn't even shake hands with Eric at the door.

"...I was going to say, um, shy?"

If only, Belle thought. Perhaps back home. Perhaps at times, towards her. But Adam was a pain and a half to socialize. Belle could absolutely relate to that feeling of being content together, but Adam was a King now...and eventually, he would have to find the will within himself to face his people once more. And other members of Royalty. And the very idea of other friends outside of his nice, quiet, self-contained castle.

But...was Ariel quite serious about such a relationship? At a distance, and with the added benefit of the language being elementary, perhaps she could kill two birds with one stone, adding to her lessons of teaching Adam to read again and gain a new friend? Could her luck truly find itself so fortunate? Belle could hardly contain herself from spinning around to hug her new, welcoming friend to grant such a wonderful suggestion—but she stilled, a dark thread looming.

What if Adam rejected Ariel? Rejected the whole idea? No matter how much she fought him for it...

"Do...you think that's too much? That it's stupid?" Ariel asked, her voice small. "I just really wish to get to know you both. But Adam seems offended, somehow." She gave a little shrug. "I'd don't get to see my own family very much. And, um, most of my other friends are too busy to write back-and you should see my handwriting. It's absolutely frightful—and—"

"Ariel!" Belle interrupted, suddenly alarmed at how much the younger girl clearly had been mulling over for some time—and her family? Belle twinged at the thought of how badly she missed her own father. Seeing Ariel attempt to be this genuinely friendly was a huge relief, so much so, that Belle threw back her head to laugh. "If Adam does enjoy your company, he'd never admit it." She then turned and gave a secret wink to the redhead beside her. "But...I'd be able to tell. I think it's a very kind idea. I'd love to help you both."

Ariel caught on fast. "I'd keep it very discreet."

"Surely better than I could," Belle chuckled. "I'm not one for hiding things. But it certainly sounds promising."

"Then, it's a deal?" Ariel held out her hand. Belle met her grasp.

"I'd be thrilled. Thank you for your kindness, and opening your home. It is lovely."

"It's very pretty a night as well." Ariel hummed cheerfully, before her eyes suddenly lit up as she spied the passing of the sunset over the castle. Oh!" Ariel shot up like a grasshopper, pulling Belle with her to her feet. "The lagoon! Would you like to take a horse to the lagoon? Oh, the stars! You have to see them! You understand some star charts, right? Like in your books? Could you show me some constellations?! Eric loves the stars as well, but I'm sure he's just teasing me. He makes
everything up about them! I want real stories! I want *real* stars!"

Belle would have to find the energy to keep up with her new friend. "Of course! Well, some stars, anyhow! There are far too many to name them all! Let's go—and, it's best we find where the men went off to...you know, before they start making themselves miserable."

Ariel seemed confused. "Eric would be happy to show Adam the grounds."

Belle grasped her friend's arm carefully to slow her down. "Please, don't mind me. He isn't the one I'm worried about."

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**AN:** I hope you guys enjoyed part 1 of 2 for Eric and Ariel introduction/visit. I sincerely hope to get better footing and keep this train moving into other Disney characters! Thank you for reading! Please let me know if you would like me to continue!
AN: Wow! You guys are so sweet to me! Thank you for the attention this little story is getting. I'm having a great time and I hope I can please! I work at a night job, so I often hope to update this daily...only to pass out. I hope to keep updating this daily. Thank you for reading!

Ariel, squished closely within the open-seat of the hitch-wagon tied to two of the most calm horses Belle had ever known the company of, constantly moved around, excited at pointing out every sort of tree, river, town that they glided across on their way to the lagoon. They had spent the better half of an hour tumbling over the loosely hinted at trails that toiled over the land. Most of the peasant town used the fences and postal signs to get where they were headed—market, fishing villages, the like of their most valuable income—but Ariel seemed determined to stay off the beaten path, much to Belle’s growing worry that perhaps she was guessing more than truly navigating their way to their destination.

“Eric told me once that horses originally came from the sea,” Ariel commented mindfully. “A Greek myth that I already knew. He does love to trick me about terrestrial lore, but, I think I know a thing or two more about the sea than he does.”

Belle continued to gaze at the rolling, coastal scenery. The ocean never seemed far from view, even as the sun sank lower, and the stars started peeking out from their blue covers, peppering the sky in beads of white and yellow. “You both seem very fond of the ocean. Eric was a sailor?”

“Is,” Ariel corrected. Then, she smiled. “I think he’s anxious to not entirely be the final ruler of his own kingdom. He’s very much a freedom kind of man. I suppose I can relate to that the most about him. I have a feeling we’ll be traveling more than keeping put here.”

“Mm,” Belle agreed wordlessly as they fell in thoughtful silence once more.

The horses had taken a sharp turn into a sharp-bushed thicket, turning their view of the ocean into nothing but the hard pressed bodies of forest trees.

Belle could only hope that Adam would come around to the idea of traveling. Perhaps she was being too selfish, too soon. She was restless, always searching for new worlds in words and atmosphere, but Adam eluded her in his vagueness to what he might be searching for. If anything, he seemed entirely content in their small kingdom, their beautiful, carefully crafted castle. He lit up when she entered the room. He spent time carefully looking over his rose garden, returning home late covered in the moist, damp smell of the earth and sweat tangling his long hair. When she went to kiss him in those moments, he’d tease her, pulling up to his full height to be out of her reach. He grinned at her mischievously—and it was in these rare, unabashed smiles that he seemed truly happy, as if all the world’s impishness could be found within something as quaint as a garden. Maybe, to Adam, it could be found.

Perhaps encouraging him to make sooner tracks into the fellow kingdoms was a bit…much.

After all, it all began with a single letter from Corona, an isle kingdom not too far off the coast of Germany. None too far from Denmark as well.
Both their dear friend, and the castle’s Majordomo, Cogsworth, made post-haste to send out word for the newly discovered Prince Adam, now King, and establishing land ties and trade connections as quickly as possible with the more easily reached kingdoms. Most kingdoms, in their turn, responded favorably and warming…most of them, anyhow. Many remained removed as it was in their belief that Adam and his family had long since died of plague, and refused to open borders in fear of disease.

Cogsworth continued to write long into the many nights after, reading aloud to Adam as quickly as he could between that week’s reply, last week’s requests, it all seemed so very daunting. For this, for Cogsworth’s abilities to continue on without showing his fear, Belle was forever grateful. True, it might not be what Adam wishes to spend his time doing so soon, but her small village, Villeneuve, was suffering from poverty. The women especially lacking proper education, and myths of witchcraft still the source of many scares.

Although, with the reality of the mysterious Enchantress still hanging over Belle and Adam. Humans (Was the Enchantress truly human, really? Surely as human as Adam ever was, Belle had to reason.) with unbelievable powers, both cruel and wondrous, existed elsewhere…

And since magic existed, the way Belle absolutely saw that it did on that horrible, heartbreaking night of Gaston’s assault on the castle…what else did the world hold outside of France? The very idea made her heart almost sputter in excitement.

Ariel matched her in anticipation, giving the quick pull to the reins of the lead horse, eventually gliding their ride to a stop.

“Here it is, here it is! Gosh, I haven’t seen it at night in so long!” Ariel leaped down, skidding through the tall grass that reached her waist before diving through the long, swaying tendrils of the willow trees that guarded the entire shore of the lagoon. The still, wide pool seemed shallow at its edges, forming a translucent green at Belle’s feet when she manages to reach Ariel’s side again.

The second she touched the water, Ariel seemed to calm. Belle watched her carefully walk the water’s edge, her feet sinking gently into the shore, and noticed that a small trail of minnows seemed to follow her…

Belle moved carefully, always keeping to the grasses. The lagoon was, indeed, gorgeous, and peaceful, but she hadn’t considered the idea of getting quite as close as Ariel. After all, she didn’t know how to swim. Papa never learned, and so, no one ever taught her.

“Oh, perfect,” Ariel turned, splashing the clear water and scaring the minnows. “I just didn’t think this through, did I?”

Belle crossed her arms over her chest. The air was cooling, so close to ocean and the lagoon, and the sun was no longer in the sky at all. The looming darkness was crisp. The lagoon somehow only seemed greener, illuminating the dark. “What do you mean?”

“I just took you exactly where I wanted to go without considering blankets or a picnic or…”
“Oh, please,” Belle allowed herself a few toes closer to Ariel. “We came for the stars, didn’t we?”

Ariel looked embarrassed for a moment, her lower lip a slight pout, before she grinned wide. “Would you? And—and you won’t lie? You promise this. I am so sick to death of Eric’s games.”

“Absolutely.” Belle turned to stare into the sky above them. Perhaps it was due to the ocean, or some other weather, but there were night clouds, misting above, blotting out most of the sky. It was harder to determine than she thought. Belle sat down in the grasses, smoothing her skirt, and motioned for Ariel to sit beside her. “Come sit by me.”

Bending to…was she petting the minnows? No…it just must be too dark to tell…Ariel took her time reaching Belle’s side, plopping down in the grass.

“Alright,” Belle began, feeling the familiar, giddy moment of sharing something new, something grand, and old.

Stars. Stars were a natural kind of magic. Untouchable by man. She liked that about them the best.

“So, there are a few basic outlines I can point out for now…do you see,” She raised a finger to point out a row of stars to the east. “The dots of three, all in row? That is Orion’s Belt. And, there, that’s the Bow of Athena. And, right here, I’m quite sure, is the outline of the right arm of the demi-god, Hercules.”

Ariel appeared panic, her red hair shaking to-and-fro as she bounced her head around as if trying to take in the whole picture at once. “I…I don’t think I understand…I don’t see them. Eric always talks about warning signs in the skies. Signs for pirates.”

Pirates? Belle tried to set that aside for now.

“It’s okay. It can be overwhelming at first. Just, take it a step at a time, right?” Belle turned to take the younger girl’s arm, to help guide her in where to look. “Use the line of your arm and move your eyes from that center, upwards. There. Do you see the Belt?”

“Oh—I do! I do! Ah! It’s right there!” And, the grasses rushed up to meet both of their backs very quickly as Ariel had pushed them over in her failing.

Belle could only laugh. She had always been an only child, always alone, happy inside her own head, but Ariel was fast becoming almost like a little sister.

Ariel popped up from the grasses, the green strains now sticking through the mane of her fiery hair. “I am so sorry! But I saw it! Yes!” And then Ariel threw herself back down, arms lifted upwards in celebration. “Ariel: one, Eric: thirty two. I’ll catch him in no time. Soon, I’ll be the one to trick him.”
“I’m glad,” Belle said. And she meant it. Slightly cold, covered in grass, the laughter. It made her ever so homesick for the young girls she had taught in the village. Could she truly make life better for them?

As a cloud rolled over the moon, darkening the lagoon for a single moment, Belle turned her thoughts to Adam. Surely, with company this sweet, Adam couldn’t be in one of his moods.

Could he?

“If I had to guess,” Eric said, snapping the horses’ reins to pull them into a faster trot through the cold evening air. “I’d say Ariel has taken her to the lagoon. We had our first date there, in a way.”

Eric turns a curious eye to Adam, hoping for some hint of life, noting how the man had specifically turned away to stare outside the carriage window. That didn’t stop Eric from waiting, however. He had worked with harsher men on ships before. Rudeness didn’t really matter. As long as he could find some common topic of interest…but Adam seemed, for lack of a better word, statuesque.

Adam finally gave a single nod to show he was listening. “How… romantic of you.”

Eric took that for all he could get. It was more words Adam had spoken since Eric decided to pull him out of that stuffy dining room for air. Eric considered just cutting out the bull to get to the best part—the part where Naveen, Eugene, Aladdin and even Charming himself, seemed impressed at his stock of prized ships. An entire fleet…all he wanted. But Adam seemed indifferent to it all. The sea didn’t impress him. Nor fine food, nor swords, or a practice round of poker…

Well, if this all went south, Ariel couldn’t possibly tell him that he didn’t try. Ugh, why was it always up to him to put up with the pedants?

“Hah, thanks. I appreciate that. I pretty nervous that night. Felt like an out of body experience afterwards.” Hey, an idea. “If I may, what was your and Belle’s first date?

A pause.

Eric swallowed drily. It wasn’t that Adam was an outrageously striking man. But there was something rather off about him. It almost reminded Eric of the way some animals acted during a hunt. Testing the grounds. Lightly breathing. Biding their time.

“I asked her to dinner.” Adam said lowly, his voice nearly lost over the sound of the horses. “Sly of you. And you called me the romantic one!”

Then, Adam turned, his icy eyes meeting Eric’s in an unflinching stare. "She said no."

Eric couldn’t hold that kind of intensity. He quickly dropped his eyes. Explains a lot, pal.

“I asked her to dinner.” Adam said lowly, his voice nearly lost over the sound of the horses.

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“Well…the boat flipped that Ariel and I were on.” He allowed himself a small grin at the memory, the adorable way Ariel’s hair had flipped itself over, covering her face.

Adam’s cold composure seemed to withdraw back, a careful look of surprise dancing there with way his left brow lifted, ever so slightly. “Was she hurt?”
“No, no,” Eric explained lightly, “It was fine! It was, well, fun.”

Adam blinked, his concern waning. “I see.”

Okay. Closer. I can do this, Eric thought. “Say—speaking of boats and danger and all…”

He trailed off, hoping, for once, that Adam might be the one to add to the conversation.

“I imagine you’re referring to the multitude of renegade crew’s pillaging coastal kingdoms, such as yours?”

It worked. Eric flicked the horses’ reins to help him focus. The topic of pirates half stalked his waking nightmares, half drove him passionately to the sea without end. “Yes, I am. I know your kingdom is landlocked. Surely, you don’t think about such things but…well, I just wanted to let you know. I’ve had sighting of a few. Black sails deep over the horizon. The villages are drunk with gossip over it.”

“People have little else to discuss.” Adam agreed darkly. “My people, as of late, are listless about witches. The ignorance of it all.” Adam cleared his throat again, the sound a low growl in his throat. “But pirates…their danger is far, far reaching. I…” Here, Adam seemed conflicted. His mouth opened, closed. Finally, he settled over his next words. “I am new to this life of expected heroism. But if you are requesting help from my kingdom…”

Expected? Eric flexed his knuckles over the ropes in his hands. “I cannot wait until the day I hang myself a proper pirate. Beyond a life with Ariel, I don’t think I want anything else in this world.”

When Eric glanced at Adam’s face, he noticed the faintest outline of a small, considering smile. It had to be the moonlight, but for all his own handsomeness, the man’s teeth seemed…sharp. A trick of light, perhaps…

“Do you hunt?” The tone in Adam’s voice was very serious.

“Hunt? Now I do. Between you and me, it’s not something I’m very committed towards. I love fishing more—but, uh, Ariel…she doesn’t approve. And, I could go on with it, of course, but I don’t want to upset her. It’s…complicated. I know that isn’t a fair explanation. But do I hunt? To please. To please those around me that do.”

A long, low exhale wavered in the silence between the two men. Adam had been holding his breath.

“I used to hunt.” Adam explained. “It was exhilarating for me.”

Eric nearly laughed in good humor at how, like clockwork, Adam had so little to say and yet, so much in each chosen word. “Please, don’t let my lack of passion stop you. Go on?”

The snap of bones between teeth. The feeling of a small, terrified heart between his jaws. He never wanted the ways of the beasts to teach him such to ravish killing, the metallic, warm taste of blood. But he could not fight his will to starve himself for long. He spent years honing his sense of smell, his many hours of stalking his prey. He was ravenous. He was always ravenous.

“It’s difficult to explain, really.” Adam added uneasily. “I just miss it, sometimes.”

Eric returned to survey the road ahead. “Good game out here. You’re welcome to come and hunt, anytime. I’d be happy to join you.”

Not that Eric really expected much of an answer, he kept his eyes straight ahead for the rest of the
ride. There was something haunting about the way the man seated beside him, how he stared, fixated, into the night. Eric couldn’t see anything beyond his own hands in front of his face. But he felt, with a chill up his spine, that Adam could see much, much more.

...The multitude of whatever was still out there, waiting, yellow eye’d, howling through the dark.

Between the cold, the clouds, and the lateness of their journey, it was called quite quickly after the entire party had arrived at the lagoon that they would head back to the warm safety of the guest quarters.

Eric and Ariel bid them both a good night without much fuss, much to Belle’s surprise. Ariel seemed to never run out of questions or conversation. But, with a hug, Ariel pounced off and up the stone stairs to the upper chambers, with Eric, a steadfast smile to say goodbye, a brief wave of his hand, soon to follow.

Belle entered through the large arch of the doorway and into the bed chamber, softly pulling the rest of the grasses of the evening from her hair. Adam was seated on the corner of the bed. It was an extremely large looking bed, stitched, of course, with the scenery of gulls floating above the ocean. She carefully removed her shoes, dress from the day, put on her nightgown and picked up a brush—strangely shaped like a fork, was it?—to continue crumpling out her hair.

Adam still did not move. With a soft sigh, Belle sat down beside him, trying to get a view of what he was staring at. It wasn’t much of anything. A rocking chair to the west wall. Dusty from disuse.

“Are you alright?” She finally asked, hating to ask questions when the answer was obvious.

“Are you?” He remarked quickly.

Belle stopped brushing. Quietly, Adam cleared his throat again, setting his jaw with an indulgent crack. Old habits that could not die fast enough.

“And, what am I to take from that? Ariel was perfectly lovely. Just as the letters described, she—” She lifted a hand to turn Adam’s face towards her. His eyes did not meet hers. “Did…something happen? Did Eric say something?”

“He, too, seems perfectly perfect.” Adam rumbled.

Belle rose a dark brow. “‘Seems’?”

“Am I to know these people in one day?” Adam returned unkindly. His fists curled into the sheets. He had not taken off his clothes for the day. It was as if he was planning to leave…

“Adam, you aren’t serious. Eric and Ariel are so kind. Tell me, was it so painful to talk to them?”

“I just wish to leave.” Adam confessed slowly. He finally looked at Belle. His eyes were bewildered, drained. “I have always known this upon meeting you—but people like you, Belle. No, it’s not even that—they adore you. I adore you.” At this, Adam rested his fingers on Belle’s face, to brush them modestly against her cheek, before he laid it down once more in his lap. “It’s all very logical. But I… I’m telling you. I cannot do this much longer.”

Belle considered this slowly, attempting to not chew her own lip. “You talk as if they’re all putting on a show for us. Don’t you believe them?”
Adam sighed tiredly, as if Belle always cut to the quick of exactly what he always failed to say.

“Do you?”

“Of course! That's what getting to know people means! And I'm sure they aren't perfect. I'm sure they fight and gossip just as anyone else. And, furthermore Adam, if you just tried to—

“Have I not made it apparent that I am doing my best? But why does any of it matter when none of it is real? It's all political scheme and false niceties, you're being naïve.”

“I'm being naïve?” Belle bulked, standing straight up, her face pink. “Aren’t you being judgmental today! Do you ever consider that they want to be our friends? That they want to help us?”

“I do not believe we need their help,” Adam sneered, his patience from the day thinning. He felt his brain constricting in his skull.

“Yes,” Belle said weightily, “We absolutely do. You have not seen your villages, my town. We need help.”

“Perhaps if we spent more time there, I would have seen them by now!”

“What? You hardly want to go anywhere! Adam, I never wish to make you do anything but we have to do this—our people need us. Good people! People like Papa, like Mrs. Potts and Mr. Potts! Good people like you, Adam. You need people too, she thought.

“Everything I am doing, I do for you.” Adam hissed. Now, he was standing as well, a heartbeat away from Belle. The room seemed so much smaller now. His heart raced in his chest. Where was the door out of here? A window? Where could he go, now? Where was there to go without her? Where was there to go without her? What about when I need you? He thought, but he could not bring those words to his lips.

“And what about yourself, Adam? Maybe if you allowed them in, you'd see they are actually very nice! Ariel even wanted to wi—”

Something inside of Adam snapped. The little girl that Eric was so delighted by; it was apparent what political marriage plans had brought her about.

“Oh, yes! His child-bride!” He could not help but give a bitter laugh. “Tell me more of her ambition! A new set of dolls, perhaps?”

“Adam!” Belle snapped.

“She's a child, Belle!”

“At least she knows what she wants out of life! What she wants from other people! Are we to guess what you want, all the time? Now you act as if you know everything about her!”

Adam’s hands went to his hair, ripping, he turned on his heels to pace the room.

“I—just—want—to—leave!” He roared.

“Shh! Can you bear to hold your tongue? What if they hear you?”

“I'd say cut out my tongue now, but I don't think they make iron piercers hot enough for me, my dear!”
“Tell me, did you plan on picking a row with every person we meet or is there a deeper strategy to your cunning?!”

Then, Adam stopped at the doorway. Frozen for a moment, then, his hands limp at his sides. Belle stomped after, her own face red in frustration, but she stopped at what she saw.

The door to their bedchamber was open, and there, trembling in her nightgown, Ariel stood, a candle in its tiny tray rattling in its post as she shook.

She did not mean to come face to face with the fighting couple, merely to press an ear to their door. She knew it was wrong, but she could not stand for it, Eric’s words of warning brushed away. But the door had been flung open to reveal her spying.

Now, she felt helpless under the frightful, hate filled look on Adam’s face.

It was beyond words. He looked worlds away from the man she had met this morning, the man with his long auburn hair tied up so neatly with a blue silk ribbon, who stiffly but mindfully bowed to her in the doorway. Now, halted in the doorframe, shoulders heaving, his hair dripping down to half cover his face, he looked like a predator watching his kill.

Ariel did not wait to find Belle. Ariel did not cry out in fear. She simply ran, dropping the candle, the flame dying at Adam’s feet, without looking back, a slender shadow that flew up the stairs without a word.

Adam could not move, the look on the small woman’s face a nightmare come true. She was the face that always followed him. The face of years of painful self hatred.

“I... I…” He was stunned. “I’m sorry.”

Only Belle heard him. But it was too late. Surely, Ariel had heard his shouting and felt wronged. As she should.

 Unsure, Belle could not bring herself to chase after. She felt just as ashamed, and she returned to the room’s bathing area. She ran some water over her face. She returned to the bedside after watching Adam stand in the doorway a moment more. Now, she felt just as tired as he looked. Against all hope, and three weeks of sea travel, what could she say now? She did not have the words to win every fight for him. Could he learn to mind himself better? Would anyone grow to enjoy Adam the way that she could?

Would he allow them to?

“Are you coming to bed?” She asked him, her voice yielding to know she was done fighting. He was welcome there if he chose.

Adam shook his head, the shadow pooling over the floor. He continued standing there, locked in his stance.

Belle laid down anyways. Some nights, when Adam could not sleep, she would fall asleep watching him, that same position, same powerful, exhaustive stance. She never asked what he was waiting for. He never told her.

“We will leave at dawn.” She called softly, pulling a pillow down to hug it to her chest. It was cold without him. “I love you. Please, try not to stand there all night. There is a bed here.”

“I love you.” Was all he said, turning back to see her sleeping form, before he turned once more. Call
it stubbornness or weakness, he felt petrified in place. In a palace that was not his. So far away from this staff, his friends. He could not bring himself to sleep where he did not belong.

Dawn seemed an eternity away.

AN: Thank you again for reading! I am open to requests and suggestions, along side my own plans, if any of you guys want to see a certain scene between two characters or new themes or conflicts! See you soon!
Creatures of Habit

**AN:** Thanks for enjoying everyone! Please let me know what you think? (apologise for tiny typeos! Feel free to correct. I work a late job, and write late, and my brain...it gets so tired to see..thank you!

The curve of the beach bent long and low along the shore. Dawn was breaking. Low-tide creeping in. As the sun dragged itself out from the mouth of the sea, weak rays of light made the sands shiver silver, now gold, then red. Shadows skittered away, moving back into the edge of the forest, where under Adam's feet, the soft sand turned to hard stone and brittle leaves.

It was here, just out of reach from the rising sun, Adam crouched. Spine rounded, shoulders steeled, he had sank into the comfort of the woodland, him alone, with no other sounds except for the steady lapping of the ocean’s teeth chewing on the shoreline.

The quiet drove Adam *mad.*

Breathlessly mad, achingly mad. He knew there were other sounds, but he could no longer hear them. Sounds like twigs snapping, birds picking through their feathers, plucking berries through the thrush. The distant hum of a near by stream...the heartbeat of a doe, watching him, watching her...

These sounds had been his and his alone for so long. He knew them more than he knew of people noise. City noise. Like Paris, a loud, thundering parade of endless, tasteless people. Not that he would tell Belle that. It was different with her around. Everything was different with her.

When he first felt the warmth of the stone balcony beneath the soft pads of his human feet, his head had been filled with a remarkable silence. It had replaced years of sharp, pungent nature with all things new: Belle, the newly human staff around them, the startling din of the sky alight with gun powder.

At first, Adam could not imagine the world as he had known it. Never again did he wish to know such captivity, such inhumanness. And yet.

And yet.

Slowly, seeping like a feral poison in his veins, he began to lie awake at night without reason. Every muscle tensed, his skin wrapped under a thin layer of perspiration. He was human again. Human forever more. Yet, why did he feel this yearning unease in the quiet of the night? Why must he keep checking behind himself in broad daylight?

The understanding of his home, of the forest, left a undeniable scar.

Human senses were so much weaker than those years spent a Beast. Stripped away from those sounds, Adam felt as if his head was being forced under water, his world muffled. If not his ears, then his eyes betraying him too, showing him shapes in the dark that were not there. Hiding all things dangerous if there was. Perhaps it was his sense of smell that was the worst culprit.

Belle's natural scent made her more than just lovely perfume. She was the faint stain of an ink pot, oak leaves from a horse's mane, violets, the remaining skins from blackberries forgotten under her fingernails. The heady wilds of a freshly pressed book.

No. All memories now. Adam could crush Belle all he liked to his face, but to no avail. He had lost his life when he was cursed a monster.
But was there a loss in being human, too? Why did he feel a stranger in his own skin?

Why did he feel so afraid?

Adam pulled himself up to stand. The soreness of how he had been sitting catching up to him. He had also walked all night, touching bark and grass, mindlessly moving. Until he found this beach. Until he found Ariel.

Some time had passed in his thinking, yet the beach remained unchanged. The flow of the water uncovered the shallows of old sandbars, tiny islands in their own right, not far from the shoreline, dots from Adam's view. A figure was seated on one of them, farthest to the left, unmoving. Her hair was as red as the dawn.

He had been watching her for quite a while now, pacing, debating, refusing, and, finally, accepting. Unlike before, Adam could not claim to have tracked her here. If fate, he had found her and thusly he knew what he needed to do. If fluke, and Adam thought it very much so, in his own miserable luck, that he would fumble his way back into the hole he had dug for himself.

Now, a spineless fool, he had sat and waited. His throat itched from thirst. His hands and feet caked with dirt. He could only imagine what he might look like now to that poor girl, to see him rise out of the woods, sleep deprived and morose, meandering back into the one place she used for safety.

How his pride played him for a fool time and time again.

With a long suffering sigh, Adam began his graceless walk down to the beach.

Subtle is not the word Ariel would ever use to describe Belle's husband.

In fact, as quiet as he might have tried to stay, Ariel could feel his eyes on her since their humiliating encounter mere hours before. And so soon after, of all the places in her kingdom, he happens upon the one beach she chose to be alone?

No, Ariel willed. No.

The instant his haggard reflection appeared near hers in the ocean's tides, Ariel fumed, leaping up, bare tores sure-footed along the wet sand, and whirled to face Adam. Her petite features vivid in disgust.

Surprised, Adam stumbled back, catching himself on the palms of his hands before he fully hit the water.

"How dare you," Ariel growled, her teeth clenched. She took a step forward, off the sandbar, into the shallows, and the water pulled away from her, as if it, too, feared her anger.

"How. Dare. You." She practically spat the words at him.

Adam felt his eyes widen. She was such a small, tiny girl, but she looked for all the world as if she had been the one plotting from the shadows. Her fists were curled, and, without warning, a streak of hard, compacted sand struck Adam in the face. The sheer surprise knocked him off balance. Then, another blow. Another! Adam lifted his hands to defend himself, and the cold, strong tide of the ocean washed over his body, his chest, his hair, half submerging him.
Ariel was pelting him with sand as she scooped it from the waves. Another blow, another step. Soon, Ariel was standing over him, her red hair a flaming swarm of fire that matched the fury in her eyes.

"Do you have any idea how hard I try to get away from people like you?" Ariel yelled at him, her words an assault all their own. "You take one look at my size, my face, my age, and you think I don't know pain? That I don't know sacrifice? Is that what you think?"

Between water and sand, Adam felt his words choked, with barely enough space to respond. "Mademois—"

It was no use. He coughed roughly, bringing up sand.

"No! You've had your say! It's my turn to talk and you are going to listen!" Ariel screamed, her pitch shrill as she sucked in air. The ocean matched her will; Adam felt as if two strong hands were pushing him into the sand, under the waves.

Ariel tore at her hair, tossing her head about as fierce as an lioness defending her territory. "You! You complete bastard! And even Eric with his endless games! Do not assume ignorance where I am concerned! The ocean covers more land than sea in this world and I have crossed nearly all of it! I am so sick of people's assumptions—and—of being afraid of them!"

Adam jerked upwards, a weak attempt at stopping the water from suffocating him. If Ariel knew of the sea, if Ariel knew what she was doing, she paid Adam no mind. She was relentless.

"I came to this kingdom because of the man I love, but he does not define me!" Ariel continued, her voice straining. Ariel stomped, the motion small, but Adam felt the ocean lurch, twisting his legs, squeezing his lungs with a force unparalleled to any he had felt before.

"So, if that is all you have to grant of me, think what you will, monsieur!" At this, Ariel gave a mocking bow, before she turned away, her fists tight once more to her sides.

Thankfully, the strength of the ocean went with her, releasing Adam. He fought for air, feeling his spine give a threatening pop as he quickly twisted around, clawing at floating sand that gave out from under him, dragging himself back onto the shore on his hands and knees. His long hair was half in his own mouth, soaked to his face, and he spat it out, water as well, into the sand, desperate for air.

Gaining new lung fills of air, Adam used one arm to brace himself as he scrubbed at his face. He had expected the sun to dazzle him once he pulled his arm from his eyes, but he found himself face to face with Ariel.

Waterlogged, still gasping, Adam could not flinch away.

Ariel's small nose flared. In, out, her scowl locked onto her face. "So, if you have something more you would like to add, you will say it to my face."

Ragged, bewildered, Adam dropped his face down. Outside the water, his clothes clung to him, the air growing colder in the too slowly moving sun. His throat felt shredded on sand, stinging with salt water with every breath, but it was no matter.

Pain was familiar.

"I—" Adam tried, a rasp of a word. "You're—I." It didn't add much. Ariel looked unimpressed.

Carefully, Ariel lowered herself onto the sand, eyes boring into him. "What was that?"
"...Right." Adam sputtered.

Her light brows kitted themselves. "'Right'?"

"I am," Adam growled, "That kind of man. The one you despise."

Ariel snorted. "I should've known, considering how rude you are. I was a fool for even respecting you. Clearly, you have no respect for anyone else."

Adam kept his head low. He watched as the droplets from Ariel's long hair, gentle against the struggle before, start to speed up as they plummeted to the sand. He could smell the weakness of the salty droplets this close to his nose, but he didn't need his Beastly nose to tell him of the change. They were tears.

"Don't," Ariel shuddered, and Adam felt a weight along the back of his neck, keeping his head from rising up. "Don't you—I look at me while I-I cry. This doesn't mean anything!" She tried to keep her voice from wavering, but it only made her words garbled. "I stubbed my pinkie-toe the other day and that made me cry, too! This means nothing!"

Although he could easily remove her hand, Adam remained still. He was struck at the sea, how the restlessness behind him now was motionless and silent. He closed his eyes and did as he was told. She didn't want him to look? Fine. He rested half of his cheek on the sand. He would look at nothing, then. He willed his breathing to shallow. It hurt to take larger breaths anyways.

Where did she say she was from? Adam thought faintly.

Ariel's sobs slowly stifled once Adam gave in. He felt her hand lift from his neck. Without her hiccups puncturing the silence, the world went quiet once more than Adam.

A moment more. And then. Then:

"Are—are you pretending to be dead?" She asked weakly.

Ah. It was nice while lasted. Adam refused to move. "Often times I feel as if the world would be far better off if that were the case." He deadpanned.

Ariel sniffled. A hand wiping at her nose.

"...I don't wish you dead...but I guess I did drown you a little..."

"Tell me, do you know how long it takes a selfish man to drown?" Adam rasped.

Ariel remained weary. "I—I haven't the faintest."

"Well, if you find me three inches of water, we shall both find out."

A pause.

"...Was that supposed to be a joke?"

Face first in the sand, Adam's voice was muffled. "At my own expense. Just for you."

Ariel shook her head, refusing to be endeared at his stupid, stupid dry sense of humor. "You, um, can look at me now."

Slowly, Adam obliged, peeling one side of his face from the sand, looking more drown, washed up
thing, than man. Ariel allowed herself a small sense of pride at her handiwork.

"And, if I sit up, what will you do?" Adam tested, his voice low in his chest, his eyes looking at Ariel with a twinge of mistrust.

Ariel flushed. She showed him her empty palms. "No more sand."

Slowly, with a dramatic groan, Adam lifted himself, feeling his spine pop again, skin decidedly bruised. He found a hint of relief when he discovered that, even whilst sitting, he could still tower over her. Of course, he never wanted to be close to Ariel in the water again.

He cleared his throat painfully before he began.

"Did you know I had been watching you?"

"Yes," Ariel pulled her knees up to her chest. Her nightgown from the hours before, half dry, had been ruined by the sea. "How did you find me?"

Ariel watched as a slow, knowing smile crossed Adam's lips. "I am a master tracker."

Ariel rolled her eyes. "Liar."

The smile was gone, but Adam allowed a sound, deep within his chest, that seemed like faint amusement at being put in his place.

"All right. If you must know, I went woodswalking until I came upon the beach. Then, I saw you, sitting there. It was a complete accident."

Ariel thought on this. "Woodswalking?" She paused, her voice small. "Were you coming to apologize at all?"

The lightness fled from his face, with the answer written there before he could dare to hide it. Alas, there was no use in pretending now.

"No." He said simply. "But, when I saw you there, I..." He struggled, his mouth twisting to find the words. "...I was trying to talk myself into at least approaching you. However, when I went close to you, you threw sand-and I lost my balance- and, ah, well. Here we are."

Ariel curled tighter around herself. Adam shifted uncomfortably until he was beside her. He closed his eyes. Took a short breath in. Blew the air back out from his nose.

"I was wrong." Adam rumbled.

Ariel did not stir.

He tried again. "I was...horrified that you heard me." A hard swallow forced a short pause. "But that does not justify what I said."

"You're not the first." Ariel allowed.

Adam considered this. "Yes...I see that now."

The ocean remained calm and silent.

"Did you know that there is a world beyond the land?" Ariel asked softly. "Deep beneath the sea...it's called Atlantica."
"Belle has read to me—" Adam started, without thinking, and felt himself cringe. He tried to recover. "She has told me legends of such a place."

"It's real." Ariel said simply.

Adam set his jaw, flexing tongue over teeth as he tried to find the words to respond. Instead, he tried this:

"Did you know that there are creatures on the land, the kind that don't occur in nature?" He asked quietly, staring at the waves. "The kind that...you turn into."

"I'm not sure..."

"They are real." He intoned darkly.

"I think I feel like that." Ariel confessed. "That I don't belong. That people don't see me. That I am less than human. It's why I thought I understood you. I thought..." She trailed off. "I feel so stupid to say this...but you're the kind of person that makes me feel afraid."

There was a pain in Adam's chest that was not sand or sea. It throbbed for a long, breathless moment. He stared out at the ocean. It was limitless and ageless. It reminded him of all the time he would never get back. How little he had truly changed.

"But I am afraid." Adam confessed.

Ariel quieted. "Did something happen to you to make you so cruel?"

"Yes." He returned slowly. "It was my fault. Now, I am afraid of what I cannot forget. I was not raised by benevolent people, I...well. That is not entirely true. My family, my servants, they treated me with kindness. I..." He stopped.

"It is my fault." Adam repeated. "I am afraid of the unknown. How can I protect those I love? How do I trust that any of it is real?" He sighed. "How do I tell Belle that I am afraid that I cannot protect her from my own destruction?"

Ariel looked at him. "So, you just let your fears control you? They can't be so bad, Adam."

"Control? Perhaps." Adam considered sternly. "But not like this. They are insurmountable. I fear I cannot go on as I have. Not for much longer." He gave a bitter, scraping laugh. "And that applies to so many things..."

"Adam...I don't know what to say."

"Then, please." Adam turned to meet her eyes. "Say nothing. Allow me to apologize. I am so sorry, Ariel. For my words, my wretched pride. My behavior. I will return with you to the castle and Belle and I will be gone within the hour."

A heartbeat of silence. Adam expected Ariel to agree to the deal of departure immediately, but yet, it stretched on.

"You and Belle must be traveling on anyway. But. I would like to write."

"Belle would—"

"To you."
Shock rolled through Adam's mind. "I don't understand."

"I don't want you both to go away. I want to get to know you both for the better. I want for us to be friends. Do you believe me?"

His brow furrowed. "But after all I have done..."

"Oh, don't worry." Ariel mused. "I'll think of something more to make up for that. But what I want most is to pratice my French. They'll be short letters, I assure you. There is more I want to discuss with you, but I find writing down my thoughts makes me sound mess, um, scatter-brained."

"I don't find you scatter-brained at all. In fact, I found you quite eloquent whilst you were screaming at me." Adam reached to brush some sand from his cheek. "Good aim, too."

Ariel lit up, smirking mischievously, her red hair curling around her face in a charming way. "Then you will write?"

Perhaps it was the water he had swallowed, but Adam's stomach recoiled, nauseated. "I...I will try."

_Belle willing, and Lord save me_, he winced.

Ariel opened her hand to reach for his. A handshake. "Then, apology accepted, monsieur."

Adam could not but help to feel relief at the calculating woman before him. He grasped her hand.

With a gentle nod, he said, "Je te remercie, Ariel."

_And I thank you.

_I thank you._

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**AN:** The adventures of Adam digging his anti-social hole continues forward! Thank you for enjoying! See you again soon!
Belle watched with little enjoyment at the way Eric went about sharpening his hunting knives.

The firm, blistered tilt of hilt to blade against the strength in his thumbs, the repetitive scrape on the leather ring. It reminded her of Gaston, and to remember much of Gaston, even in his more innocently ignorant of moments, only made a hard stone of disdain settle deeper into the pit of Belle’s stomach.

But for all of his business, Eric seemed, to Belle’s surprise, extraordinarily carefree. He had been at this for most of the morning, since he and Belle had minimally greeted one another in the main hall, and Eric had shooed most dawn staff away into their duties within the square corners of their brightly lit home. It made the castle, particularly without Ariel’s chipper voice bounding off the walls, feel quite empty.

“Did you sleep well?” Eric intoned, glancing up with blue eyes at Belle. He kept rhythm in his timing, every knife as sharp and honed as the next, without much thought. “Ariel and I aren’t used to guests. I’m afraid I hadn’t checked to see how the guest quarters had fared since, well, last year I might think?” He switched knives, rolling a shoulder behind him, as if debating adding a word further.

“I slept fine. And your guest quarters are lovely. Your whole home is lovely.” Belle responded in turn. She met Eric’s eyes and felt, once more, locked in the moment of Adam’s bellowing, of Ariel’s gasp of fear. “Ariel…did she tell you?”

Eric stopped his work at once, setting the steel along the table before him. He picked up the rag and brought it to his face, cleaning away sweat. “Yes, she did.” He folded the cloth down slowly. “I’m afraid that is why she couldn’t join us this morning.” Eric clarified. “But.” Eric held Belle’s gaze meaningfully. “I want to tell you, this isn’t anything new.”

“Isn’t anything new?” Belle inquired, her voice terse. “Adam—he was entirely out of place. He absolutely needs to apologize to her! And to you, I might think!”

Eric turned briskly away from his guest’s face, his expression guarded.

“Belle, what I mean is that Ariel and I, we have had people object to our marriage from day one. Adam’s reaction, Ariel’s anger, it’s been said and done before.” He sighed tiredly. “I’ve given up trying to console her during these outbursts. She has to learn to not let other people’s opinions hurt her.”

Belle came to Eric’s side, hands folded nervously. “You mean that? You truly mean that you have gone through this before?” Her voice fell flat. “That’s…that’s terrible. I cannot believe it.”

“Well, try.” Eric said pointedly. He glanced at Belle once more, then lightened his shielded stance. “I hope you know I don’t throw your opinion in with the lot. You have been nothing but sweet to us.
“Thank you,” Belle said quickly. “I know I cannot apologize in his place, but Adam…he doesn’t mean what he says. I hope…despite what you have been met with prior…you can believe me.”

“I think Ariel is the one that needs to believe us both.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“From your letters I had gathered that there was something amiss with Adam. Something behind your words. I never meant any harm in thinking so, but, I had figured you were referring to nerves, or perhaps an illness, or maybe, just maybe, he was coming to seek advice on his crownship.” Eric rubbed at the back of his neck absently, recollecting of Ariel’s delighted face upon the promise that Belle and Adam should arrive in a month’s time. “However, from the moment I met him, I knew exactly who I was dealing with. Ariel—she fought me that entire period of waiting. She begged to differ in every way about getting to know people.”

“Did she?” Belle said sadly, picturing the dead candle she had picked up from the floor this morning. “Sometimes, people do not wish to know anyone. It’s as simple as that.” Eric replied curtly. “Ariel thought she understood something deeper to it.” Eric allowed a taut smirk that did not reach the weary look in his eyes. “But—what is there to hide, really? Adam’s temperament is none of my concern. As long as you and he can come to my kingdom’s aid if I need it, I’ll be just fine.”

Belle felt her chest tighten. “You require our aid?” She fought the very idea of how little they had to offer. The poverty of their own provinces, the hapless men she had known that attempted to take the life of her beloved. Could she grant that to Eric? To anyone?

“Adam did not tell you?” Eric murmured. “Well, I don’t mean alarm. I simply meant that I have been expecting some pirates in the coming months or so. Fishing has been so plentiful this time of year, this is when I expect a raid. I have guards, I have men…but I want someone who knows their way around a battlefield. And you and your kingdom are so close. An alliance between my ports and your markets would be most beneficial.”

Belle shook her head in alarm. “I don’t know what Adam has told you, but he’s never seen a battlefield a day in his life. He knows nothing of arms or fighting. He—” Belle stopped short. Eric was looking at her in the most peculiar of ways. “You disagree.”

“I’m…I’m afraid I have misunderstood.” Eric replied, his tone perplexed. “Are we talking about the same person? Adam hardly had six words to say to me—but Belle, you’re married to the man. Surely, you can see that look in his eyes?”

Belle felt the hair on her arms rise without reason. “What look?”

Eric stiffened, his usual good nature gone hollow. “Why, he looks like a man with bloodlust. And I need all the help I can get if there is a raid. Pirates, Belle, can you imagine? They’re ruthless. I need someone like him at my side.”

Bloodlust. Belle felt her heart skipping rapidly. Someone like him. Her Adam. Her face paled. No…no, what could this mean? Adam seemed so sure—together they were so sure this was—it was over. How could Eric see…?
“Adam is kind.” Belle began. “He loves the idea of fighting, I’m sure. He loves stories about knights and war—but he—he is confused. I will talk to him. Today. When he returns.”

Eric remained still for just a moment before he returned to his chore, fiddling with the blunt edge of a blade. “Ah…so, he has ran off as well?”

“Ariel did, too?”

“Yes. To the north beach.”

“Adam goes woodswalking.” She softened, willing herself to stay focused on one problem at a time. “It’s his word for requesting alone time, anyhow.”

“Woodswalking,” Eric echoed. “Hah! What a masculine word for sulking.” He seemed charmed by the word, despite his gentle mock. “I like it. I should try that on Ariel one day.”

Belle knew where this was going. “You do love to trick her, don’t you?”

“Only out of love—and a little meanness.” Eric replied opportunely. “She likes it, too.”

“Where is she from?”

At once, Eric looked shocked. He blinked his eyes a few times. Belle resisted pressing further, but what a remarkable reaction to such a simple question…

“It’s…a rather large nation, uh, far, far reaching. With, uh, unusual ways of transportation. Ah.”

Now it was Belle’s turn to look entertained. Prince Eric, all calm and regal, tripping over tongue?

“Don’t hurt yourself,” She called playfully. “I don’t mean to pry. Ariel can tell me herself if it upsets you so.”

“It doesn’t upset me,” Eric returned, sounding rather upset. He gave a short, nervous laugh. “It’s her father, if you must know. He is still warming up to me.”

Ah. Belle smiled knowingly. “A father’s love can be oppressive. And rewarding.”

Eric seemed grateful at her letting it go. “Don’t I know it, Belle. Don’t I know it.”

Eric watched as Belle’s face, pretty in morning sunlight, sadden. “Do you wish to go searching for them?”

“No, it is never long that Adam is gone.” Belle sounded very sure of this. “I just worry. He was, um, wounded once during a hunt, and, well, I think he lives in this grand idea that he is impervious to nature. I do worry he’ll come back missing a limb one day and try to pretend like all is normal.” She give a small laugh. “His stubbornness can be endearing.”

Eric shared in her laughter. “Oh, I bet. I have to pry Ariel out of the sea during a heavy enough storm.” He lowered his voice and leaned in to Belle conspiratorially. “Got my fair share of cuts and all manner of bruises that way—but Ariel—she always comes out just fine. As a sailor, I find it little unfair, if you ask me.”
“Oh, believe me, Adam is often the definition of ‘unfair’.” Belle looked at Eric in shared hesitation. “I just hope he realizes that he isn’t the only one that likes to not play by societal rules.”

“Ariel has her lessons to learn, too.” Eric flicked the blade around, catching it with his left hand, bringing it down, up, and around again—nicking himself in the processes on his forearm. Caught in the trick, Eric looked sheepishly at Belle. “Me, too, of course.”

“I’m always open to learning.” Belle said kindly, grabbing the stained cloth to hold it out for Eric to take. Eric did, pretending that his knife stunt went on swimmingly. “I suppose I’ll check back a little later with you. Will you let me know if you see him?”

“Sure, sure.” Eric agreed. “I doubt I’m anyone he wants to see, but I’ll try to ring a bell.” He gave a wink, thinking himself funny. Belle fought looking amused.

“Did,” Belle asked as she moved towards the door. She led herself to a stop. “Did you really mean what you said? About Adam—about what you think you saw in my letters?”

“That he has little to hide?” Eric considered. “Well, I had hoped to get to know him. I assume it’s all very simple that I can’t, but, am I wrong?” He studied Belle carefully.

“I disagree about Adam. About your interest in using him for your raid defense. You are wrong.”

“Isn’t that his choice to make?”

“I’m telling you—he isn’t what he appears to be, Eric. Adam will prove that in time.”

“Well then. It would seem that there are other worries that we must attend to,” Eric ceased, his eyes tight. He fitted the blade once more to its holder at his thigh, wiped his hands, and with that, seemed quite done with the conversation. But Belle felt her face heat up as she turned away. She was not done. Whatever plans anyone had for Adam, she was not done with this at all.

“And you just let your father burn them?” Ariel questioned, her tone outraged.

“What was I to do? I was eleven. I was—I was quite the coward. I couldn’t stand up to that.” Adam turned to her, their trudge through the woods nearing its end. He was surprised by the expression on her face. “You seem awfully upset.”

“I would never allow my father to burn my books.” Ariel argued. She crossed her arms over her chest. Adam turned back to face the trails. He did not want to keep staring at that cute, childish look on her face. It was all he could do to not laugh at her. She would take it the wrong way. “I would have stolen them somewhere and hid them! They were your mother’s!”

Adam gave a tired shrug. “She was my mother, and she was very sick, and there were little options. The doctors told us that the disease clings to everything touched. They had to be destroyed.”

“That’s horrible.” Ariel protested.

“That is what happened.” Adam concluded, his voice impassive.
They continued on for a while, drifting between friendly silences and the occasional intrusion of judging a flower by its worthiness. Ariel’s newest interest. Once Adam had let it slip that he enjoyed the keeping of hard to grow flowers, every plant was a game.

Finally, without too much to reason it, Ariel let out a giggle from behind him. Concerned, Adam glanced over his shoulder to find Ariel picking out some blooming reeds a few yards back.

“Whatever are you doing?”

“Trying to save you some grief,” Ariel called back. She quickly flew back to Adam’s side, a fist full of dry, yet pleasant looking blooms. “For Belle.” She offered them astutely.

Adam did not reach for them. Ariel pouted mightily. Adam still did not move.

“Those are a kind of weed, and yes, while pretty, they’re pollinating.” He declared coolly. “I am not bringing those to Belle.”

“Oh, come off it!”

“I’m not bringing those to Belle, Ariel,” Adam protested again, but the stern look on his face faltered at the silliness of Ariel’s drive to make her latest scheme come true. “But that is very nice of you.”

Defeated but amused, Ariel dropped the reeds, happily running over them on her bare feet. She walked side by side with her new friend.

“You are so strange.” She stated, staring up at Adam with her large, blue eyes. Adam furrowed his brow at her.

“Am I supposed to be impressed by such an observation?”

“No,” Ariel laughed. “It’s just—you’ve said more words to me in the past hour than you have in nearly two days of being here.”

Adam reddened, but he pretended it was the excursion of walking that winded him. “Spare me.”

Ariel laughed again but jeered him no more.

The long walk back to the castle seemed much shorter with company to keep.

When Belle returned from talking with Eric, she nearly jumped at the shadow looming near the guest room door. It was Adam, looking far worse for wear. His long hair hung, clinging to his face. A day without a shave had already dotted his jaw and neck with stubble. And… he had seaweed in his hair…?

She nearly ran into his arms, wrapping her hands around his waist. She felt him tense. “Are you covered in sand? Where did you go? What have you—”

“I ran into some trouble with Ariel…” Adam explained. “I found her at the beach as I went walking and we talked.”
Belle pulled away, her emotions fighting between relief, confusion, and remorse. “Adam, I should I have went looking for you.”

He peered down at her, sand still dusting his face. His eyes beheld her lovingly. “Nonsense. I was wrong.” He glanced down at himself, the dirt, the sand, the throbbing of his back, and gave an uncomfortable sigh, and returned to Belle again. “I do believe I have found what I deserved?”

“I’m not so sure—did you pick a fight with the ocean as well?” Belle mused. She pulled him into the room and hugged him once more. “I don’t believe that is a wise fight.”

“No, it was not—but would you believe that tiny woman threw sand at me?” Adam laughed, but the sound felt painful. “No. She was quite surprising.” He looked at Belle somberly. “I was wrong, my dear.”

“And you…apologized?”

“Yes. And she accepted. We actually had a nice time walking back through the woods. She,” He laughed sorely again, “She even wanted to bring you some fancy weeds she thought flowers. An amateur’s mistake.”

Belle slowly considered all he was telling her. “A ‘nice time’? You? With someone else?”

Adam groaned in exasperation. “If you are to mock me at least let me be comfortable.”

Belle let him go, and Adam hurried to change himself from half dry, half sanded, half drowned clothes into his bedclothes. He laid down over the bed without complaint, clad only in a pair of loose pants. He looked up at Belle in content. “There. Go on, then, on with your jests.”

“Adam,” Belle smiled warmly, coming to his side. She pulled herself onto the bed to pull back the wet hair from his face. “I’m proud of you. And for Ariel, too, for putting up a fight with you. Tell me, how did the ocean get involved?”

Adam quieted, the lightness gone from his face. He almost looked unsure himself. “I’m not sure entirely what happened but… I have good reason to think that girl is somehow tied to the sea.”

“What?” Belle dropped her voice into a whisper. “What—you cannot mean—like magic?”

Adam stared at his wife’s face very seriously. “I don’t know, Belle, but Ariel made that water move. It felt like it was crushing me—here, do you want proof?” He turned, and Belle studied the deep, green bruise that rested at the base of his spine. She ran a hand over it and he pulled away in pain. “I’m not sure, Belle.” It was all Adam had to go on.

“She didn’t try to hurt you, surely?”

“No—no, she was just upset.” Adam heaved a sigh, resting his head on his arms. “As she should be. Look, the girl is of no concern to me now, magic or not. Now you tell me, did Eric say anything?”

Belle gave a soft, gentle stroke along his hairline, thinking.

“He was that angry, was he?” Adam presumed, his voice coarse. He tried to clear it but the attempt only made him cough. “I do imagine he’ll be taking one of those pretty swords of his into my side?”
“No…he was actually very reasonable.”

“Hm?”

“He said,” Belle’s voice tightened in shame. “That this was nothing new.”

Adam made a sound low in his chest. Belle understood him without the need for words. Ariel must have said something similar. They were both silent in their thoughts, Belle still moving her fingers through his hair…

But Eric did say something Belle was fighting to understand…

“Adam,” Belle said softly. “I wanted to talk to you about something difficult for me. Something Eric said…”

But Adam had nothing more to say. He was stretched out long over the covers of the bed, his head resting on his arms, burrowing into Belle’s side, dead asleep. The act of walking all night and through near a day caught up to him. Belle stopped herself.

Soon. They would talk about this soon. She promised herself this. Even as they moved onto other royals to meet. She stared at her husband’s sleeping face and tried to see the dangerous man Eric had seen, but he was not there. Adam was not dangerous—not to her, to them, to anyone.

Belle stared into the morning light of the room, avoiding the shadows casted along the floor.

“I love you,” She whispered, stroking through his hair once more with Adam’s quiet breathing her only answer.

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**AN:** Thank you all for enjoying! I’ve gotten so many follows and favourites that you guys made me swoon. If you have a spare moment, please leave a review, as your words help me understand what is working and what you guys want to see next! Thank you!
Fire. The world was a burning, raging, red.

Adam awoke at once to the smell of sulfur. He could taste it in his mouth, the chalky, smothering smoky fingers spilling into lung, bristling down into his chest. He staggered to the window. Thick plumes of ashy flames had created smoldering tunnels into the sky. Each a burning, helpless dot in the distance. Adam knew each marking was a fishing village just along the bay. Even at such a distance, Adam could hear the people screaming.

Adam took the stairs three at a time, sprinting down slick stone and onto the roads, a racing shadow hounding through the stormy air. It was impossible to see through the sheets of rain. The paths were swollen with water, river-like pools as black as the night. They looked endless if Adam dared to step into one, but he pressed on. A hurricane roared from the east, growling and clawing at the bending earth, the mouth of the wind screaming in wrath as it decimated the towns below.

Adam twisted his hair from his eyes, bending forward until he was on all fours. He leaped broken fences, twisted trails, climbed felled trees. Nothing could stop him. Nothing could keep him from where he wanted to go.

Then, without warning, a shredded blast of light split Adam's sight, blinding him. He lost all footing, smashing into the gravel until he felt something solid strike him right along his wounded back. 

*Clic-lack.*

A singular sound made the world come to a perfect, frozen halt.

A trigger. The sharp, bitter sound of a pistol. Its muzzle right between his shoulder blades.

Adam could never forget the feeling of guns.

"Stop right there," a voice commanded.

Adam felt himself tremble in the rain. He dared himself to look but he refused his eyes to believe. He knew that voice. His heart shuddered in his breast. Dark hair. Blue eyes. A pistol heavy in one hand.

"Eric?" Adam asked, his voice afraid. "Your people are dying."

The Prince responded in a coaxing way, his smile open as if in ecstasy. Adam felt the cold iron dig into his back. He could smell the stinging of sweat, the heat of more bodies admixed the staggered breathing of horses. There were other men. Adam looked all around him and, between raging storm and blind empty roads, he could see the fiery torches in the distance. Adam had no choice. He was outnumbered.

Adam took flight, flaring his lungs harder, his eyes narrowed into slits. The villages were still burning just out of reach.

But no matter how far he ran. No matter how much he willed his body to run, until he felt his skin shredding under the earth, he could not escape Eric.
The Prince of Denmark stormed over the winds, his hands glistening with rain. A pistol held out before him without a hint of regret. He looked unhinged, nearly mad, with his blue eyes sparkling with an untapped need.

Adam staggered forward, hitting the forest floor, scrambling to his feet again before Eric fired.

A shock of fire along his back. Adam cried out, dashing to the floor again, wounded. He turned to look up into the eyes of his personal killer, teeth bared, snarling in the back of his throat.

Eric looked unmoved. He produced a new pistol from his belt. Adam watched as Eric's finger locked over the hammer.

Along the heat of the forest floor, Adam shifted backwards, hands under him, crawling away, but Eric shouldered forward, the pistol pointed straight to Adam's chest. The rain hissed, rippling away leaves and branches, scattering the screams from the villages below into a heady, unearthly silence.

Eric's once friendly face was set grimly. Adam watched him cry out into the wind, but Adam could not hear what he screamed.

Eric lunged. The trill of agony rattled the teeth in Adam's jaw from the swing, taking the full force of the blow to the side of his head. He tasted blood in his mouth. His fingers tightened into the moist earth beneath him, squeezing to block out the pain.

He did not need to know what Eric said. The look of murder on his face said it all. The pistol was raised again, barrel right to Adam's forehead. Strewn along the debris, Adam did not bother to move. He went limp, allowing the smoke, rain, wind to overpower him. He could not bring himself to speak.

For he had no proper lips. No human tongue. No way to beg for his life. Adam brought his hands up over his face to see what he had always known: his claws had return, still such sharp, terrible things. His nose brought in the spoils of death, skin burning off of bodies, thunder cracking open the heart of trees, all sweltering, all dying.

He wheezed under a tremendous weight brought down upon his neck. Eric's boot, twisting over his windpipe. Adam cried out in desperation but the sound that ripped from his jaws was a horrible, heart-stopping roar. He tried to twist away but he was trapped under Eric's eyes—those eyes that said it all. Everything Adam had tried to will away.

I see you, Beast. The hunter's eyes said, pistol to Adam's forehead. I know what you are.

Eric knew. Adam felt the fight leaving his body, breathless, senseless, dragging himself into darkness.

He knew.

Adam snapped his eyes closed, seeking the shelter that he fought to find inside his mind, but he was melt with six other guns, each pointed along his body, each held by men with familiar faces. But Adam no longer cared.

For his claws had returned to him. Even in his dreams, Adam was never the last one to die.

Blood filled his mouth. Men cried out in horror as their flesh and muscle slithered from their bodies by the Beast's hands. He felt nothing but fury. He wanted death. He wanted it more with every passing hour. He wanted them all to die in a squall of endless, soulless, fire. He fought and clawed until each man lay dead. He lifted a paw to lick the blood from his claws. It tasted so fresh. The men
were dead, piled at his feet.

Everyone but Eric.

Is it over? Adam thought, his chest heaving. Are you here to kill me?

But the Prince did not answer him. Eric's body melted, becoming shadows, becoming bones, and finally, becoming the Enchantress. She was still as beautiful as she had been all those years ago. Beautiful and skinless. She floated towards Adam, her head a glowing skull. She was Death. Adam swallowed thickly. Death was calm. Death was ever closer.

The pistol rose one final time.

Let the world be done with me, Adam thought. The pistol fired.

He shuddered, fell back, and the world fell with him.

Adam panted awake. The bed was cold. He was shivering, disturbed, and quite alone. The moonlight pouring through the windows of the bedroom tilted his vision silver and blue. Adam ripped off the sheets that had covered him, hands flying to check over his body. He had no bullet wounds, no bruises from his attackers. No fur, either.

He willed his breathing to slow, forcing air through his nose and out of his mouth. He felt silly, but he could not help but to check his face as well. He ran his fingertips over his teeth, finding only his human jaw, his human canines, however overly sharp they might look to others.

He pulled himself to his feet but felt the room tilt from under him. He fell to the bedroom floor. His skin felt a fire. His legs were weak. The room spun faintly. Adam clenched his eyes tight, trying not to cry out in fear, trying not to let anyone know. He closed his eyes and tried to think of Belle.

Belle. Belle.

A voice said, "You're burning up."

Belle?

She was there. Or, at least, Adam prayed she was.

Their hands felt like ice, the kind so cold that it, too, burned his skin. "It's okay. I'm here, I'm here, love."

Her voice was unmistakable. It was Belle. Adam found instant relief, the sound pathetic in his throat. He could not have whimpered to know she was there. He never whimpered.

"I'm dying?" Adam managed hoarsely. Those two tiny words, a struggle.

"No, you're going to be fine," Belle soothed, but her hands hurt him. "You're so dramatic, my love."

He swallowed, his throat a-flame. "I killed them, Belle."

"What?" Belle asked him gently. She had pulled him from the floor, back onto the bed. "Adam, no one has been in here but me. You had a nightmare my darling."

He closed his eyes. A dream made sense. A dream, perhaps. A dream he wanted it to be.

"A dream?"
"Yes," She lulled. "Go back to sleep. I'm here. I'm not leaving you."

Adam clung to her, his entire body trembling. His body raged on in fever. He could not feel the tears dripping along his cheeks, fading into her skirts. Don't leave me. He thought feebly. Don't leave me alone. I am not myself. I don't want to die alone.

He closed his eyes and willed himself to not see the Deathly Enchantress any longer.

At the docks, Adam stared out into the gentle sea. The sun at mid-day was coating frothing of the waves in a deep, gem-like blue. Belle looked uneasy as the many servants of Eric and Ariel's castle moved parcel after parcel of luggage into the hull of the ship. She glanced at Adam, offering her hand, which he took without hesitation. They had decided to say nothing of the long night before. They both felt they had troubled this kingdom enough. Adam's fever had broken just before dawn. He seemed strong enough to go on, but Belle remained wary.

Ariel stood close by, eyeing the ship with a professional eye. She turned to the pair, allowing a smile. "You two do make a very handsome couple. With Belle the better half, of course."

Belle blushed, the color to her cheeks all the more radiant. "You tease me."

Adam give a small smile to Ariel. "And you wound me."

"I would think so, Adam," Ariel replied, her small tongue sticking out. She padded to Eric's side. The young man had placed his hand over the wood of the ship in thought. "Are you going to tell them of our parting gift, Eric?"

Belle looked surprised. "No—please, you shouldn't!"

Eric smiled good naturedly between Belle and Adam both, careful to not hold Adam's eyes for too long. For all that had happened, Adam seemed, if in regards to Eric alone, terribly uncomfortable to be too close. Eric took the sign to stay away with pleasure. The man looked ill, paler, more tightly wound than he had when he first arrived, and Eric felt no need to collect a cold so soon.

"It's nothing much. It's just a bottle of wine." He plunked up the bottle from the lot, holding out the neck of it to Adam with poise. Adam dropped Belle's hand to grasp the gift. "If you keep it until you reach Corona I would suggest showing it to Eugene."

A look of intrigue crossed Belle's face but she said nothing.

"Thank you," Adam responded brusquely. He felt awkward with nothing to offer in return.

"I wish you both a safe journey. Perhaps Ariel and I shall travel to visit you both soon." Eric continued cordially. "It was a pleasure to host you both."

Adam forced a smile. "Thank you, Eric."

Belle grasped Eric's hand in hers, squeezing his fingers softly. "Thank you for a lovely time. We will write."

"Oh, I know you will," Ariel said pointedly, her eyes twinkling at Adam. Adam flickered his eyes away, unwilling to play her games this close to freedom. At this, Ariel leap forward, hugging Adam tightly before she let go. Surprised, Adam hoped he had not flinched away. He righted himself once more, his face red. "Oh come off it," Ariel said knowingly. She settled herself into Eric's arm. "Be safe. And Belle, thank you."
"Merci beaucoup," Belle answered happily. She took Adam's fingers to interlock them with her own. "Shall we?"

"Lead the way," Adam returned, already feeling much better with his back to Ariel and Eric, his eyes on Belle alone.

They returned to their ship, setting their course for Corona. When Adam took to their sleeping quarters, he removed his jacket to find a note stuffed into the pocket. He pulled it out gently, scanning the paper for answers. It was in a feminine hand and, while he could not even hope to read the Danish, cursive prose, Adam did have the sense to recognize one word: Rapunzel.

A note to the Princess of Corona? Adam puzzled over what it could mean. He turned it over gingerly in his hands before pocketing it once again. He would ask Belle later what it meant. A feminine hand, and it certainly was not Belle's…Ariel did hug him. Another of her schemes?

Alone, Adam allowed himself a slight chuckle at Ariel's sleight of hand. She was a clever girl. He would give her that. He returned to the upper deck to breathe in the salt air. The world always seemed better when it was just Belle and himself. Why couldn't it just stay that way?

"Adam," Belle greeted him. "Isn't today beautiful for traveling?"

"Yes," He said simply. Then, he turned to her in jest. "Let us never go back there, oui?"

"Adam," Belle chided shortly, attempting not to laugh. "You are terrible."

"You accepted my hand, my dear. Blame is shared between two."

"You're terrible," Belle said playfully. "But I think I love you for it."

Adam grinned at Belle, watching her positively glowing in the sunlight. "Are you quite certain?"

"Perhaps," Belle said lightly, shouldering Adam with a gentle bump before returning to her maps. "I did say I think. Maybe not today," she returned wittily, giving Adam a wave before heading below.

Adam smirked at her before he turned back to the ocean.

Corona would not be far now.

AN: THE FORESHADOWING CONTINUEEEESS.
A movement fluttered from the corner of Belle’s vision, lifting her out of sleep. Adam’s fingers had caught the strains of her dark brown hair between his index and pointer fingers. He twisted the hair back and forth, his eyes wide and glistening in the early morning light.

Belle pulled away gently, reaching up to cup his face in her hands. His eyes held hers carefully, his mouth tight.

“Good morning,” he rumbled expectantly.

“Good morning,” Belle said softly. “You're up before me? I'm impressed.”

Adam smiled faintly. “What is the expression? Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and...scorned by his wife?”

“You tease,” she said quickly as she pulled him in for a kiss, thumbs planted through his hair, pinning him. “Before we are off to the docks,” Belle held the words in her mouth between kisses. “I need to talk to you. It's been bothering me and I need to know.”

Adam stopped, his words hesitant. “You wish to have this conversation now?” He held her face in one hand, memorizing her in the morning light. He did not wish to let this go. His heart felt heavy but he attempted lightness. “I much prefer the kissing, if I have any say in this matter.”

“Adam,” Belle tested. Then she carried on. “Do you...fancy the idea of fighting?”

He looked perplexed. “In what way?”

“Eric,” Belle recalled anxiously. “He made a request from you. To fight alongside him in a possible pirate raid. Did you agree to this?”

Adam settled back along his pillow, eyes to the ceiling of the sleeping quarters of their ship. “I hadn't realized you had been told.”

“He said...you wanted to do this.”

Adam kitted his brows, trying not to let how badly he felt exposed, so close to the nightmare before, where Eric’s boot had pinned his lifeblood into the grasses. Right now, Adam had no wish to be near anything related to that frenzy of violence, now with Belle lying beside him, the hazy scent of her hair filling his head. “I...simply proposed that if I could help, I would.”

“But do you want this? To apart of Eric’s hunting party?” Belle bit her lip in distress. “I know…” She laced her fingers along his chin, asking Adam to look at her. “I know this has been so difficult for you. But I want you know how happy I am to be with you, doing this. I couldn't ask for more in my life.”

**Sunlight**

**AN:** I so hope you lovely readers are having as much fun as I am! I apologize if this chapter seems to cut off a little short. The truth is, I have the other parts already written out, but I want to keep the chapters as consistent in length as I can so….a sneak treat for tomorrow, then? *WINK*
He allowed his head to move, but he held his withdrawal.

She calmed. “I just hope you can talk to me about what has been happening lately. I thought maybe it was because of me. Forcing you through this too quickly. I am so sorry if I am. Sometimes,” She lowered her head. “I feel as if this has been all my fault.”

Adam answered this by kissing her temples, first the left, then the right. “Believe me, I shall tell you when I have fully decided my answer. Right now there are larger matters at hand—like preforming well for my kingdom before hurrying off to get myself killed.”

“You promise?”

“Of course, my dear.”

Belle scrutinized his face. She reached up to suddenly touch his forehead, unconvinced. “And with how you've been feeling lately...”

Adam caught her hand, folding her fingers to give her knuckles a kiss. “I am feeling much better, Belle. Surely it isn't uncommon for one to feel unwell in a new place? New people, new airs... I did spend ten years locking myself away in one single place, after all.”

She relaxed. “Yes, that is true…but I just want you to know, you're not—” She cut herself off as his sharp eyes studied her.

“I am not what?” Adam allured slowly, his voice deep and cautious.

“You do not have to be afraid, Adam.” Belle finished meaningfully. “I will never let anything happen to you.”

Adam could feel himself beginning to sweat, with her face this close, her words so sincere. “Do you think me cowardly?”

“No, never! That isn't what I said! I only worry that you still feel you're trapped once more. And with that nightmare, with what you said.” Her stomach felt as if it were made of ice to say it. “Who did you kill in your dream?”

“Everyone,” Adam said expressionlessly. “Everyone but Eric.”

“Eric?” Belle gasped in shock.

“He was hunting me!” Adam shot up at the tone of horror in her voice, his own rising at the confession. He had not planned it this way, but she was impossible to avoid for long. “He and those terrible dogs that he calls friends! I tried to tell them, Belle, I tried, but I had no mouth! I was not human! I was myself once more! What decision did I have, if not to lay down and die? Even that bloody Enchantress—!”

“The Enchantress?” Belle tried to steady him, an arm resting over his, muscles coiling tight as he stared into empty space.

“She...she was there.” Adam resumed. “And I...I...killed them all.” He closed his eyes, unable to face her. “I tried to escape. I tried to reason. I...”

“Adam, you are no longer a Beast. We have broken the curse,” She held his face in her hands, pressing her forehead to his. “You would never hurt anyone. You were threatened. You have a right protect yourself.”
“Protect.” Adam related sadly. “How do you make my deeds sound so honorable? You make me feel more human than I have in years…Yes…I wanted to protect you. My kingdom. My mother. But I did not stop.” He lowered himself in shame as the whisper of his sins left him. “I did not want to stop killing.”

Belle placed a kiss to his forehead, clammy and cold. “Nightmares often lead to mournful places. Please, don’t think so lowly of yourself.”

Adam opened his eyes to take in the hurt expression over Belle’s face. “I am not sure any more about what it is that is happening to me.”

“Just stay with me,” Belle grasped his hands and returned his kisses there in kind. “Just let me inside of that mind of yours.”

Adam leaned to rest against her, attempting to open his fears up with a shaking voice.

“I was a game, Belle. I could see it in their eyes... a game for rich, young men to play, to strike the heart of what they fear...I try, you cannot imagine how hard I try, but Belle...if I cannot hide my nature. I am human again, my love, but am I righteous? Have I always been this way?” He trailed away, feeling thin.

It hurt to be this honest with her.

“You have a good soul.” Belle countered evenly. “That has never changed, not a once, even as a Beast. I fell for you before any spell, before I knew of any curse of fate. Have you forgotten?”

*Only with you do I feel like a man that could be more than he was meant to be,* Adam thought. He simply offered a kiss to her delicate cheek.

“I have not forgotten a moment of it,” Adam sighed. “And that is what I feed into.” He looked at her in tremendous misery. “And how long before you are punished for my paranoia? My misdeeds, my self-doubt?”

“Punished?” Belle hushed the word. Her stomach turned to water. “Is that what you think of all of this?”

“And if they find out what I once was,” Adam continued, his voice rising in passion. “Am I to live in this terror of what will happen to us? To you? My Belle…” He could barely say the words. “Another witch to hunt?”

“Stop it,” Belle snapped. Her head swam, her own headache over his words. Her heart trembled in her chest to hear him suppose the idea they were an object to be slain. “Please, stop.” She pressed her hands over his chest as if to heal the darkness there inside of him. “Please… I won’t hear any more of this.”

Adam felt as if she had slapped him. “I am sorry. You asked to know my thoughts.” He paused, staring down at her through half-lidded eyes. “I feel poisoned to think them…but they never cease.”

“You’re fine,” She willed this into her heart. She laid down on his chest as if to smother him in the idea. “We’re going to be fine.” She curled her arms around his neck, her face hidden against his shoulder. She said nothing more.

Adam wrapped his arms around her tight. He held her long into the morning, listening to her breathe.
They were caught in unspoken, passionate impasse. But one thing was rightfully certain:

If Belle still wanted to go on, the world could not be done with him yet. Adam promised himself this.

A man and woman curiously strained their eyes to stare at Belle and Adam as their ship approached safe harbor—the woman waving happily while the man beside her gave a mock salute in greeting, long before their boat had reached the docks. Already, the woman was calling from the docks, running barefoot up the wooden platforms until she reached the furthest edge, leaning over. Belle lifted a hand to wave in greeting.

Adam ducked his head back down, already nervous, checking his pockets as if he were seeking something long lost. Should he wave now or later? Was it already too late? Too soon? How long should one wave their hand? He stared only at the planks beneath him, desperate for the correct answers. They never arrived. His hand once more spied the aloof letter, folded neatly to his side. Ah, of course. He had forgotten. He pushed it away for now, focusing himself on Belle.

“Are you ready?” Belle asked him, offering her hand.

“Is one ever truly ready?” Adam offered back, attempting wit but sensing he had said nothing truly brilliant.

Belle, always there to make him feel less small, somehow seemed amused. “Do you wish me to go ahead for greetings? Why don’t you look around? Corona is absolutely gorgeous. I’ve read all about it.”

Adam took this offered gratefully, letting Belle spring ahead of him. She was already half up the walk before he could blink, jumping up and down with the woman—a right, sliver of a thing with her hair cut sprite length to her chin. Rapunzel, Adam wagered a bet. They met hands and hugged sincerely, as if they were old friends.

Wait, were they old friends? Adam felt all the more alarmed. Belle had been doing some serious amount of writing but this was all to Adam’s failure. He could hardly read the language he spoke. What was he to know of Belle’s companions? He felt that letter in his pocket like a stone, feeling suddenly unsure. God, help him through this day.

The sun, blistering and smoldering above the city, hung high in the afternoon sky. Adam followed suit not long after, pausing to admire the long lengths of shadow that gave relief from the sun. He sought out to know how this was managed and found himself studying the sheer immensity, the grandeur of the kingdom before them in open awe.

A huge, impressive symbol of the sun caressed the gardens through the gates at the dock. It was impossible to miss. The statue was held aloft in a massive centerpiece of stone, carved by hand, devotedly set to reflect the passing of the hour. Shadows tilted through the square open holes, back onto the boats, sweeping into the blue, gentle water swishing below their feet. It was huge, hospitable, and glittering as well. Gems had been set, like stained glass inside the church of Notre Dame, with each hour reflecting a new color. The color now appeared a lovely, feminine pink.

Of course, Adam allowed himself a moment of reprieve. Even the shadows are lovely in Corona.
to glance up as well, mimicking his pose.

“Two o’clock in the afternoon,” the man said. “Bah, so close yet so far. The Snuggly Duckling won’t be open for three more hours. And yet, here I am, without a cold ale to welcome you.” His dark eyes glanced to Adam’s, giving him a once over, then he retuned nonchalantly to the statue. “Let’s say we take it as a sign?” He turned quickly, punctuating his timing with his arms as they pointed out the steps to his next few words. “You get in your boat, head back out for a few miles, and then I’ll pretend to meet you again, happily drunk.”

Adam blinked, taking in the man before him. He was slender in build but had a strong looking face with a strangely angular nose. His facial hair was dark as well, groomed along his jaw. His eyes, while dark, sparkled with sarcasm.

“I—I’m sorry?” Adam began, perturbed at how to respond so causally.

The man broke into a large, bright grin that seemed too big for his face. “Name’s Flynn Rider.” He held out his hand, grasping Adam’s without much problem or care. “And I was only half kidding about the whole beer thing.”

Adam attempted to follow as reportedly as he could. “My name is Adam. I am newly appointed king due to my birthright and my father’s provinces in France. I have traveled here to seek a trade alliance, alongside my wife, Belle, and I am looking for the princess of this kingdom.”

This Rider fellow stared at him quite incredulously. “Wow. Did you, uh, practice that speech the whole way?”

Adam opened his mouth a little ways, concerned. “I prefer to be appropriately well informed.”

Flynn Rider continued his stare. “Uh…appropriate. Right.” He dragged the beginning ‘r’ for the word ‘right’ as he glanced around. Adam followed his stare but saw nothing unusual. “Uh, yeah. Hey, let me take you to that princess then, okay?”

“Very well,” Adam said cautiously, keeping a short distance between the animated man and himself. He was wearing rather dirty looking clothes—boots for hiking, a blue vest, white undershirt, tan pants, meager in design. A commoner perhaps?

Rider glanced behind a few times, his face open in debate. Adam had a feeling this man couldn’t hide what he was thinking to save his life. But whatever it was that Rider was questioning, he turned to face the two women—and a handful of regal looking guards chatting loudly by the dock. Once they approached, Adam got a better view of the proposed princess. It was, indeed, the woman he had spotted from a distance away.

She was remarkably small, beyond Ariel. Her entire frame reminded Adam of fairy tales his mother once read to him as a child. Her hair was brown, cut short, and her eyes glowed like the green glass through the sunrays.

“Adam—I am so honored to finally meet you in person. Belle has told me so much.”

“Has she?” Adam slid a glance at his wife, who artfully avoided his gaze, feeling out of place. He attempted a bow, less stiffly than usual. “The pleasure is mine, princess.”

“Rapunzel.” She corrected brightly, “Please. I certainly won’t be calling you by your title this entire
time. We’re burning day light as it is!”

“I assume this man is some kind of personal assistant? Perhaps your majordomo?” Adam intoned, motioning to the man that he led him here.

To Adam’s complete surprise, Flynn Rider broke out into a peel of laughter.

And, again to Adam’s surprise, the princess rebuked as if insulted.

“Eugene!” Rapunzel flared. “What did you say to Adam?!”

Rider threw up his hands in defense, his expression innocent. “Nothing! Nothing! I—I greeted him! Just like you asked!”

“I put trust in Eugene to not, for once, tease our company but he continues to do so without fail. I am sorry!”

Belle could not control her laughter. She placed a hand over Adam’s arm. “Adam, who did you think this was?”

Adam felt himself positively blush in mortification. He quickly scuttled his eyes between princess and this—ragamuffin, if Adam had to choose an adjective—man before him. “I—I—who are you?”

“Hey, just to make things even, I’ll have you know: I tricked Kristoff for two weeks straight into calling me Flynn before Blondie here ruined my fun.” The newly revealed Eugene gave a short, airily suggestive glance to the princess who seemed, at first stolid, then she, too, laughed.

“Okay, that was a little funny.” Rapunzel continued, but she curtsied anyhow, careful to not trample over Adam’s pride further. “Forgive him, Adam. He’s…incorrigible.”

“Blonde? Adam thought, studying the princess.

“Okay, was a little funny.” Rapunzel continued, but she curtsied anyhow, careful to not trample over Adam’s pride further. “Forgive him, Adam. He’s…incorrigible.”

“Irresponsible,” Eugene amended with a deliberate nod, as if relating the tales of his own crimes.

“Incomprehensible,” Rapunzel returned.

“Irredeemable,” he quipped back.

“I-n—in—uh! Oh, shut up, you!” Rapunzel struggled for a moment before her pixie-like features gave in. “Okay. You win this one.”
“Ah, it was inevitable that I would, Princess,” Eugene shrugged, giving Rapunzel one of those charming smiles as he scooped her up to twirl her around. Adam felt overwhelmed between the banter of them both. Thankfully, Belle fell in beside him, grasping his hand in hers.

“Come on! I would adore to show you some of today’s Sunlight Festival before we settle in!” Rapunzel strode on, sure footed without her shoes, giving Eugene a playful push to get him away from her.

The two strode ahead, giggling in their own madness that Adam felt his head swimming over.

Belle gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “How are you holding up?”

Adam lowered his voice as to not be overheard. “I’m not sure—do I look dead enough yet? Will that man leave me be if I pretend?”

“Adam,” Belle reprimanded affectionately. “Rapunzel thinks you’re sweet. And Eugene is happy to have you here.”

“I noticed that Rapunzel already knows me.” Adam shot a suspicious look at Belle.

Belle smiled coyly. “Mhm.”

“And, pray tell, what did you say about me?”

“Only the good parts,” Belle assured. She lifted herself on the tips of her toes to give Adam a chaste, innocent kiss on the cheek.


The couples drifted further into Corona, with the afternoon sun sinking none too far off in the pleasant sky…
The sun was, even when not in the sky, indeed, everywhere one looked in Corona.

Flags of a light purple littered the grounds. Sun-pattered lanterns peppered the bends and roofing. Sun pattered foods and dishes, the market benches, the skirts of the people—and there were innumerable amounts of them. Adam kept close to Belle's side, swallowing his growing unease at the swarms of people all around.

Belle pointed out the architecture she enjoyed best—the towering, smooth plated stones warming the walls of every building. The purple and pink hues that clung to everything. How the greenery popped with a liveness unseen in Adam's dark, emerald forest. And the people, still, without pause, without warning, they ran to their princess—who walked without guards—some dropping to their feet, others crying out in delight—delight—to see her pass.

Adam watched with little comfort at how Rapunzel took private pleasure in each separate conversation she had with those less lowly around her. Despite how lovely it looked on outward viewing, no matter how badly he wanted to bring prosperity to his people, Adam's skin crawled at the idea of being touched by so many…

But yet, if there was something uncannily fortunate about the people of Rapunzel's kingdom, it was the tanned, vigorous glow to every citizens' skin. Even the most uncommonly people floating about the plazas, the stalls, the palace itself, (open to the public between sunrise and sunset. Adam could dare not imagine such a sign outside his gardens, let alone his own home.) it was no trick of the sun.

Unquestionably, the people of Corona each looked fantastically healthy.

Truly, Adam could not help but stare at every person once he took notice. The twisting paths, the maypole of the festival giving way to a crowd of performances—this way—that! The poorest of Corona had not a trace of illness. No coughing from the alleys, no broken limps, no smell of disease burning his nostrils.

And no hint of the plague.

Adam knew Corona was an isolated nation, but the plague had killed so many in its outbreak…surely, even in this dreamlike place, such a grasping, chilling disease still had its icy fingers along the kingdom's edges?

Adam held this in the back of his mind. If there was anything to know from this beautiful kingdom, it was the medicine that was crafted here, its death-stopping properties, and how he might hope to achieve them for his kingdom's own good.

They walked on, until the sun beating down upon their backs slid, cooler, colder. The paper lanterns blinked among the endless stars above, settling mocking rounds in the shape of the sun in stark shadows over the faces of anyone standing under the stalls.

It was here, between the small talk of other locals, Adam heard a short whistle to his left. He dropped his inspection of a pink wild flower, lolling its petals from the stall (too much sunlight, fit to die soon,
a waste, the florist had no real sense of ability to thrive her crop, pathetic) and turned to meet the dark playful eyes of that Rider person. He took a step back, weary.

No, Adam had to correct himself, his name was... "Eugene."

"Bingo, buddy! Hey! So, can you guess that time it is?"

Adam glanced for help from the women, but now Rapunzel had tempted Belle into the final dance of the evening, dazzling between the rows of other joyous people, yellow flowers braided into her dark, volumous hair.

When he did not answer, Eugene stood a tad closer, looping an arm over his shoulder in comradery. "It's about six o'clock! And! It's time! To go! To! The best spot in all of Corona!"

Ugh. Adam thought, his mood sinking. He was having a pleasant enough time just watching.

Watching was a proper step, a foolproof plan to keep to himself and not have to deal with anyone. He had stood in the back shadows, rolling flowers between his fingertips calmingly, waiting for the next moment to catch Belle's eye, the sheer happiness shining there, and, occasionally, Rapunzel, the tiny woman giving a large smile that Adam could not help but timidly return.

Adam did not smile at the excited look on Eugene's face.

"I thought the palace was the most extravagant sight? Aren't we going there soon?"

"What? Oh, well, yeah! I mean, of course! But that's so obvious!" He gave a slap to Adam's back, moving them along. "I'm talkin' local sights."

Locals. Adam felt his own heels digging into the ground beneath him. Why? Why did these things always happen to him?

"I don't think I—"

"Am totally prepared to see the most thrilling entertainment of this evening?" Eugene finished for him, his dark eyebrow flickering. "No, my friend. You most definitely are not. But that's why I'm here!"

"Eugene!" Rapunzel dizzied herself from the dancing, flouncing over to throw herself into his arms, stumbling them both backwards. "Where are you sneaking Adam off to?"

He gave her a sly look. "The best place in Corona, Princess."

Without missing a beat, Rapunzel's face absolutely lit up. "Oh my gosh! The Snuggly Duckling!" She spun around on her heels gracefully to grasp Adam's arm. "Ohmygosh, you'll love it! Everyone in there is so nice!"

"...Great." Adam tried to save face. His expression felt frozen into place. He had to keep this up, perhaps the whole night through, unable to risk yet another wonderful day of his wife's...ruined, because of his temper. He could do this. He glanced back at Belle, giving a weak wave of his fingers as she spun, laughing as the music took on a fantastic, incomprehensible beat. Soon, she faded from view.

And then, it was just himself and Eugene, walking through the woods.

The best place in all of Corona? Adam mused. That didn't sound so bad. He could stand to not be so judgmental of everyone he met. He fixed his teeth into a smile. He checked the buttons running
down his sides, his pockets, scraping his fingernails along the letter from Ariel…oh.

If Ariel could want to keep his company of sorts, maybe others wouldn't be so bad.

He could do this.

Maybe.

When Eugene turned back to him check on him, Adam watched as the smaller man give a little jump, flying his eyes to Adam's face and back to face forward again, as if in relief to not have to see Adam's snarl.

Adam dropped his smile, his lips sliding back to a natural, passive expression.

Never mind.

The Snuggly Duckling was a host upon itself.

"Rider!" A swirling mass of unruly voices screamed just inside the din of a small, horrible smelling little hole-in-the-wall in the middle of the backwoods.

"Youuu guys!" Eugene called back, equally at home. Eugene wasn't shy to grab Adam and himself a table at the back, ordering two drinks of—Adam didn't bother to remember the name. Eugene had a charismatic turn of phrase—Adam could understand that. His sense of humor was another battle entirely.

"A pub." Adam deadpanned.

"The best place in all of Corona," Eugene elated, unobservant to Adam's scowl.

"That piano player is missing a hand." Adam enlightened, his tone short.

"Yeah, isn't he incredible though?" Eugene lifted his flagon. "YOU SHINE ON, YOU AMAZING, PIANO PLAYING PILLAGER, YOU!" He called into the bustle of the bar—the heart of which Adam spied the grizzled faces of men that looked astonishingly morbid.

"Riiiiider!" They jeered back, jerking chairs, smashing plates—was…was someone in chains to the back wall? Adam leaned away from his stool in hopes of catching a better understanding…only to back into the arms of a huge, nasty looking man with tattoos slithering up his neck.

"Excusez moi," Adam replied curtly. He felt no need to pardon himself at all but he would allow the mistake to fall where it may.

The man looked on in disbelieve. "What did you just call me, pretty boy?"

Adam flashed his eyes to meet the man glowering before him. From under the table, his hands made fists.

"I said, pardon me."

The man held Adam's eyes for a minute more…and the dashed a friendly grin. Adam felt a taken back. The brute then pulled up the closet seat he could find, slipping in between himself and Eugene, a massive wall of a man. "So this is the guy you've been so excited to meet, eh, Rider?" He gave a short, roguish look at Adam. "He doesn't seem too keen to be here, huh?"
Eugene looked guilty but the movement passed with all those faces upon him. He laughed with his own schemes. "I may have lied to him a little."

"The old 'best place' bit?"

"Yeah," Eugene snorted, bringing up his drink to take a swig. He gathered enough of his wits to study Adam's face. Wow, did this guy ever lighten up? He thought briskly. Should've ordered something stronger. "Do, you, um, like your drink?"

Adam glanced down at the untouched, watery, murk in his glass. He found himself ever so homesick for a real drink, like wine. Something with flavor and boldness. He took a single sniff and wrinkled his nose. I'd rather eat my own tongue, he thought, but held his mouth closed.

"I won't be drinking." Adam said dismissively. "But thank you." Polite. Be polite.

"He won't even drink with you?" Another man called from beyond the bar, one with a horrible, unsightly nose. "What a dip! Is he even a man? He certainly can talk a pretty talk—what, ale ain't good enough for Prince Charmin'?"

Adam felt himself being mocked and the hairs on his neck bristled. He crossed his arms, his jaw set tight. "I'm not surprised." He replied coldly. "I had little expectation for any of Rider's remarks."

Suddenly, the laugher died as easily as it had started. A few of the men, for all their bluntness, actually looked...hurt? Eugene swallowed thickly, unprepared for that kind of reaction. "Hey— whoa. Slow down." He tried to play off the insult. "These guys are just messing with you, buddy. Really. Don't take it so seriously."

Adam tilted his head, his eyes tight to Eugene. It was hard to take Eugene's word honestly. Whatever this place was, with whatever scum Eugene took pleasure in, Adam certainly felt his time was being wasted. "How long will this be taking?"

Eugene gave a quick shrug of his shoulders. "Well, I wanted to introduce you to a couple of my friends—" Eugene attempted to lighten the mood further, raising a hand to point out a few men in the room—"We got—let's see here—an! Attila! Gunter! Ay, Hooky, my main man! Don't think I didn't hear that piano melody ah-la-Mozart? Huh?" Eugene gave each a high five or handshake—each a towering hulk of a man as broad as the next.

"Friends?" Adam responded drily. He gave each of the men a look over, finding each in turn a horrible, unclean miscreant. "They don't even call you by your real name."


Friends...Adam pretended his lack of relating to Eugene's party was inconsequential. He, too, had friends, did he not? He stared down into his untouched drink, disturbed. Friends...like his staff. Like his servants? Trapped with him for years until they finally learned to like him? Friends like that?

"A pleasure to meet you all," Adam said coolly.

One of the men seemed excited by this, smacking Adam hard on the back, causing the entire table to shift over. The entire party thought it a riot. Thinking coarsely, Adam struggled to bring back the small talk of his younger days. In his youth, he could chat up an entire room without needing a sip of water. Now a days...

"What—ah, do you gentlemen do for pleasure around here?"
The bar quieted. Then, rancorous laughter. Even Eugene refused to explain. He simply shot down his drink. "Believe me, you aren't ready for any of that."

"Excuse me?"

"Just—just believe me. You don't want to know." Eugene snickered.

"Eh, dunno, Rider. I mean, look at his long hair! Think he has any interest in styling it?"

Eugene laughed knowingly. "He's a king, fellas! I think he already has someone for that."

Adam drew himself back, unsure of how to retort. Knowing names mattered not. He felt a stranger with each passing second. For some space, he turned around, taking in the rest of the smoky pub without much interest. The most stunning thing about the entire, rundown place was that a tree seemed to be growing right into the walls. But he felt something else misplaced. A strange feeling of being watched…

He studied the room thoroughly until he met the eyes of a dark stranger. Adam went to turn around out of habit to face those he was speaking with but the man continued to stare.

His eyes felt like they were burning two holes into the back of Adam's head.

Adam swallowed without relief. Unlike the kindlier men in the place, this man seemed…venomous.

It did not take long for Adam to sense the stranger's approach. He swaggered up to the table without a hint of shyness. He collected the long stares of the other strangers. Adam did not like how the lot of them seemed to not recognize the man. That meant…this was something new.

Something Eugene did not have planned in all his harebrained schemes.

Adam settled his eyes to watch the man from the corner of his vision. There was no mistaking it. The stranger only had eyes for him.

"You a king, eh? That what I heard?" The man asked, his voice smoky, a clipped British accent over his curious tone. He was a tall, thin man with angular cheekbones. His hair was a matted mess of long, beaded threads. On his head he had some type of outrageous captain's hat. "Don't look like any king I've ever seen—and mate, lemme tell you, I've met me some kings in my day."

Adam blinked, unmoved. "Who are you?"

The man flashed a sly, assuming, golden smile. Half of his teeth, most rotten, were glistening gold. "Oh—I'm not from 'round here." He paused, flickering his eyes to the others around, then back to Adam. "So back to that kingship. You don't happen to be where I think you're from, do you?"

"No. I never said where I was from, sir." Adam clipped his retort. Clearly, this man had no breeding in his blood.

"Aye, aye." The mad nodded keenly. "No, I figure not. But you've just…" he motioned with his hands in a strange, aloof way. "Somethin' about you, I suppose. I thought I'd met you before…"

"I assure you, we have not." Adam growled. This place was far too small to be trapped with a man that smelled of old fish and rum. "Are you finished with me, then?"

"Oy, you've got some bite, don't you, lad?" The man smiled in a fascinated way, as if Adam were something to procure, and not a person, equally awkward, seated in a bar. "Not too keen on
strangers?" He settled into a seat at a joining table. "How 'bout I not make myself a stranger, then?"
He outstretched a thin, boney hand, covered in rings. "My name is Jack…Captain Jack Sparrow, to
be more demure about me status, but…"

He paused here, as if he awaited the bar to sit back, stunned by his title. But no one moved.

Adam refused his hand.

"Jack Sparrow?" Eugene gawked, his smile loose on his face. "That's the worst pirate name I've ever
heard of. Hell, that's worse than Flynn Rider, and I stole that one from a children's book!" The bar
roared in laughter, but between the chaos of voices, Adam and Sparrow never took their eyes from
one another.

"Ah, but you have heard of me?" Sparrow returned. "Which means, you've heard of me?" His eyes
were dark like Eugene's, but they held so little light in them. There was no friendless or play. He kept
Adam intently in his contemplation. "Haven't you?"

"No." Adam snarled, his entire credence for the day dropped. "And once you leave, I'll forget you. I
don't associate with pirates, captain or no, and I don't take lightly to fools who waste my time."

"Yeah," Jack slithered the word out from his mouth. "You remind me of 'em, alright. May not be
him, but you could be lyin'." His dark eyes flashed. "Don't you got a pretty little thing somewhere?"
Sparrow presumed, his eyes tightening. "N' I don't mean jewels, mate. But some pretty little girl…
they say…she's a mermaid, yeah?" He paused, a hand to cup his own ear, as if listening. "Heard it
whispered…thought I'd come take a peeky."

Adam straightened in his chair. "You have me confused for someone else. I don't know what you
mean. I've never met such a woman."

"They say she grew herself a pair of gams…outta true love." Jack nodded, his voice low. "Ya think
she might know other magicks, eh?"

Adam held his stare unflinchingly. "If you are searching for such an obvious lie, I hope you don't go
beyond this isle. I've met a man that wants nothing better than to hang a pirate such as yourself."

"You said you're a king, ain't you?" Sparrow asked heatedly, rising from his seat. "Wih' royal
company to keep? Even if you aren't who you say you are, and even if I'm not who I say I am, I still
know what you know, and what you've told me is all I need. Not this island, then. Not you, perhaps.
But closer. I'm closer."

"What?" Eugene snapped in confusion. "What the hell? Alrighty, Jack, I'm a little tired of you."
Eugene glanced to his boys, each looking just about as done as Eugene had announced. "Boys…
take him outside for me, will you?"

The men rose, showing off their muscles, but Jack couldn't be bothered to look at them.

"Thought I'd drop into this bar for some local gossipy but…to meet someone like you…" Captain
Jack Sparrow suddenly lunged forward. His eyes were as black and cold as the night outside The
Snuggly Duckling. "Look at those eyes, lads." He seemed to be peering into a place where Adam
could not hide. A place that sent a cold droplet down his spine. "I've seen some terrible things,
mate…but what are you?"

Adam dared not pull away. Not with what Jack so dreadfully failed to hide. A loaded pistol. It was
what kept Eugene's friends in check. No one had loaded one fast enough. Not like Jack.
"If you think a gun will scare me you are horribly mistaken," Adam replied. "But if you wish to shoot then, do so." His blue eyes widened, then narrowed, soaking in nothing but the man before him. "I warn you not to toy with me any longer."

"Mm," Jack agreed. He locked his finger over the trigger, but held Adam's gaze, blue upon black. "Clever lil' bast—" But Jack's next words were lost in a cry of pain.

Adam twisted the gun from the man's hand, bringing the handle back to strike it across the face of the pirate before him. He quickly leapt for the man's arm, dragging up cloth to reveal the mark of his sins: a single P burned slowly into his arm. It was all the proof Adam needed to continue his assault. He brought the handle back down, striking it once more across Jack's face—again, and again—

Adam felt his blood heating up, boiling under the surface. His jaw ached. His fingers curled inward, frustrated at the weapon in his fragile human hands. *It was so much easier to use teeth—it was so much easier to use his claws—*

"Alright, alright! That's enough! I said he's had enough, Adam!" Adam felt arms gripping him back, dragging him away, his grip on Sparrow entirely lost. But the man looked less ready for the fight than he played to be. He was being hauled away by the other men in the bar—and what looked like to be a guard from the palace, keeping watch over Eugene.

There was blood under his fingernails. Adam fought to uncurl his hands, finding the motion excruciatingly painful. He couldn't open them all the way. He let his arms go limp to his side.

Eugene's face slowly faded into view, but he looked pale and scared. Although Adam was the one that ended the fight, Eugene's skin showed off a thin layer of sweat. Fear. His heart obviously palpating.

"God…I thought you weren't going to stop, man…" All trace of Eugene's charm was gone. In its place, he looked decidedly in shock. "Uh…" He helped Adam up from the floor, careful to not hang on for too long. He wiped his hands over his pants nervously. He then turned, ordered another ale, and drank in one long, winded, gulp.

"He had a gun," Adam said minimally, his hands aching from the blows he had brought down. "I just wanted him to stop pointing that thing at me. I assure you I had no idea who he was—what he was."

"No, no," Eugene agreed, his voice up an octave. "I totally get it. Yup. He had a gun. That…that was insane." He sighed out tiredly. "Holy shit. Okay, okay." Eugene sucked in a mountain of air before he turned to Adam, his smile constricted but true on his face. "Promise me, no matter how drunk I get, no matter how many times I beg you, you PROMISE not to fight me! Seriously! I want all my teeth still in my head. Holy hell, Adam! That. Was. Incredible!"

Once distant with tension, The Snuggly Duckling seemed to roar with new found laugher. Adam felt a slight sense of welcome from this, but it felt like it came at such an awful cost. He nearly beat a man to death. Granted, the man was a pirate. With a gun. It felt justified, certainly, but….

"I'll take that ale now, please." Adam said faintly to the eyes staring at him. He was slid his mug and he drank without complaint. He had expected it to taste exactly what it looked like, but it was surprisingly minty. He gained Eugene's attention with a mutual nod. "Can we…keep this between us? I wouldn't even know how to explain what just happened to Belle…"

Eugene seemed relieved at Adam's request. "You just gave me a heart attack and then said the six most precious words to revive me, buddy. Yes. Absolutely. 'Can we keep this between us?' Duh."
Eugene then turned to see the rest of the bar staring at him expectantly. "And…um, ALL OF YOU GUYS!"

"RIDER!" The bar cheered.

"When I was a boy, my favourite book was King Arthur."

The quiet silence between Eugene and Adam had settled for quite some time as they walked back through the woods. For a moment, Adam was not sure if Eugene had heard him clearly enough—Belle often told him he tended to mumble in company, but finally, Eugene stopped.

"I—"Eugene was pulled from his thoughts. "Uh, you're talking to me?"

"Yes," Adam said hurriedly. He wanted to be friendly, but more so, he felt like he had exposed something raw to this acquaintance before him and he wasn't sure how to make it right. Eugene clearly had not recovered. His face, after he had turned away from his friends at the bar, had been one of forlorn. He looked haunted. "My mother read it to me often. I was obsessed with knights. With their chivalry, I like to think."

Eugene considered this quietly. "I didn't have a mother." He said suddenly. A pause. "Or, ah, a dad. Was raised in an orphanage. Taught the other kids to read." In the moonlight, his rouge-like face seemed wishful. "The Tales of Flannigan Rider'. That was what my favourite book was called."

Adam raised his brows in disbelief. Then, in understanding. "'Flynn Rider'."

"Bingo," Eugene said halfheartedly. "Must seem pretty dumb, huh? To someone like you?"

Adam paused in his own steps. "You've lost me."

"Hah," Eugene gave an anxious laugh. "You've got this whole…aura about you. It's like…you're untouchable. More than just being born with a silver spoon in your mouth. It's like…I feel inferior to you?" He seemed to question his own revelation. "Shit." He started walking again. "Maybe I'm just drunk. Don't mind me. I just…seeing you take that guy out—no second thought. I…I don't think I could've done it…" He trailed off. "That besides, you just seem so educated. The way you study every last detail. I feel oblivious. I just stole every last damn thing in my life."

Adam quelled, following lightly behind. He knew his attitude towards Eugene's friends was inexcusable. He thought Eugene to be a joker that wanted to make his night miserable. He saw now he was just…being friendly. Adam cringed as his hands throbbed once more. His fingers still curled. He didn't dare force them open with Eugene around. He couldn't mask that kind of pain. There would be questions. He wanted tonight over with.

"You misunderstand." Adam said somberly. "You misunderstand because you don't have to go through situations like me." Adam cleared his throat, attempting to explain himself better. "I don't have friends."

"Don't you?"

"What? My 'silverspoon'd' life? My servants? I love them dearly, yes, but…to make a stranger laugh. To have a room full of people, people unrelated to my life, just happy to see me? That is truly impressive."

This seemed to breathe some life back into Eugene. "Well…you don't have to be such a dick all the time. I mean, who turns down free beer?"
"Ha!" Adam laughed suddenly, the sound loud on the night air. "Ha, haha!"

Eugene nearly turned in shock. He had never heard Adam laugh before. And he had made Adam laugh? Laugh genuinely?

"Are you…laughing? At my joke?" Eugene sputtered.

"Yes, that was very funny." Adam agreed. "And you are right. I was…uncomfortable. I apologize."

"So, your solution is to make other people miserable, because you're miserable?" Now it was Eugene's turn to take a piece of the laughter. "How did you end up with someone as good natured as Belle?"

"I have no idea." Adam said, his voice, once more, light into the humor. He thought to return the compliment. "Rapunzel seems like she will make an extraordinary queen. Her people already love her."

"She's the best thing to ever happen to me in my entire life," Eugene declared simply.

Silence once more. Then, Eugene said:

"I mean, okay, I can relate a little to you, Adam. I had it all…kind of. Women…money…adventure…women…stealing from exciting places…women…uh…did I mention women?"

Adam laughed inaudibly. "I think I understand that."

"But I'd give up anything for her. Even if she wasn't some long lost princess. Even if she was just another girl. She's…she's everything." He chuckled to himself. "Sheesh, don't tell her I said that, okay? I'm such a sucker."

Lost princess? Another tale to inquire Belle for. "Speaking of the Princess, may I ask something?"

"Hmm?"

"Her people. Your people." Adam corrected. "This island is so isolate that I didn't think it fair to assume but…you have had no traces of the plague here?"

"The plague? The black plague? No. Actually, none at all."

"How?" Adam asked, the passion in his voice cutting into the peace of the night. "My mother died from the disease. Belle's mother as well. Do you think there is any way I could procure—"


"Whatever do you mean? How do you cure your people?"

"B-bottled sunshine?" Eugene suggested. It didn't seem to work.

What is wrong? Adam found himself checking himself, his questions, the way he asked them…Was there something hidden here? "…if I ask Rapunzel, would she be open to a discussion about it?"

"Um. Yeah. Maybe." Eugene rattled. He seemed to speed up walking.

Adam followed behind but slowed his pace. With the way Eugene had sped up his walking, he didn't want it to seem as if he was chasing him down. He wasn't a hunter. Not anymore.
"Tink."

"So, that means—"

"Ttink."

"Absolutely!" Belle laughed.

"So, if I pulled open a map and pointed at the coast—I mean, it's just that easy?" Rapunzel chatted happily.

"Ta-tinkk."

"Would you like to start a map of the world?"

"Only if you promise to help me."

"Tinktinktink."

"Well, I can't draw to save my life," Belle responded.

"I got that covered." Rapunzel giggled.

"I—"

"Pardon." Adam interrupted, feeling caught between two rapid fire conversations.

The clinking stopped with good reason. Adam hid his hands under the table, still clenched, still breathlessly painful to attempt to use. He found he could no longer hold the silverware required for the dinner. Every spoon, every handle, he fumbled the edge, knocking it back into the bowl. He had managed on passing with Eugene for cover, but he simply could not continue the night in such pain. He wanted to clean himself off. He wanted to kiss Belle goodnight. He wanted to thank Eugene for not leaving him to beat that pirate to death.

Adam did none of those things.

"Adam?" Belle's voice sounded worried. "Are you okay?"

"I'm not feeling well." He paused awkwardly. It wasn't too far from the truth. "Belle might have let you know I get a kind of travel sickness. It will pass. I am sorry to retire early. I bid you all a goodnight."

Rapunzel looked disappointed but she nodded. "I'm sorry to hear that! Yes, of course. We've had your luggage placed in the guest room down the hall from the main stairwell. My mother and father are off visiting the surrounding islands and won't be back in for a while, so, please, without worry, make yourselves at home."


"I'll be in soon," Belle called. She gave him a knowing look before she returned to the conversation at hand.

_For once_, Adam hoped that Belle would not return to him so quickly. The long walk to the bedroom, his hands held in front of him, fingers twist grotesquely, his nails ripped. He groaned in agony as he forced his hands open. He could not bear to let Belle see him in such a state. Not after their conversation. Not after tonight. _Give me some time, my love._
I just need time.

Rapunzel tended to wake up like regular clock work to Eugene. He unhooked his arm from around her slender hip to let her free to get water. Lazily, he often said she should just request a night guard for a cup but she insisted that as long as she had legs, she could do this herself.

She padded blearily out of her bedroom, turned down the hall, and moved towards the kitchen suite. She picked up her regular cup, filled it to the top, and took a few sips, humming pleasantly. Closing the door behind her, she moved back up the hall, and, suddenly, stopped.

From the other end of the hall, Rapunzel saw something move from the corner of her eye. It was more than moonlight, more than frisky shadow…it was huge…and tall…

It was breathing.

Rapunzel screamed.

AN:

A quick (and sassy) Q&A from yours truly:

Q: KAY, YOU HAD A GREAT STORY. BUT NOW YOU'VE MADE IT ALL WEIRD. NOW I'M MAD AND MULTICROSSOVERS SUCKS!

A: Well, just because you may not like one chapter, doesn't mean you can't enjoy a new one. Stick with me! Maybe I'll change your mind!

Or, you know, #byefelicia

Q: IS JACK SPARROW COMING BACK?

A: In case you didn't notice, I had Eric talk about pirates. Like, a lot. So. I'm gonna go with a solid maybe. But will he show up a lot? Hell no. This already story has a central plot.

It's about Adam being a huge asshole to everyone. I love it.

Q: BUT I HAD THIS GREAT HEADCANON ABOUT (X-CHARACTER). YOU DIDN'T FOLLOW IT.

A: Look man, I'm doing my best here. I try to give every bits of dialogue meaning, every character motivation, and I'm fleshing out characters as I see fit. If I'm adding more to a giant universe and you also happen to enjoy, then I'm doing my job. But if you don't well…that's just, like, your opinion, man.

Q: WHY DIDN'T YOU JUST KEEP IT TO DISNEY PRINCESSES MANN, I DON'T WANT YOUR SUBPLOTS

A: Subplots add world depth, make information more meaningful, and also I'm writing this story for the hope of anyone to enjoy and be amused by. I'm not going to try too hard to stick to every damn universe-ruley-thing. Disney is fun. I wanna have fun. Please don't leave me, I've worked so hard. ;-;

Q: OKAY, I LIKE WHERE THIS IS GOING BUT I NEED SOME STUFFS EXPLAINED
GIRL

A: Yesss. YESSS. What will happen next? Why is Eugene sketchy as hell? What will happen to Adam? WILL THAT FLOWER VENDOR EVER GET HER SHIT TOGETHER? God the anticipation kills me.

AN: See you all tomorrow! And thank you so much for your reviews, comments, kudos, and follows/favourites! They mean the world to me!
Moonlight

AN: I feel like a newspaper delivery-boy sometimes, like, I roll up to ya'lls lawns nearly everyday, tossin' a rolled soggy paper over my shoulder, yelling: "'DISNEY DRAMAS HERE'! 'DISSSSNEY DRAMAS' HERE! YA WANT YA FREE DISNEY DRAMAS? WE GOT YA TONEAL SHIFTS, WE GOT YA DRAMATIC IRONY! WE GOT YA HUMOR! WE GOT LITERALLY EVERYTHING BUT ACTUALLY GETTING PAID FOR THIS! OH GOD! FORGET MY FACE! DON'T TELL MY BOSS NUTHIN'!"

Rapunzel was screaming.

Eugene leapt from their bed, feet tangling in the sheets. The moonlight air seemed foggy, damp. It clung to his bedclothes, in his hair. He hit the bedroom door, skirted around the long halls, racing to Rapunzel.

Something was wrong. Eugene could feel in deep inside his bones. It couldn't shake it since this evening, since that strange, ominous pirate kicked up a row. And Adam, sneaking off to bed without as much as an inside joke about the events of the evening. Eugene felt he had at least earned himself one more genuine laugh from the stoic king. Just when he thought he was getting somewhere with that guy…

The screaming had stopped.

"Rapunzel?" Eugene gasped. "Rapunzel!"

How did the night change everything? Perhaps Corona relied too much on the sun. Since when did he, a master thief, become so disoriented? Every hall was a long, shadowy drop. Every window casted the halo of the moon over the flooring. As he ran, the pads of his feet cold along the floor, the face of the moon followed him, its eye a white, pupil-less watcher in the sky.

Eugene turned his back to the moon. He slid his hand down to touch at his left ankle, feeling the outline of a small, sharp knife. It wasn't much. Hell, it was hardly anything compared to what the guards carried. But the castle was so large. The staff not nearly observant as they should be. Sound was often muffled within the stone.

And Rapunzel. She was so, so small.

He staggered around a corner, another—and then, Oh God, he felt weak just to see her. Her shadow hardly casted her frame along the walls. Her body pale, her arms pressed tightly around herself, shivering, but she looked unharmed. He ran to her, skittered to his knees to wrap his arms around her, pulling her down with him.

"God, Rapunzel! What happened? What is it?"

"How…” She asked faintly. Her words were hard to make out. "How did you…"

"How did I find you?" Eugene ran his fingers over her face, pushing her hair behind her ears. "Baby, you screamed. Did you know that you screamed? You gave me a damn near heart attack."

But Rapunzel did not look at Eugene. She was looking through him. Her entire body icy in his hands.
"No…no…you don’t…no." She whispered. "How…how did it not see you…?"

Eugene pulled her closer, trying to understand. "What? Rapunzel what is going…"

A threatening rumble echoed from down the hall. A sound so low, so deep, it sent a shiver run up Eugene's spine.

*We aren't alone,* Eugene closed his eyes briefly, willing himself to stay calm. "…on." He finished.

The couple turned to stare into the dark. It was hard to make out any concrete details but Eugene knew it was huge. Beyond huge. He caught a glimpse of two long, thorny horns. Massive paws padding along the floor. It was moving forward gingerly, pooling through the shadows. Its breath, hot in its jaws, allowed Eugene to see every exhale drifting through the air. Eugene wanted to call it a bear, maybe a wolf. But there was one more thing.

It had a single pair of eyes. Eyes that stared at Eugene and Rapunzel in the darkness. They were large and unfathomable to watch. They looked…intelligent.

Intelligent enough to know exactly what it wanted to do.

Eugene swallowed, looking every which way. He should scream for the guards. He should place Rapunzel behind him. He should grab his knife. But he remained unmoving.

He whispered, "Has it come any closer?"

"Yes," Rapunzel whimpered. "Yes—it has been getting closer for a while now."

"And what if we run?" Eugene suggested. His heart felt like it was puncturing itself in his mouth with how hard it had been beating.

"And if it chases us?" Rapunzel whispered back, her voice terrified. "I've been too scared to move. I don't think we should move."

Eugene brought a hand to rest over the small of her back. He could feel her heart thundering under his fingertips. "Rapunzel, I know this is horrible, but honey we have got to move." He grasped her wrist in his hands, pushing them both to their feet slowly.

"No—!" Rapunzel stepped backwards, her arms tight to her sides. She couldn't look away from… from that animal. "Please—I can't run fast enough! I can't!" She looked absolutely panicked. The high, horrified edge of her voice seemed to attract the creature's attention. Its large head turned to study Eugene's arm over Rapunzel's wrists. "Rapunzel, I know this is horrible, but honey we have got to move." He grasped her wrist in his hands, pushing them both to their feet slowly.

"No—!" Rapunzel stepped backwards, her arms tight to her sides. She couldn't look away from… from that animal. "Please—I can't run fast enough! I can't!" She looked absolutely panicked.

The high, horrified edge of her voice seemed to attract the creature's attention. Its large head turned to study Eugene's arm over Rapunzel's wrists. It moved a little closer, allowing Eugene to get a better look at its eyes. Blue eyes. Bloodshot, wild looking eyes. But blue. He had never seen a bear with blue eyes before. Blue…and narrowed…and…and…

Eugene felt his mouth run dry. He let go of Rapunzel, making the motion clear that he wasn't going to drag her away. The animal, this thing, it seemed smart. It sensed Rapunzel's fear. And if it knew fear, if it could understand the pain in her voice…Eugene held the beast's gaze, unwilling to blink.

If it had…understanding…Eugene couldn't help but furrow his brow. He knew animals were smart. Hell, Maximus was an invention of his own, legendary horse-like design. But…something was wrong.

Eugene willed his own breathing to slow. The animal looked away. Down at the floor. Out of the windows. In the moonlight, the shaggy, dark hair appeared silver. He tried to calm himself down, as
much as he failed to do the same for his wife. He traced the pattern of the beast before them. It was huge, yes, and absolutely powerful in each of its muscles—but it didn't seem actively trying to attack. In fact, now that Eugene steeled his nerves, he watched the beast's breathing. It seemed labored. Aggrieved. It was too creepy. It was almost human in its cycle of breaths. It even caught itself, quieting the sound, before giving up again.

Eugene kept pushing that thought away, but the feeling stayed. A feeling that made the hair rise up on his neck, the back of his legs. Every time the beast returned his gaze, Eugene couldn't help but be stunned by how….familiar that look appeared. Had he seen this creature before? And if not now, then where?

And if not in this beast, if not in its eyes, then whose? A tiny, insane voice whispered in the back of his head.

"Rapunzel," Eugene turned to his wife. He took her hand in his. "Okay. I know we're both scared. Like, I feel like my heart might just explode. But…I need your help."

She looked wildly at her husband, her face blank in disbelief. "Help with what?!"

"Baby, look into its eyes. Doesn't it seem different to you?"

"I—I don't know!" Rapunzel exclaimed. "What are you trying to do?"

"Rapunzel…I think it needs help."

"Help?" Rapunzel yelped the word in shock. "Are you crazy, Eugene?!"

"Maybe, a little, yeah!" He returned, blinking his eyes open and closed. "Look, it isn't attacking, right?" He turned to look her in the eyes. "Am I right or am I wrong?"

"Not yet it hasn't!" Rapunzel cried, her voice breaking. She sounded as if she had been crying.

Eugene held her eyes, pushing away the way the hurt he felt to force her to deal with this, trying to communicate his feeling, the feeling that she clearly wasn't feeling. It didn't make him feel much saner. "Rapunzel, I think we need your power. Please, I know I sound crazy."

She shrunk away, entire body trembling from adrenaline. She looked ready to break in two.

"Eugene, I'm scared! I can't do this! I can't!"

Eugene grasped her hands again, pressing it to his chest. "I'm here, I'm right here. Please. Please."

She was crying now—her voice wrecked with frightened sobs. "Please, please, please don't make me do this. This isn't the same! I can't, I can't do this!"

And this suddenly made the beast roar—the sound shaking the glass in the windows with its power. Eugene swear he could feel his teeth rattling in his jaw. He held Rapunzel tighter to him. Now, Eugene really understood. Whatever that thing was, whatever was happening, he had to get Rapunzel to stop screaming. It didn't like that.

Not one bit.

"Baby, please. Shhh." Eugene ran his hands through her hair. "It's okay, it's okay…"

"NO, NO IT'S NOT!" She shrieked.
"Rapunzel, I've got you. I've got you right here. It isn't going to hurt you! I won't let that happen! But honey, I have a plan!"

"Eugene, I keep people alive. I've healed cuts and bones and illness. But this isn't human."

"I know, honey, I know, but you have to focus! You've been protecting Corona from the plague for nearly a year now! Please!"

Rapunzel dug herself into Eugene's side, a mere sliver of a girl, her green eyes as wide as the moon. "I—I can't!"

The thing, the Beast slandered forward, the sound of claws scrabbling on smooth stone. Eugene turned to look at Rapunzel, his face beaming with sweat, ever nerve screaming for them to run. "You trust me, Rapunzel?"

She went to speak but her throat felt pinhole tight.

Eugene slowly bent down, eyes on the creature before him, and slid a small knife from his left sock into his dominant hand. "I won't let him hurt you. You trust in that, Rapunzel?"

She squirmed again, stepping away in horror, her eyes shut tight. "Eugene this isn't the plague! It doesn't look sick, it looks murderous!"

Eugene, heart in his throat, forced himself to reach for her and pull her forward. He hated himself for making her do this. He wanted to tell her run, to scream for help, and he'll hold off the monster. He gripped the knife tighter.

"Rapunzel, look into his eyes! Don't you see him?! Open them, and look! We don't have time!"

Rapunzel barely did as she was told. She pulled open her eyes to stare at that the horrible, heaving animal before her. It was huge, and so frightfully tall, almost like a wild bear rising in to full height. Surely, this was a nightmare. She wanted to wake up. She wanted to make the all go away. She clamped her fingers over her mouth, struggling to keep from screaming.

She rose her eyes over the Beast's form to see a pair of extraordinary eyes glaring back at her. Blue eyes.

They looked almost…human.

She squeaked in horror. "Eugene, what...what is it? What is it?"

"I might sound insane, hell, know I do, but I think that's Adam."

At this name, the animal staggered again, sinking onto all four legs. A low growl echoed again through the hallways, traveling deep down Rapunzel's spine, chilling her blood.

"Oh my God," She breathed out, frozen in her place. "Oh my God. It's going to kill us!"

Eugene wrapped an arm around her neck, pressing her into his chest, trying to ease her panic. "Rapunzel, we have to do something! Something isn't right! We have to try to understand the hell is going on!"

He felt Rapunzel trembling in his arms. He only knew of one way out. Perhaps the one choice they had before the Beast was upon them both.

"Rapunzel, please try. Use your magic."
"No," She whispered fearfully, "I can't. I can't, please."

"Rapunzel!" Eugene yelled, stepping backwards slowly, trying to keep any distance he could. He allowed the edge of the blade to glow in the moonlight. He hoped the creature knew what it meant.

"Baby, we don't have a choice." His voice spiked. "Please, don't make me do this. Think of Belle! I don't want to hurt him!"

Think of Belle? How? How could this be real? Rapunzel thought frantically. "It can't be him!"

The creature moved faster. It was breaths away, the great face amixed with all kinds of animals—a bear, a wolf, a buffalo—but those eyes! Those eyes had to be Adam's! Eugene had traveled far in his life; he'd seen many a bizarre adventure before. But this—this sent his mind racing, as if this Beast was an obvious answer to an unconscious question. He had seen those eyes, pain-filled, angry, just hours before. The image of that man's face was unforgettable in that heart pounding moment in the bar.

He moved himself forward, knife bared. He urged Rapunzel as gently as he could, trailing her behind him.

"Baby," Eugene begged, his voice full of dread. "You're stronger than anyone in this whole damn kingdom. Please. Please try."

Rapunzel didn't have a moment to fight him—his voice said it all; it was this or it was bloodshed.

For you, Eugene, Rapunzel thought, willing herself to let it be her last. I love you.

She closed her eyes as she reached out a hand. Her palm reached forward, wavering, until she felt fur. Felt jaw. The outline of fangs.

But she did not feel pain.

Finally, she began her chant. She willed it into her hand. She willed this monster away, back to the forest, back into her nightmare, whenever, wherever, whoever Eugene thought it was.

"Flower gleam and glow," She staggered the little song, her words breathy. "Let your power shine. M-make the clock reverse." She felt the hot breath of its mouth against her skin and whimpered but she forced herself not to stop. "B-bring back what—what once was mine."

"Holy hell," Eugene cursed. She felt his arms sliding away from her. She refused to open her eyes.

"Heal what has been hurt. C-change the Fates' design. Save what has been lost." Then, she felt skin. Human skin, hot, feverish under her hand. "Bring back what once was mine..." She peeked an eye and stumbled the rest in shock. "What once was mine."

Adam. It was him. The monster had disappeared. She was holding her hand to Adam's face, his eyes half closed, staring through her. He inhaled in fragile shock before he sank to the floor, lifeless at the princess's feet. His eyes were pure white, rolled back into his head.

Eugene sprang to work immediately.

"Holy hell, holy hell. It was him. I wasn't crazy! I'm not crazy!" He fled one hand to his hair, pinching himself, pulling at the roots, threatening pain out of pure relief. Realizing he had still clutched the knife in his other hand, he threw it swiftly away, listening to it clink delicately down the opposite hall. "And I nearly stabbed him. Hell. Holy hell."
Rapunzel stilled, her sides heaving. She rose a shaking hand to touch at Adam's face. She trailed small, delicate fingers down his neck. Her eyes wide and jade green.

"Eugene," was all she said. The word was choked. She started to cry once more.

"I'm right here, Rapunzel." He knelt down beside her. He wrapped his arms around her, squeezing her tight. "I knew you could do it. You're the bravest person I've ever met." He kissed the words into the crown of her hair.

"He's...he..." She couldn't help but to cry. She had been so scared. She was convinced she was going to die. But yet, here she was, alive, with Eugene safe beside her, and now. And now, all on her own, she had ripped the strength away from a monster. In its place, a man, vulnerable over the floor.

A man? A beast? A monster...?

"Is he...?" She shuddered the question. "Is he sick?"

Eugene carefully moved Rapunzel away, gliding her small weight to give her some space between her hysteria and Adam.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Eugene crouched forward. He moved his eyes to trace Adam's body. He considered his breathing, his spine. No longer did he have claws. No mane. No horns. His long hair fell over his face, pooled along floor. With jumpy fingers, Eugene brushed it aside to look at Adam's mouth. No fangs burst from his lips, either.

"I...have no idea." Eugene concluded. "But he's human now. I think the magic worked."

"Does...does Belle..." Rapunzel began, her voice stronger than before. "Should we get her?"

Eugene nodded. "I'll be right back."

Rapunzel lashed out her hand, snatching Eugene's arm. "Don't leave me. Please don't go."

"Rapunzel, you think he's going anywhere? Look at him. He isn't going to hurt you."

But Rapunzel held on tight. "Let me go." She fidgeted nervously over the body on the floor. His breathing was deep, his expression peaceful. "I want to go find her. I—I don't want to be alone with him. What if he wakes up?"


Within moments, Rapunzel was gone down the hall. Belle would be here soon. Eugene continued to stare at the man before him. It was hard to tell with his eyes closed, but he seemed to be completely relaxed. Whatever pain was there before, it was gone now.

Eugene sat back, unsure of what to do. If the guards found them, there would be questions, no doubt. What to say? What to lie about?

"Heh," Eugene allowed himself a small laugh.

He wanted to lie. The answer simple. The way he covered for Eric's secret fishing or how Naveen had accidentally scratched one of Eric's prized ships with a misaligned firework. It was like he had unconsciously decided this long ago. It seemed so reasonable now. "...And here I just thought you were just a huge jerk. God damn."
From the floor, Adam's eyes flickered. His hands twitched. Eugene crept forward again. "Hey...you awake?"

A short moan was his answer. Adam stirred further, his eyelids struggling to open. "Belle?" He murmured. He tried to curl up into himself. "Belle...?"

"Hey, easy. It's okay. Uh, she's gonna be here soon." Eugene sought for some way to help. "Look, I have sort of an idea about what you're feeling." Why was rambling always his go to bit? "I was stabbed once and Rapunzel used her gift and like...it just feels incredible. Just don't try to move. Seriously. You won't be able to stand."

Adam barely managed to look at him. His blue eyes appeared cloudy, sedated. Weakly, he flexed his hands, liberation rushing through his body. "No pain...?" He sighed gently. "S'gone."

"Hell yeah, there's no pain." Eugene confirmed. "Rapunzel is no cheap trick. It comes from her alone. It's a powerful kind-of healing magic. It's like a euphoria in your bones. It sticks with you for days."

A slight pause.

Eugene's voice lost its moxie, his face paling. "I, uh, I'm sorry we didn't mention it. You even asked about medicine and I...I...I get protective over her. Someone once tried to take her from me just for her magic. Someone that was basically a monster in human-skin and you have no idea what I'm saying anymore, huh, buddy?"

Adam's breathing evened out from his spot along the floor. He couldn't speak even if he wanted. He was lost in the weightlessness of the unending warmth spreading through him, his thoughts unraveling. He closed his eyes.

"Belle will be...." a voice was saying but he lost all meaning in the words, fading away...

_Belle_, Adam thought. He clung to her name. _Belle._

_Belle...._

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**AN:** Updates might run a little slow this weekend. I got family in town, and while they are fully aware that I'm some little post-graduate nerd that sits in a dark room and writes for hours, that doesn't really go over well for my being missing at parties. If only, amirite? See you soon! Thanks again!

(postpost notes: I know that at the end Tangled Rapunzel is suggested to lose her power with the last of it going into Eugene during his death scene, HOWEVER, I noticed that in the new post-Tangled cartoon, this isn't the case, and she not only (for some stupid reason in my personal opinion) gets her long hair back, but (in a pretty interesting twist) also all her weirdie powers. So, if Disney runs that into its would-be canon, so will I. Hope that helps explained my thinking here. Plus, super powers and princesses? That's just too much fun, man.)
Compassion

**AN:** Thank you all so much again! Your support means the world. Seriously. This chapter was interesting for me to write in particular as I have such a soft spot for Tangled, and sometimes I get so nervous writing characters in ways that we do not get to see them act in the films we love. But sometimes, you just gotta be real about them, give them space to just be people.

Not everyone is going to be accepting.

"I know you have questions but I think you'll understand why mine must come first."

Someone was speaking to Adam. Someone that sounded cold and distant. Or, maybe it was him. His entire head felt filled with cotton, every sound muffled, the rhythm of speech dissonant. He could hardly tell which direction it was coming from.

"...And, I want to believe you'll understand my choice." The voice continued. It was soft. Feminine. "You and I only want what is best for our people. So, if you can hear me. If you can open your eyes. I want your attention. Now."

A command…? Adam's head was swimming, struggling to grasp the intention. Somewhere, hidden within his thoughts, he knew he should feel fear, but it was so hard to be afraid when he felt so warm, so calm.

He did as he was told but the effort ripped through him.

Dragging himself from that toil of that deep sleep was as if digging himself out of his own grave. Every limb was impossible to move, every breath a weight that pushed down on his chest. But there was no pain. No pressure festering inside his bones. Adam wondered through the graceful, lingering twilight of his own mind. He had been searching for something and it had gone all wrong. And there was screaming...but who was screaming? Why?

He blinked opened his eyes. The world was a colorful blur. He was lying within empty room on single cot by a window. The light through the glass was truly beautiful. Pinks...greens...blues...orange...the colors came and faded like the scents that filled his head. He could not recall being able to grasp the return of Belle's hair, of salt and sweat, the changing of multiple strangers, with such ease before now.

The world may have been a dull, shapeless blur but inside of his head, Adam felt truly, fantastically alive. The pain that crawled through his body had disappeared like a whisper of wind. In fact, he felt more energized than he could recall in years—beyond his age, beyond when he was a more foolhardy, youthful man…

A shape, slender and small, was seated nearby. Adam could not make out facial detail. But her hair was long, golden, flowing in shimmering ringlets to the floor...why was the color so familiar...like the rattling of chains in his ears...formless, floating, Adam thought that the light made her shine radiantly. Almost as if by magic…

His mind was slow, but his heart was picking up speed in mournful realization.

"Enchantress..." He whispered.

Surely, his nightmare had become reality. She was here. Here to tell him what she had planned. Why
"No," The voice said pensively. "I am not some powerful being. I am just...just me. But I was born with this gift and I use it as I see fit. My father, my mother...they have wisdom and knowledge that I have yet to know, but I cast the longest shadow in all of Corona." The voice took a shaky breath, as if she, too, was fighting for words. "And I will do what is right."

Adam felt his eyelids falling again, rushing him back into darkness. He gasped in a breath, trying to remain here...he felt he would be punished by the Enchantress if he could not stay awake. What did she want with him? Why wasn't the suffering over? Where was Belle? Where was Belle...

"I have realized now that I cannot cure you. You have no sickness inside of you. And I don't care what I am told...I won't be lied to again. Never again. I was lied to for eighteen years and I will not risk my life, my kingdom, my love, for..." She stopped, breathing in once more, and her tone went flat. "...someone I cannot trust."

While she said this in earnest, another sob washed over her. Another hiccup. The voice had begun to cry. Adam could taste the tears in the air. Why was she crying...? Was he the cause? It was so hard to focus...

"Belle. She loves you. And I love her." The voice paused, fluttery, distressed. "But she is...perhaps as cursed as you. She claims this is done. She claims you meant no harm...but I have sat here, and watched you change once more...and I have forced it back. Belle is...disillusioned. I am not a fool."

The voice was pained. "I am so sorry," it went on. "Maybe she is right...but I am the princess of Corona and I must do what is best for my people. Belle is—was—one of my closest friends but she...she is lying. Even by her admission she cannot prove that this will not happen again. You may be in human skin but you are dangerous. Without cause, without reason—and—I." the voice broke again, attempting to force her will into her words, "And if I cannot cure you, then I must ask that you leave."

Adam tried to move, tried to respond. The hurt in that fragile voice was a burden he could not bear to hear. This was all his fault. What had happened...? He dragged his eyes to her, her form glistening before him. His own eyes felt wet.

"Don't look at me like that!" The girl snapped in her grief. "Don't—don't give me such damming eyes! You cannot judge me for who I am, what I must do!" She was nearly hysterical, edging closer, then further away.

Adam could not focus on the quickness of her hands, her arms, as she paced:

"Do you think I don't understand the selfishness of my own desire?! Do you think I cannot be afraid for all I know?! I know the plague is out there, beyond my home! I know Belle and you have suffered at its cost—but I will not leave! No one can take me from my people again! I will not abandon my destiny for the fate of strangers!"

She screamed these words, so loud in his ears, Adam flinched from where he lay, weak, helpless to fight back.

This was hell. A hell where he could not move or speak. His body was not his own. He attempted to speak but the sound was nothing more than a moan. The sound of her voice was shrill and sharp. It hurt him to reason, to think...

"And is it my responsibility to be born for all the misery in the world, and to rid the world of every
disease? Of every dying thing? And what if, in its place, I bring about a bigger plague...one I cannot fight. What if I bring about a more terrifying fate…" She swallowed and her words were coarse in her throat. "... like yours."

Those wide, tearful eyes were a dark, pulsating green. They rolled over the fog in Adam's brain, snapping into place instantly. This was not The Enchantress. This was Rapunzel.

The details still twisted and churned. Rapunzel was there before him, wavering like a faraway dream, and then, the next, The Enchantress, her beautiful face filled with despair. Adam closed his eyes, losing the fight to be verbally wounded, without an ounce of defense.

"Look at me," Rapunzel demanded coldly.

Again, Adam found the strength to do as he was told.

The Princess of Corona, so small and young, looked already a queen. Her face was unforgiving. Her decision made. "When you are strong enough, you and your wife will leave this place. And you will not write. And you will not speak of what you have seen. You will do this because I will promise this mercy: I will not tell the world of what you are. Hold this promise to me and I will not cause you to suffer in return."

Adam sought for his passion, his reasoning, his fury...but it was not there. In its common place, he felt sadness. He felt Rapunzel's sadness.

"Do you promise me, Beast?" She demanded again, her words biting. She had wrapped her arms around herself, attempting to hold together her pain.

_I have...a name..._ Adam thought. He fought through the lightness in his head. He had found those words. She could take his strength, take his voice, take his body...but he refused his name.

He went to tell her this, but he could not gain traction with his lips, his tongue. Her green eyes felt as if they were burning in his flesh, wrapping him in chains. He had no choice. No voice....no...

No...

There was more...

Adam saw a blue light from behind her...he blinked slowly, fighting to stare at it. His vision swam again, cloaking the room, but still it remained.

A tall, smoky shadow, standing over Rapunzel. It seemed almost human in form as in its darkened face it had two glittering yellow eyes. Shadows danced behind it, chasing each other along the back walls, in the light from the flickering blue flames atop its head. It smiled at him with sharp, pointed teeth. Adam smelled smoke, the same from his nightmare where Eric had hunted him, but he sensed no other presence, no secondary breathing...the deathly Enchantress, come again?...

Adam shut his eyes tightly. When he opened them, it was gone. But it was too late. All that came through his gritted teeth was a growl. And it damned him. She seemed all the more affirmed..

Adam let his pride fall, and in it, in the judgement of those green eyes, he surrendered.

There was no escape.

He nodded with last of the strength he could find. His eyes slid to a close. He did not know what became of Rapunzel after that. He did not know what her face looked like as he agreed. He did not
wish to be here anymore, come what may. Was this a dream? Was this real? What had he done…?

He faded back into silence and warmth. It was as if this feeling had crafted a singular barrier of safety between him and the world. He wanted it back. He wanted everything back as it was before…

Low voices awoke him next. They were far away, muted, but they rolled back and forth like a stormy sea, tempest and thunder shower, locked in battle.

The light had faded into greys and blues. Adam did not feel as removed as he once had. His body was no longer impossibly heavy. His thoughts formed timely. Although his body whined in fatigue and his eyes stung, he still felt no pain. He slowly opened his eyes to take in the chambers.

It was just as it was before, empty and cold, with only the cot. It almost looked like a holding chamber of some kind…

"Hey, so you are awake?" Eugene said carefully, appearing in Adam's line of sight from the corner of his vision.

Adam tried not to appear startled as he felt, but that was hard to hide. His reactions were too unguarded across his face.

Eugene took a step back, concerned. "Ah, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I…" his easy expression along his face looked very strained. "I just didn't want you to wake up, like, alone. Um. I know I'm probably the last person you want to see. But, Belle and Rapunzel are...sort of having a row down the way…"

Adam breathed in, the scent still strong in his nostrils: Belle's hair, the Princess' tears...Belle was there and was now gone just before he had awoken. Everything the man was saying before him, reflected in the air, was true.

"Belle...she is... where?" Adam would have refused to speak if he had known he would sound so desperate to his own ears. "Please...I wish to see her."

Eugene nodded in understanding.

"She has been with you all night if that helps you at all." Eugene then sank again into his chair, a little wooden thing, edging it closer to the bedside. He rubbed at his own eyes and sighed tiredly. "Just like how I've been with Rapunzel."

Adam looked at Eugene's face in weaken dread. "Rapunzel...I remember...she was in here…"

"Ah." Eugene leaned back in his chair, defeated. "I don't have to tell you, then."

"I…" Adam began, but he faltered.

There was a drifting, heavy silence.

"I nearly stabbed you." Eugene blurted unexpectedly. His eyes were red and exhausted. "I want you to know that. I nearly stabbed you. I was…” He held out his hand to margin his fingers an inch apart from thumb and pointer finger. "This close."

So, it was true. The pain he had rid from his hands. The night before, a hazy memory of searching, the scent, the stretch of his limbs.

The screaming.
...It was no dream. The curse had returned.

Adam held his gaze to Eugene. "...Why did you not?"

Eugene was still, as if unsure himself, until he shook his head slowly. "I just...had this feeling. This horrible feeling..."

"Why are you here?" Adam wanted his voice to sound as guarded and aggressive as before. Anything to be alone, to go to Belle faster, but the words just came out in despair.

Eugene looked at Adam in surprise. "I'm sorry?"

Adam bristled, eyes tight. "Must I spell it out for you, you fool? Have you an ounce of self-preservation? You know of my true nature, do you not? You know of my curse! You alone have seen my soulless rage, my inability to stop once provoked! Why do you pretend?!" Adam trembled the words through set teeth. "I don't want your pity."

Eugene looked at Adam in shock, frozen where he sat. "Pity? You...you think I agree with Rapunzel?"

Adam's eyes widened in ire. "How could you not? You saw me for everything I am that night! Why waste words?!"

"Because—because you're human!" Eugene commanded back, his dark eyes joyless. "Do you think I'm so stupid as I can't see what's in front of me? You should have seen Belle's face when she saw you lying there...you can't see someone's world look like it is ending and turn your back!"

"The Princess would disagree." Adam glowered darkly but his heart throbbed in his chest. Could this fool truly mean that? Was he not one more foe to fight? Compassion for Belle...that's all Adam wanted. Damn himself. Damn his fate. But Belle needed good people in her life. If this were to be.

If he could not control himself...

Eugene seemed to quell. He leaned back again, resting his head on the back of the chair. He stared up into the ceiling.

"She's...God, I love her. I love her so much...but she's scared to death. You...I don't know if you'd understand...but Rapunzel...she's been through a lot. She's not some spoiled little girl. She has scars. And her scars didn't heal very well."

"You...have told her this?" Adam could not believe his own question.

Eugene blew out air from his mouth in exasperation. "I refused to stab you. I refused to call the guards on you. I held Rapunzel so tight to my chest I think I gave her bruises..." He brought up a hand to run it down his face. "I love her. I'm married to her. But this isn't my choice. It was her own accord that made her come and speak to you. That wasn't me..."

Eugene brought his head back up and gave himself a short inhale of reprieve. "But this? This is me."

He bent down to reach under the low space of the cot Adam was lying on to pull out a long, iron chain. At the ends, the cuffs for the hands were opened. Eugene then made a show of tossing it over his shoulder, leaving them to heavily clatter to the floor.

"Rapunzel wanted those on you, even while you slept." Eugene explained. He gave a tired shrug. "I took them off."
Adam beheld the chains on the floor. He returned to look at his own hands. His anger before long forgotten. He flexed his fingers, curling them, amazed that he still had control. "Why…?"

"I know what it's like to sleep in chains. I wasn't gonna let her become that kind of a person. Rapunzel is scared and stressed out and, just, a complicated mess. But she's not a bad person. She's not like this."

Adam blinked into the stillness. He returned to look at Eugene's face. A commoner he had dismissed so easily. A man who owed him nothing, who had every right to be afraid of him, beastly or no.

A man who chose to grant him freedom.

"I...I don't understand you…"

Eugene allowed a small, half-hearted attempt at his usual charm. "Flynn Rider is unpredictable and listens to no one." He then gave a chuckle to drop the facade. "But I couldn't summon that side of me last night. You're...you're absolutely horrifying. I won't lie about that. Like, I had my theories. But I never thought you were…"

"A monster?"

"...Your words, not mine." Eugene said shortly.

"I was born human. I am human."

"With your sense of humor?" Eugene began lightly, sincerely, but his face was worn. "Could've fooled me, buddy."

Adam snickered, the sound escaping before he could stop it. What he was hearing was too good to be real. Surely this was another hallucination brought on by fever or magic.

"Hey," Eugene turned, looking annoyed. "You can't laugh. You can't laugh now. Not when you're all full of Rapunzel's magic stuff. That ruins my score."

"I am a game to you?" Adam returned, his tone dry.

"Yes. Yes, getting you to laugh is extremely hard and this doesn't count, so don't laugh, asshole."

Again, Adam laughed, but the sound was splintered. Tears had sprung to his eyes and he quickly reached a hand to cover them, digging nail into skin, replacing relief with pain. He cursed himself, wincing away.

Waking up not in chains. Waking up not a yet monster. Waking up at all.

Between his own lightheadedness and the sheer relief of a gun not being at his throat, it was almost too overwhelming, too noble to be true.

*How do I deserve any of this?* Adam thought, his own anxiety rising to nauseate him.

"H-heya," Eugene said uneasily. He stayed where he was, his expression puzzled, but sympathetic. He remembered too well how intoxicating it felt to be under Rapunzel's spell, to feel so emotionally thin, defenseless against everything. For someone to say Eugene merely teared up would be putting things mildly. And nicely. "You...you want me to get Belle?"

Adam breathed deeply, centering himself again, trying not to appear any more unrefined. Trying not to flush. "I'm... I'll be fine."
Eugene settled again. He kept his eyes away from Adam for the sake of sparing him further embarrassment. "S'okay. So, I was gonna ask, uh...How do I put this..."

Adam looked at Eugene again, dropping his hand from his face, forcing himself to respond. "Yes?"

"Belle...she said this curse...that it was broken."

Adam closed his eyes. "Yes."

"So...so you have no idea what brought it back?"

"No. I am just as lost as Belle to the reason. And..." He opened his eyes faintly. "And the fate of my staff..."

"Whoa. How deep does this thing run?"

Adam swallowed grimly. "I pray it is just for me alone."

Eugene considered this quietly, flickering his eyes back and forth in thought. "It's from a source of magic?"

"Yes. Years' worth of it."

"But..."

"It is not for you to be concerned over." Adam said tonelessly.

"Listen, I don't have any answers. But, I don't know, maybe, if it is just for you, maybe there is something more. Something you have to do?"

Adam sighed listlessly. The very idea seemed to crush him. He turned the subject away from himself, uncomfortable with the idea of discussing it further.

"Should you seek Rapunzel soon?"

Eugene shook his head firmly. "Uh, yeah, half the reason I'm in here is to escape that. Belle is defending you like mad. I don't think she'll change Rapunzel's mind, but wow, she has a thorny tongue."

At this, Adam smiled. "Belle...she is..."

Passion, wit, fierceness, pride—my reason for living.

He couldn't will himself to say it with company to hear.

But Eugene didn't need to hear the rest. "I think I finally understand how you got someone like her."

Adam felt his face grow warm, feeling far too vulnerable. "May...I see her?"

At this, Eugene rose to stand. "Yeah, soon, I'm sure. It's, um, getting dark outside, but Rapunzel...she'll want you gone..." He said this with great reluctance. "If you're feeling up for it? Rapunzel told me she, uh, hit you twice with her spell. I couldn't imagine how that must have felt. I could barely handle it the first time, let alone twice."

Faintness still clung to his body. Dizzy if he moved too quickly, perhaps, but with all this new information spinning in his head, Adam felt the safety of his own ship a Godsend. "I will be fine."
Eugene seems to debate this but he summed up his best chipper tone.

"Alright. So. There is one more thing..." He reached into his vest pocket to pull out a folded letter. "I didn't show Rapunzel yet...I was, uh, hoping you could tell me about it? It does have her name on it after all."

Adam recognized it at once. "It is from Ariel. Ah..." He paused. "I cannot read it. It is in Danish."

An awkward pause. Eugene seemed to fiddle with its edge. "Really? That's all you know?"

At this, Adam seemed curious. "Perhaps you should tell me, Eugene."

"Nothing...it's nothing." He pocketed the letter. "I'll deal with it later. I just didn't know if there was more." He stood at edge of the doorway, his expression somber. He sucked in a deep breath himself.

"I'm sorry we have to part ways like this. I am very curious to know what you will next, but, alas..." He gave a sad grin at this. "Rapunzel needs me more than ever."

Adam studied Eugene, his pride gone, his energy to hide torn away. "Eugene...you told me before that you felt inferior to me." He returned to study the chains on the floor. "...I am the one inferior to you."

Eugene looked at Adam with uncertainty. "What...what makes you say that?"

"I would have stabbed me, in your place." Adam said without hesitation. "I would have taken my prisoner in chains without a second thought. Your compassion, your ability to understand someone else's view...you are unmatched. Your kindness to Belle...to me." Adam ducked his head lowly. "...I'm in your debt."

Eugene gave a small, awkward laugh and braced himself against the door, exaggerating his prideful stance.

"Showered in praise from you?" He wagered a mischievous grin, much like the one on the dock. "I couldn't get that in writing, could I? The boys at the Duckling will never believe me."

When a look of panic crossed Adam's face, Eugene rushed to make it clear he was kidding.

"No debt, no bargains, no need for that kind of fuss. Just do me a favor, okay? Don't feel like, I don't know, you have to do whatever this is ya gotta do alone. You do have friends. Probably more than you know." The serious tone flew from his voice as Eugene gave a wave, stomping out of the doorway. "And that's my touchy, feely, quota for the day. Feel better, Adam."

The voices Adam had awoken to had stopped, and in its place, he swore he could pick out Belle's footsteps alone. His heart raced to see her face, to hear her voice. And, soon, to be rid of this beautiful, sunlit kingdom.

He did not know how long he might stay human. But, with Belle, with the need to know how his staff fared, Adam found himself thinking of his own fate less and less.

*Home*. They would be home soon.

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**AN:** I have a special treat for you readers about who they are meeting next. Don't worry, this won't stop Belle and Adam meeting the royalty as well. It just means there's more going on than meets the eye...
To answer a few more questions from PMs I've gotten: Yep, I know Naveen (and other characters soon to appear here) are from a different, more recent area or even a largely older era. Yes, they are still going to appear here. No, there is no time travel going to be involved or anything unreasonable. This fic is within the idea that all Disney characters are aware of each other, for the most part, without too much semantics. Yes, I have an idea of how I am going to make it work in terms of tone, environment, and characterization. It may not be perfect, but I am going to try my best. c:

Thank you for reading and letting me know what you think!
PART TWO: Home/ Return of the Curse

AN: Hi everyone! I'm thrilled to keep the motion for this story going! I apologize if I can't get to the meaty parts or the more narrative-driven parts as quickly as I would like. I wanted to rush into the next set of characters, but I've come to realize that letting a story naturally breathe makes getting to the next parts all the more sweeter. Does that make sense? Gah, anyhow.

Thanks for reading!

Lumière never knew entirely what to say when The Master was upset, but this…?

This was beyond agitation.

He certainly did not expect to be hugged by M. Adam.

At least, not since after their fabulous return to humanity. Special occasions always called for sweetness, for tenderness, but to find himself swept up, off of his own boots, by The Master once more…? Did the post arrive and Cogsworth fail to mention their King had gone quite mad since his journey for M. Eric, Mm. Ariel—the rest?

He knew, of course, that M. Adam had his…difficulties. He had changed, after all. That resonated with a clear, unwavering authenticity to be...kindlier. What had been roars and tantrums, Master Adam now spoke with respect to all the live-in staff. His voice, once cruel, once lashing, now softer, more deliberate as he now thought laboriously before he speaking. But, the years had been hard to shake. Those parties of the past that thrilled and hummed the castle walls now lead to dust, to quiet. Guests, while welcomed, never stayed long, much to Lumière and the rest of the house's chagrin, as if there was some unconscious deliberation to leave before…

Before, what? Lumière gave a modest shrug to his darling, coquettish Plumette whenever she prodded about the halls, dolefully dusting and primping paintings and tapestry, dramatically fluffing herself into his arms, eyes thrown skyward in boredom. Why must they leave us, my heart?

By God! They could entertain an entire town. They could out throw a party for all the land, dare he to boast they could out shine the Festival of Fools in Paris. The castle, loud and happy, for hours and hours and hours…

Just so long as The Master could sneak away, unnoticed, under cover from Lumière—there to distract and delight— after the briefest of introductions…

That, Lumière thought with a bit of good humor, would never change. Oh, poor Mm. Belle. What an angel inside and out—only to be cooped here with The Master. However he had changed, "His Grace", (as that lout of a Majordomo Cogsworth had taken to only refer to M.) was as gawkily as ever.

Even as a boy, grace was not a princely title The Master ever conquered, even if the staff had been too frightened to state so.

But yet, here without warning, he found himself snatched up in a very anxious embrace. Had Lumière known better, he might have thought The Master was quite happy about something, something yet to be said…

But as the embrace went on, it left him with more a feeling of foreboding, than the gentleness the
affection inclined.

"...Master? Are you quite alright? Not that I object to hugging. I do enjoy hugging. But, that is, you don't hug. So. I am...concerned?"

"It is nothing, Lumière." Adam replied, putting the man down as quickly as he had picked him up. "I am just glad to finally be home. Where are the others? I need to see them..." And with that, he was off again.

Mm. Belle trailed in behind, flushed from her own journey. Lumière drifted to her warmly, grasping her hand in his own to bring his lips to her fingers. "You are as lovely as ever, my Queen. Welcome back, welcome home!"

"Please," Belle said gently, "To you, all my friends here, my name will always just be Belle." She smiled at him distantly, her brown eyes looking after The Master in deep disquiet. "Um, if you will pardon me."

And then, she, too, was gone.

Lumière stood by the door, foot planted on the runner rug, feeling quite put-out. He glanced at M. Adrione and Mm. Chaperue for any clues but they simply slipped away, back out into the court yard, pretending to be far more interested in unloading luggage than The Master's strange behavior...

But something was, indeed, wrong.

Adam had stormed into his own home, his own castle, near tearing the heavy oaken door from gold hinges. He had checked every room all by himself. He pulled back long curtains, pushed open every window—and there were quite a lot of those. He poured through the kitchen galley, four drawing rooms, the Ball Room, the master dining room, the guest dining room, the washrooms, the gala, the botany houses, the gardens, the terraces, honestly...Lumière wasn't quite sure what it was he was looking for. He greeted every servant, every member of the entire caste, his blue eyes tremulous and rushing, until everyone was met.

The better question was: why did he seem in such a hurry? Where was the rush? They had just arrived back in town, oui?

Lumière, realizing Belle was no longer in view, caught up to Adam, matching his pacing with little ease.

"Master, I was thinking, within the next few days there will be much to do in Paris. It is near time for the Festival." He glanced behind him to check that that busybody Cogsworth was not in earshot. "I composed a request to Cogsworth that, clearly, he did not send out, but, if you don't mind...Master?"

They had arrived at the rose garden. In full bloom, the faces of the roses had moved themselves in time with the sun, drifting their scent through the open windows of the castle. Soon, the smell of roses would be in every room, on all their clothing, soft and heady in the air...

"...Yes, Lumière, whatever you wish. It is fine with me." The Master responded distractedly.

Adam had slowed, walking back through the thick, thorny bushes of his roses, carefully cupping the faces of a white rose, then a yellow, and finally, a red.

"Ah, yes, sir, I took good care of them. You will find not a petal out of place."

At this, The Master turned to his friend, his eyes low. "You are certain nothing is different?
Everyone is fine? I—I checked as quickly as I could…I…"

Lumière looked a taken back. He glanced once more and ducked his voice low. "Master…are you quite alright?"

Adam sighed deeply. "I don't know, my friend."

"Whatever do you mean, sir?"

Adam let go of the rose, returning it into its nuzzled family of flowers. "I…I have just been worried."

He turned again on his heel, walking back towards the terrace. "What is it you were going to ask of me, Lumière?"

"Oh." Lumière adjusted his vest, unsure. "Yes, I have chatted with the majority of the staff and, well, if it is alright with you, sir, we wanted to go into Paris in a day's time. To see the Festival of Fools, no? Wouldn't that be exciting? It has been…very drab around here, Master."

Adam stopped shortly. "You wish for…everyone to go?"

"Oui, Master. Everyone. And, if I may be so bold, I think Mm. Belle would love to go see Paris in season."

Adam held these words closely, his jaw opening slightly, only to close his mouth once more. "I…I am fine with you and the rest going…but please." At this request, this plea, The Master looked quite distressed. "Do not tell Belle. Not yet. I must speak with her still."

What had happened? A fight between The Master and Belle?

Lumière wished to reach forward, to tell Adam that he would never do a thing to upset him further if he truly did not wish it, but he did not move. Instead, he turned his thoughts towards the idea that his request had been granted.

"So, you do not mind? We…go?" Lumière's face lit up exuberantly, nearly shaking with excitement. "How fantastic! We shall clean the castle post-haste and start packing for tomorrow! Oh! Plumette, she will swoon from happiness!"

At the delight in Lumière's voice, Adam pulled himself a little from his thoughts, his expression lenient. "But…for tomorrow. Please. I…I don't wish to be out for long."

"You…you will traveling with us, sir?" Lumière intoned carefully, his own eyes wide in astonishment.

"Yes." Adam returned slowly. "I feel Belle needs this right now. It does not matter what I want."

"Oh, Master," Lumière said frivolously, "Do not be dramatic! You might have a good time after all, hm? And with Belle in beautiful Paris…just stay close to her." He gave a coy wink to Adam. Then, he glanced into the open sky. The evening stars were just beginning to peek out of the clouds. They looked white and pink, adrift like sails in the sunset. "Oh, well, I must be going in, then. It is nippy out tonight, is it not, sir?"

Adam lifted his head to the sky as well. "It smells like rain."

"Does it, sir?" Lumière returned quickly. He checked the sky again, the dry dirt beneath his shoes. "Well, if The Master insists, I am sure nature will obey." He took this in great jest before he returned back into the castle. "I will be in the East Wing if you need me, Master."
"Thank you, Lumière." The Master replied. He stood on the terrace for a long time after, staring out into the gardens, into the woods. Lumière could still see him standing there from the windows of the upper towers. His shoulders tight, his head pointedly forward. His long hair had once more been tied upwards, wild and tangled. Even in his dayclothes, The Master had a knack for looking out of place in the way of royalty. He looked more like a wolf surveying its territory.

At this thought, a wolf responded. Its howl, low, then rising high, out into the distance. Adam turned his head and its direction and took a single step forward.

It stopped.

The wind had picked up. From this high up, Lumière had suddenly grown so cold.

Lumière quickly shut the windows, casting away the chill in the air. It was not assumed it would rain tonight, but now, Lumière felt the joy of the day, the thrill of tomorrow, almost too far away.

He turned away, deciding to light every fireplace in the castle, to keep everyone warm, and hoped The Master might come in soon.

Belle's tongue had grown tired of talking. Her and Rapunzel did not scream at one another, but Belle felt so tired, so very, unbelievably tired, half of it because of everything she could not possibly explain. And why should she now? She felt betrayed herself. Rapunzel, her friend, her dearest letter writer, Belle had told her so many secrets, even of the curse, but she did not ever need to tell Rapunzel of what the curse had done to Adam. That was not for anyone to know. That was done and gone. But now?

Belle had no answer, no logic to help her. Her own thoughts felt muddled.

Between her night spent at Adam's bedside, and now, she stood here before Rapunzel, her green eyes have teary, half filled with rage. She could spare herself the sleep no longer.

"I…I am done here." Belle struggled to say, the hurt lingering her tone. She rose from her chair, took in the beautiful master bedroom Rapunzel had pained all her own. Daisy yellow suns and grey-toned-moons, star charts, the consolations she had shown Ariel…it seemed so long ago now. "I will retrieve Adam and we will be gone."

One arm cinched around the arm of her own chair, the other hand clasped over her eyes, Rapunzel made no move to stop her. "I….I want you to know I want what is best…"

"For me," Belle retorted, her voice sore, but her words, she hoped, still held her resentment within them. "I know what you wish for Adam."

"Belle," Rapunzel began, destitute, her voice losing its own will to continue this fight. "If only you had told me. If—"

"Tell you?" Belle snapped, her fists tight to her sides. "I don't have to tell you anything I do not wish! What Adam and I have been through—how can you refuse to see it any closer than what you, too, have suffered? Tell me, Rapunzel, do you wish to talk about that?"

"This is different, Belle," Rapunzel returned ominously. "Gothel is dead. Adam is dangerous."

Her Adam, dangerous? No…he would never hurt anyone, not willingly…Was this curse forever? No…it had been broken…she had broken it; they had broken it. How could this have happened? Belle wrapped her fingers into her hair, palms pressed to her face. She would take this no longer.
She made for the door without even a goodbye.

Rapunzel turned as well, arms crossed to her chest. She refused to see them off. She refused to leave the bedroom, feeling cowardly, feeling lowly, and nothing like the daughter she strived to be. Her parents… they would be endlessly disappointed in her. But she could not move. Eugene would have to see them off.

Belle made her way down the hall, eyes forward, remarking nothing to the passing guards. She only had eyes for the terrible, gleaming shine of their swords, their axes. Rapunzel had kept her word: no one within the castle, or outside of it, knew of Adam. But yet…

She picked up her pace.

"Belle…" She heard an exhausted voice call out for her. Her heart skipped. She raced towards it, turning the corner, only to end up wrapped tightly in Adam's arms. Human— he was still human!

My Belle, finally. Adam pressed his face into her hair, his arms around her waist. He tried to pick her up, her weight, her frame so easy to play with how he wanted, but he hardly had the strength to hold himself up. He tried not to lean on her too heavily. "Belle…"

She could feel him unsteady in her arms. She thought of their time apart, of his recent illness, of all he had attempted to do for her, and could only hold him tighter, trying to push everything away. She had no tears left within her.

"Belle…Belle…" He could not stop saying her name, as if to remind himself she was here. "…I didn't mean… I... I don't understand…" Adam murmured, his words all but lost in her hair.

"Shh, it's alright. We're together now. It's alright." She attempted to soothe him, but she could think nothing of the guards down the hall. "I wish to leave. I want to leave now."

"I agree." He said solemnly. He looked back into the room nervously. "Eugene…"

"What of him?" Belle buffeted, her tone terse. She had no more reason to feel fond of either of them, if this were their treatment. When Rapunzel had forced her out of the chamber to speak with Adam, Belle had saw the chains over the floor. She paced outside, while Eugene stood by, his expression crestfallen, his eyes turned away from her, as if shamed. She did not need to hear his voice to know of his opinions about them. "I hope I never—"

"Shh… just listen, Belle." Adam began gently. He walked slowly alongside her, a hand along the wall to keep his balance, trailing his fingers loosely. "He has been nothing but understanding. He disagrees with Rapunzel. He does not want us gone. He's helping with the ship now. I didn't even have to ask him. He just… took it upon himself."

Belle considered this quickly but she could not break away from the look of mistrust in Rapunzel's eyes, held in the back of her mind. If that was true, where was Eugene, then, to help her against the most powerful person in all of Corona? Hiding? A coward like his wife? "…I'm glad he was so kind to you… I'm sorry… I… I just want to leave."

"I know, Belle, I know." He wanted to stop her again, to close his eyes and wish them anywhere else, even days before, back with Eric and Ariel, but he could offer her no such comfort. He could hardly provide himself such comfort. He was still a man, but for how long? How much time yet did he have…?

Belle was swift and silent beside him, her thoughts swirling, her own passion getting the better of
her. She would do everything in her power to protect him. There was little else to it. Everything else came second, including her own wishes. She tried to pull herself away from the conversation on the ship, where Adam had confessed to his own thoughts. *How far back were the signs?...Is this all my fault? Mon Dieu...*

Belle was glad she lacked the tears. She found little reprieve in crying. They had fallen on deaf ears to Rapunzel, and again with those too ignorant to seek the most basic of human dignity. And Adam. She glanced up at his face, the way sweat delicately lined his temples. He needed her now. She couldn't torment herself. Not yet.

"Please, we will figure this out. Together." Hope was not something to be forced, but it was all she had.

"And…if not?" Adam asked her, the panic exposed in his voice. He had stopped briefly, his breath tight in his chest, a hand pressed to his heart, beating so fast, so hard, it was hurting him. Belle returned to his side, bringing up her hands to his face. He closed his eyes at her touch.

What Adam dared to imply…what he kept trying to tell her…it was *killing* her.

"Adam, I will love you, always. No matter what."

He opened his eyes to take in her face. He reached up to carefully push her hair behind her ear, just as he had so long before, the joyous day, when the world made sense, and the curse had been purged.

"I love you." He said, but the words were tight, his expression pained. He was fighting not to cry—Belle could read him so easily. What had that wretched girl done to him with her magic? Now, Adam was the one to cry. Belle moved her thumbs to wipe away his tears as they fell. He could not stop himself. "I love you." He said this like a prayer. "I love you."

"I will never leave you. Never."

Adam's eyelids fluttered. Belle could feel the sudden rush of his body weakening, sliding downwards. She scrambled to hold him up, but she wasn't strong enough. She pushed out the sound of guards running. How his body had felt once, cold, too cold, in her hands. *It's all in my head. It's all in my head,* she chanted. She would find the strength, somehow.

Over her shoulder, another figure approached. Belle spun in wild retort, and she came face to face with Rapunzel's husband. Eugene stood, looking for all the world like someone that had walked in on the worst of all the moments that made up his short, stupid life.

"Uh...uhmmmhiI'msorrybuttheshipisready." He said in one entire breath. He brushed his hands along the back of neck, clearly embarrassed. He averted his eyes. "You guys do wanna leave here, right?"

"Please," Belle said, refusing to let this man, this kingdom, hear the fear in her voice. She was not afraid. She was not afraid of this man, of their future. She refused. She curled her fists and held her ground. She refused to let them make her afraid. "Do not touch him," She said bitingly when she saw Eugene move to grasp Adam's arm, to help take the weight from her shoulders.

"Ah!—of course, right!" Eugene said quickly, lifting his hands to show her he had no ill intention. "Everything is there...your staff is waiting, uh. I." He couldn't seem to find the words. What to say? What to do? "I'm sorry this happened. I truly, sincerely, hope things get better. Adam is...he's a good man. I know he is."

Belle moved on without looking back. She lacked the strength to give back to Eugene, even in
respect. She was so tired, too tired. She wanted to go home. She wanted to leave this place. She used this will to move Adam with her.

"Goodbye, Eugene," was all Belle managed. She could not even will herself to be angry any longer. She helped Adam along the docks, her dark hair, a shadowy fury on the evening wind. She kept her back to the kingdom as long as she could, the only weapon she felt she had against the sun, the moon, the dark, distraught rush of the ocean’s waves.

When they reached their sleeping quarters, Belle continued her silence. She undressed them both and pulled her husband to her chest, her arms aching from how hard she was holding onto him.

"I love you," Belle said faintly into his skin. Adam did not respond, too far gone from her, too trapped within his own mind. "I love you so much," She whispered again, closing her eyes, burying herself into his back.

It was only when his breathing was deep and even, when Adam was finally, finally asleep, safe in her arms, did Belle allow the slow wash of terror that swelled from her chest to reach her heart.

How, even safe, going home, she felt something was slipping away from her. Something, perhaps, she did not realize. Something she had forced to change too quickly. She couldn't tell. Maybe this was all out of her control...control. She just allowed the tears to slip silently down her face, not even bothering to wipe them away. Perhaps she had tried to control too much.

"Please...let us just get home safely. Please." She squeezed herself closer to him, and let the hot tears sting at her eyes. She felt so helpless. She was afraid. She couldn't hold this back forever. Was this the work of The Enchantress, still? What did she want with him? What if she was anything like Rapunzel...unfeeling, terrified, spineless...

Belle stopped herself, muffling a sob. She couldn't bring herself to hate Rapunzel. She didn't hate her husband, either. But she prayed they would keep their promise. That promise was the one thing Belle could not revoke. She could keep them safe, from the villages, from other kingdoms...but even she could not stop rumors, how large they grow.

Like fear... spread like wildfire.

She pressed a kiss into Adam's skin and just focused on his breathing.

As long as they were together, everything would be fine....

*Please.* Belle thought silently, unsure of whom she begged. *Please.*

Soon, she would find more answers. She would not allow her life to be led in fear, in hiding.

This curse will meet its end a second time. Belle promised more than herself this.

She promised this to Adam.

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**AN:** Thank you so very, very, very much for your reviews and following, and, of course, for reading! See you soon! Next characters then! ; )
"And you wish to go?" Belle was staring at Adam seriously, her brow knitted, her expression fixed.

They each sat within the front most drawing room of the entrance to the castle which held Adam's chair and an ancient fireplace. Over the rug, Belle had pulled out many books from their library, each propped open to different pages of words and images. Most Adam could not figure out, but one page, featured in rough sketch, a very round looking creature, stone-like in appearance, with large crystals around its neck. Wherever did she find that book? What section? When did he even purchase it? Perhaps it was time for the laborious task of organization once more for his records…

…But Belle had captured his face with her eyes. Those dark, fantastic eyes. He almost forgot the question she had asked him, staring back at her, dim firelight dancing along her cheeks.

"With our staff? Through loud party and celebration? All over the streets of Paris?"

Ah, that. The more she said it, the more Adam regretted.

"Yes…" Adam continued, trailing off as he considered the ashes in the hearth.

It had begun to rain early that evening. The warmth from fireplace made even the darkest corners of the castle feel quite comfortable. However, Adam had not gotten too far in this practiced speech, and he felt the words dropping from his head like the slow peeling skin of the wood before him.

"I hoped this would make you…happy." At this, he turned as inconspicuously as he could back to his book, a worn, weathered thing, where he had spent long hours practicing the swirls of prose in shaking, unruly hand.

It would appear now, since the return of the curse, Adam could not afford himself the pride he once had in his slow, but meager, return to the word of literacy. Basic sentences in French, basic arithmetic had flown back to him easily…until now. The shaking of his fingers had only gotten worse when applied to paper. That breathless pain he had felt before had not returned, but in its place, Adam felt himself coming apart by his own apprehension. Where was the point if he was to return to his wretched, Beastly body? Why pretend there was future in menial tasks that edged him closer to humanity when, every day, each hour, he felt a little than less human? And not even just to become an animal…

He felt lower than even that.

When he had awoken in Belle’s arms, he had expected to find fur, tooth, and claw once more—but yet, human he remained. His comprehension for magic was limited and dismissive. Ariel fueled by sea (to this Belle agreed, curious, probing for more details Adam's mind failed to remember) and now Rapunzel by some unworldly internal light. She could manipulate sickness and hurt…but for how long? To what ends did that kind of power reach? Unchecked, could Rapunzel and her people fight death itself?

Could one live forever with such power…?
"Adam," Belle pulled herself closer to his side. Despite his attempts to pretend, she laid a hand over his fingers, holding them tight so they would not move. Adam blushed, defeated by his own haplessness at maintaining...anything, it felt, since those long days at sea. "My happiness is not dictated by where we go nor what we do. You understand this, don't you?"

He brought her hand to his mouth, resting his lips over her skin in thought.

"Belle..." He began seriously. "I cannot promise you the balls I once could. I cannot promise you light and music and a thrum of people...I can hardly promise you a dinner with close friends. *Your* close friends. But that was all before...now I just want to give you what I can. What we still have time to do."

"We have the rest of our lives, Adam. Please." Belle returned, her voice cutting.

"Precisely," Adam agreed. "You seemed quite enthralled with travel. You adore meeting new people." Adam rumbled. These facts Belle could not dismiss. "That is yet another thing I love about you. Your sense of adventure is remarkable. It...it gives me the courage to try again."

"Adam...with all that has happened...I just don't know."

"And since when are you to waste opportunity against the unknown?" At this, Adam gave the back of her hand a small, pinching bite with his teeth, causing Belle to gasp and pull away in laughter.

"Stop it!" Belle giggled, her hand now safety to her chest. "You will not win in buttering me up for something, clearly, you don't want to do."

"I would do anything for you, my dear." Adam stated simply.

"That isn't the same. I want to do something you want to do, my love. Please. Please think on that."

"I have. All night, in fact. And I have discussed it with the rest of the house. The Festival of Fools comes only once a year. I shan't have you miss that. And I know you will miss that."

At this, Belle seemed uncomfortable. Where Adam had found much pleasure, much adventure in the comfort of books, of Belle's voice reading to him, she knew how he still remained unsure of the world beyond his home. But for Belle...it was undeniable how badly she wanted more.

"...You haven't been well."

"To which part of me do you speak? This has been my whole life." Adam jested fondly. "If only my mother could have met you, Belle, she would have agreed. I was a terrible boy who became a dreadful young man and now I am merely the shell of a wiser fool. To be unwell is my blood." He held her eyes with his, making sure she was watching, as he gave a small, mock bow from where he laid. "Are you certain you wish to marry into this family? Ah, right. It's already too late."

"Adam," Belle said mindfully, but a small smile had broken across her face. She returned to the books about them, running fingertips caringly over the open pages. "There is so much I need to understand...about magic, the curse. There has to be more that I am simply missing. You're right. Beyond the French books, the English, there is so much I cannot translate...staring at these pages all night will not help."

Ah, yes. His beloved's sweet, soulful plan to 'fight' the enviable. Adam smiled softly at her.

"Could you find reason in going if you traded some of your research into merriment? Just for the afternoon. You can—you can take those books with you, if you wish."
"And…what if you…change?" Belle had picked up a book and held it to her chest, as if seeking protection from her own question. "All those people…"

"It will be brief. And. And." Adam stumbled to keep his plans afloat. "And if I feel ill, I will return home, unseen. I am very good at escaping from places unseen." He chuckled at his own self-deprecation but his wife wilted before him. She turned back to her books. "…Well, I thought that was funny."

Adam would not let this stand. If it was his choice to go, he would not allow Belle to sulk. He knew she wanted this.

He stretched himself along the rug, pretending to rest along the floor, before, steadily, collecting his balance on his hands and knees, he crept up her, his shadow rising, imposing in the firelight, graceful along the walls, before he made a jump towards her, gathering up Belle in his arms and covering her neck in kisses. She squealed and tried to pull away, battering him with a book, before she dropped it to the rug to return his affection.

"How did you convince me to go somewhere? This isn’t fair!" Belle returned indignantly.

He growled playfully into the shell of her ear. "Selfishness does not believe in what is fair."

Now he had her pinned to the rug. Her dark hair spread out along the floor, shimmering red in the light. He leaned down to kiss her once more and, soon, nothing else need be said.

They had arrived early that morning in Paris. The sun reaching into the clear, blue sky above, looming like a golden flag over the city. The main square had already been set up from the evening before. Large dancing platforms, spires for watching, marble fountains and wishing wells. The sound of horses, coins falling from purses, the calling of commoners, voices rough and loud. The purples, golds, greens, reds, the faces of clowns and face paint on every person passing by…

Of course, the majority of the events waiting to take place were the make-shift felts of breweries.

*The Festival of Fools*, thought Adam, *would turn out to be little more than a festival of drunks. Heh.* Perhaps the title suited it better than he originally thought.

His staff did not stick to the carriages for long. They tittered and trotted about, zigging and zagging, grabbing one another in squeals of delight and awe, their own wild brand of party dwellers, swallowing the atmosphere in unparalleled competition to be the loudest, the brightest, the boldest trope among the grounds.

Adam was more than grateful to see them off.

With Plumette skipping far head, Lumière turned back briefly to his King, a fast wink echoing his own feelings of anticipation, now equals within the city, on a day where pomp and circumstances, titles, lands, these stances had no meaning, all reasoning reversed.

*Poor Master, he will be drowned in cordiality.* Lumière thought in fondness, a little saddened that he would not be around to gleam the majority of Adam's reactions. An hour before they had engaged in formal call-and-responses for what to do about Adam, well, being royalty:

*(Shall we bring banners, Master?)*
*(My God, Lumière, absolutely not.)*
*(And we shall tell no one around that they are to call you 'His Majesty' or…)*
*(I wish to be as discreet as possible. It should not be hard. I own no likeness, I appear to no crowds.*
I….are you mocking me?)
(Oh, no, Master…where would you get an idea like that?)

Belle, Belle. That was what mattered. And to see her face light up among the rush of people, shopkeepers, performers…Adam could not take his eyes from her. Belle dressed modestly in her usual blue dress, tying up her hair to match Adam’s, keeping his hand in hers as they walked. Adam kept up his own suit, navy blue, yellow buttons, and common boots. He did not wish to make a scene, but, to be thought a commoner…he did not mind to make a stranger glance twice at him.

Adam paid little mind to where they were going—only that when they stopped, Belle had craned her neck to stare up extraordinarily high.

And, like perfect clockwork, a loud, echoing bell tolled from on high, causing Adam to near jump out of his skin. Even from the ground, the sound rattled bones, spooked horses.

Notre-Dame de Paris—of course. The large, beautiful church stood forever in its refinery, unmoved by the urchins below it. It had recently been cleaned, shining in the midday sun quite piously. Even the Gothic architecture, expelled of residue of rain and mud, looked remarkably, well, good. While his time as a Beast had changed his castle to cast itself into darkness and gloom, Adam he grown fond of the gargoyles that stared out over his home—to see the creatures return, brave and uncaring, in broad daylight, made him feel a little less out of place. And conjoined to a place of holiness, no doubt. For once, Adam found a great interest in foundation that crafted Paris Belle usually kept for herself.

"Do you know of the story of Notre Dame?" Belle asked him, pulling him up the steps, as if she wished to go inside.

Adam raised a brow. "The story? Of its history or of its mystery?"

She chuckled. "So you are aware of the story!"

Adam matched her pace, pulling her back down the steps, alongside the pathway outside of the church's yard. He did not wish to go inside. He had seen enough of the church as it was. Adam did not consider himself a religious man—nor, did faith seem to find itself in his wife, but Adam felt suddenly alarmed at being forced inside, sweat dripping down his back, nervous.

…In fact, seeing Notre Dame again had drafted a slight memory in his mind…of his mother. He stared back up into the towers, squinting into the sun.

"My mother was a devout woman. I don't remember much of her, but I know this: she loved the bells of the church. I recall her telling my father how sad she was that we were too far away to hear them ring. I was far too young to remember attending here, but she always sang this little children's rhyme to me at night…" Adam titled his head, as if listening. "I'm trying to recall…it goes something like…" He gave a soft hum in the back of his throat, much to Belle's amusement. "Here is a riddle—to guess if you can—sing the bells of Notre Dame—uh—something about monsters, men, mortality stories—don't sin."

Belle gave a loud laugh. "Yes, 'don't sin', Adam, I do think that sums up the song well!"

"I was very young! Whatever do you want from me? A whole song?" Adam pulled her close, feeling her warmth in the sunlight. "I will leave the singing to you, my dear."

She pulled away, giggling. "Will you do me a favour?"

"Certainly. Does it involve not sinning?" At this, he gave a much opened grin, showing his teeth. "I
promise nothing of the sort."

She muted her smiled, trying to compose herself to go inside the building. Within her bag, she had packed two books—one in Greek and one in Latin. "I have a friend inside of this church. Will you wait here for me while I deliver these books?"

*More friends?* Adam thought in shock. "$I—of course. I will be right here, Belle."

"Thank you. I will be right back."

And with that, Belle was gone, a flurry of steps and a soft sound of her dress fluttering in the wind as she went. Adam stood alone, feeling fairly out of place, shuffling around the court yard. He made no attempt to look anyone in the eye, least they think it an invitation for conversation.

The bells chimed again—loud, deep, and caterwauling against each other…This close, the noise caused a great fiction in his ears—a slight throb of his temples.

Adam reached up to rub at his face only to find that when he put down his hand, he had wondered eye to eye with that of a large animal.

Its breathing alarmed, snorting from its long muzzle—Adam turned, buffeted by the rearing back of a horse on its hind legs—its eyes wide in fear. Gasping back, Adam thrusted himself back, hands pulled up to defend himself—he never did too well with horses. Even Phillippe still regarded him with a watchful eye.

"I am so sorry! Achilles!" A blond man had thrown himself between the horse and Adam, arms raised high above to ward it off. "$He—he never gets so spooked! Achilles! *What is the matter with you?*"

The horse did not seem to listen. It continued its assault, falling back until it maintained a good distance between itself and Adam. Concerned, the man turned back, his own face looking very disorderly. "$Achilles! We've fought *Crusades* together, boy! What is wrong with you? He's just one man!"

Panicked, Adam continued walking backwards—anything to get away from that panicking horse, his head throbbing from the sound of the bells and the horse's screaming.

The man managed to wrangle the horse in, twisting reins around great fists, before he sighed in relief.

"There—there. Sheesh! There are too many people around for you to be doing that." He gave the horse a tough pat to its hide, none too hard, but not too soft, either. "$You'll hurt someone! Like you nearly—" The man made no move to approach Adam, only to stare with slight curiosity at just how far of a length Adam had gone to not be near Achilles. "$Hurt…this…fellow."

There was an awkward pause. Adam refused to come closer. The man blinked hard, as if he felt some odd sort of disturbance that his horse merely sensed first. Adam studied him with cautious eyes. The man had a golden goatee and blue eyes, muscular in build. From the way he steered that horse and his well-sewn clothing, Adam knew that this man must be of military training.

"My name is Phoebus. I am…" The man began, free arm outstretched to shake hands. When the man tread forward, tagging the horse alongside him, Adam took a step back. This repeated.

Repeated.

The man stopped, dropping his hand.
Feeling his back suddenly touch against Notre Dame's outside walls, so did Adam.

"Uh…I'm…what are you doing?" The man asked, raising his voice to Adam could hear him over the crowd.

"Your horse doesn't care for me." Adam returned, as if that explained the harsh intensity of his distance.

"Yes, well, I'm very sorry about that. He's a good horse, really. I think all the people today just got to him." At this, Phoebus laid the reins on the back of his mount, bringing up a hand to command the horse. "Achilles—heel." He approached Adam attentively, causally, sensing there was something a little…startled about the man his horse had nearly maimed.

As if by reflex, Adam stepped back again, only to be pushed back by the walls of the church. He did not realize the man had a broadsword holstered to his side. Adam had to fight to not stare at that weapon in sheer spite.

Soon, the man was before him, eyes light. "My name is Phoebus. I was going to say I'm a Captain of the Knight's Guard for Paris—but I'm not anymore. That's just bad habit. Although, I suppose today is the day of all day's to attempt breaking that, hey?"

Adam studied his eyes between the sword and the man's hand. Attempting to save face, he straightened himself, grasped hands, and quickly pulled away.

"Adam. I'm not anyone. I'm waiting for my wife."

"'No one', you say?" Phoebus returned a smirk. "Tell me, if that is for only today, does that mean you're actually some sort of king?" He snickered away. "You have nice enough clothes for it, if I do say, my friend."

Adam did not laugh.

"She is inside." Adam concluded coldly.

"Notre Dame?" He mused. "On the Day of Fools? How odd. Absolutely no one is in there today of all days. Well. Besides..." he lifted his eyes to the bell towers, then dropped them. "Anyhow. I'm sorry again that my horse panicked. I feel like a very bad handler. Can I buy you a drink to make up for it?"

"I—" Adam, too, scoured his eyes to the church, but Belle was nowhere to be seen. "I can't. Thank you." He moved around the man without much dignity, keeping his back to him as he made his way back to the steps.

Much to Adam's dismay, the man followed suit. "Really, I must insist. I'm sure your wife would understand. In fact, my wife, she is putting on a performance in the celebration today. I do think she would be very happy to put on a performance for free for you. And, if I may say, she's the best dancer in all of Paris."

They were cut off in conversation as the bells had rung once more, clanging the air and causing the hairs on Adam's arms to rise.

Go. Away. Adam hissed against the chiming of the bells. "I do not dispute this, monsieur, but I cannot."

"Please. My name is Phoebus. And if you're certain." It would appear Phoebus had the common
sense to know when he was not wanted. He gave a shrug and turned away.

Adam hid his sigh of relief as Phoebus returned to his horse.

"Alright Achilles, you miserable beast. Let's go. On, on—the square. Esmeralda will be waiting for us."

Adam stood where he had before, counting the chiming of the bells with little indulgence as he waited. And waited. And as the shadows from the afternoon sun sank low in the sky, painting the gruesome smiles on Notre Dame's gargoyles to frowns, Adam soon found he had no choice. That blasted encounter with that man and his horse had separated him from Belle.

Alone. In Paris. In a crowed party where even his staff had disappeared. His 'brief' plans all but ruined.

Adam stared at the long worn doors to Notre Dame, feeling as if he was barred from it. Whoever Belle had gone to see within its candled chamber, Adam hadn't the faintest idea.

For once in his life, Adam hoped he might be spared an ounce of help from the divine, as much as his body was soon to be unholy. What little soul still lay inside of him.

For Belle, he told himself.

He would find her and they would be rid of this place, this city, its loudness, its grandness.

His own burning fear of it all.

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**AN:** Hehehehehe! I am thrilled at the lovely reviews, comments, kudos and enjoyment I can give to you all! See you soon! ; )
"I feel I must tell you, my son, usually the punishment comes after the crime." The old priest said, his back bent over the pews. He was cleaning the rows one by one with terrycloth and melted lacquer wax.

Adam turned in alarm. He had only sat down for a moment in wait. He had wondered uncomfortably from the narthex to the nave, feeling more trespasser than ever, when he finally stopped at the back most benches. He figured if Belle was still here, she would see him quickly, the lone figure inside the entire church.

If one excluded the spying face of the priest, that is.

The old man gave a little chuckle of himself, ancient face crinkled in lighthearted humor. The young man seated before him looked guilty as sin, as if caught in a moment of nefarious thought.

"I apologize to you. I know I shouldn't make light in this beautiful place, but perhaps even the joy of this day has turned this old heart younger."

"No. It is my place to apologize to you, sir. I am in your church without moral reasoning. I am looking for someone."

"Ah, I see." The priest straightened his spine, looking to the ceiling as if sharing a secret joke. "You doubt yourself too soon, my son. What better place to look than Notre Dame?"

"No..." Adam could not tell if this man was playing him still or meant wisdom. "I am not on a pilgrimage. I am simply awaiting my wife. She has a friend in this place."

At this, the old man raised two greying, bushy brows. "Did she?"

Now it was Adam's turn to look surprised. "I would assume she meant you, Father…?"

"Jean, my son. But there is no need to be so formal on the Day of Fools. I am delighted in your company. On this day, my home feels so empty, as if the people outside could not be happier than to rid themselves of devotion. I am afraid to tell you I have not met one soul more besides your own. Perhaps she is already gone from here?"

Adam felt his stomach drop. He had not considered that Belle would leave Notre Dame. But the reality dawned on him logically. She was more than likely searching for him as well.

"I saw her go in. She must have left her gift with someone here. I might ask them where she went. Is there no one else besides you, Father Jean?"

The old man considered Adam seriously but widened his mouth into a smile. "There might be." He said mysteriously. "But, I am unsure if you really want to meet this friend of hers. He is quite shy to strangers. He might even ask you to leave."

The old priest turned to stare up at the stained glass that let in such fantastic light into the heart of the church, as if some voice called to him. Adam followed his gaze to find a small stone passage to the east. It seemed to lead upwards, into the rafters of the church.
"I am too old to make such a journey so high. But." The priest turned back to Adam, his small eyes shining. "If you ask openly, he may help you."

Openly, Adam picked at the word in dismay. Was it so apparent, his guard against anyone that came too close? He resisted crossing his arms over his chest in retaliation. "I assure you I don't mean to stay a minute longer. I will be brief with him."

"Of course, my son. Of course." The priest nodding knowingly. "Who would want to miss more of this lovely day?"

The priest said this a bit too wondrously, as if, peering into Adam's unprotected heart, no matter how he attempted to hide, this man of God could see straight through him, into his disdain for the world outside, for perhaps even the church itself.

"Thank you, Father Jean." Adam replied as earnestly as he could. He wanted to break for the stairs but he found himself unmoving.

He considered the old man a moment more.

"I...I appreciate you taking time out of your work to speak with me. Is there much I can do to aid you in your keeping of the church? It's very large. Far larger than I remember."

The old man smiled once more in appreciation.

"I thought I sensed an ounce of reverence in you yet. So you have known faith before. Why stray so long from our lovely Lady of Paris?"

"I...I have been away from Paris for many, many years." Adam answered in kind. "By then, I felt as if I could not return. That I do not belong."

"Hmm." The old man pondered this for quite some time. He sat beside Adam with his withered chin in one hand. "Tell me, my son, for it seems you have known suffering. What is it that you feel you have lost?"

Adam found he could no longer hold his gaze. He looked at his boots along the floor. He was not prepared to be spoken to so unceremoniously.

Adam found himself grasping for the proper words. "I often wonder if it is possible to lose something I feel I never had, Father."

"A great question," The priest returned. "Can we, so human and flawed, possess what is earned? Are we ever truly set to a path of righteousness? And, what then, is our reward when we feel our strife has ended?" The priest looked to Adam in gentle reminder. "I have seen eyes like yours before. In other, even more harrowed men, that think their actions have severed their spirits. I feel I know your answer, but I must ask this. Have you known death?"

"Yes." Adam said slowly. "My mother died when I was young. After her passing, I felt... such an emptiness for the world. For my father. Then, for my people. I almost cannot recall a time I did not seem to think my life was distant, as if it were so lacking of value, my own intentions lacked the same."

He paused here, as if suddenly locked into confession.

"That feeling has since turned away from others and onto myself." He felt his fingers curl into his palms. "This anger. As if I am burdened by my own free will." Adam gave a bitter laugh. "To see
others suffering and yet to think only of myself, and, yet, I understand that this fault is my own. I lack the means to control it." Adam turned his face away from the light, as if it pained him. "I wonder if my soul went with my mother?"

"Souls are bound together in this brief existence, but one cannot be taken by the other." The old man explained. "But I feel what you think is lost is merely hidden."

The priest stood heavily, a hand suddenly on Adam's shoulder. "I cannot promise you an easy answer, my son. But I do believe you have the strength to seek out this truth. All that remains is the ability to risk the pain of believing in yourself. And, one last thing, for this is a warning I feel deeply for you."

At this, Adam raised his head, all the rawness inside of his head, quieted.

The old man held his words in deep conviction.

"Do not compromise in your humanity. There is nothing more tempting than seeking reception through the sweet promises of a wicked tongue. This loss you must seek is only through your own means. Selfish, perhaps, painful, without doubt, but a soul is not a deal to be won. No one, no force or magic on earth, can offer you peace of mind, but yourself."

He began his task once more of cleaning the pews but he motioned for Adam to make for the stairs. "Go on, then. Go find that wife of yours. I will be here and will stop you if she returns before you are done."

Adam stood carefully and paced for the stairs, unsure of how one as easily went from advice to action as this man had done. He only felt more exposed by the look in the priest's eyes. To say so much, to so easily speak his own mind to a stranger, in such a sacred place, left Adam feeling suddenly panicked, as if he expected the church to be stormed with gunfire and swords for daring to appear human before the eyes of God. A blasphemy he all but passionately acted upon.

Finding he could not speak a word more, Adam turned up the stairs without a single glance back.

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The loft was empty. Stars upon stairs as they led upwards, open towards the sky, where stone walls gave way to the spire like bones of the church. Adam minded his step more carefully, lest an old platform give way, or open aired, windowed view cause him to fall from the perilous height of Notre Dame. Adam had soon expected to come across another man along his climb, but the dusty rafters and quiet whispering of the wind merely moaned in inhuman language.

Adam peered around cautiously, checking the backs of weathered gargoyles and the breathless view of the sunset over Paris. The mid evening stars had once more revealed their faces. Adam stopped to look at them, tiny things, observant and endlessly recurring.

….He had looked at them every night in those long seasons spent a Beast…

Even now, Adam worried to see them. He could never read the omens of the universe like star seekers and charts obsessively tried. The weather was fluid and demanding, giving warnings to his nose and bones, forcing Adam to listen to the control of nature.

But the stars? What purpose did they serve? Why must they go on and on, as if to mock his own idle purpose? Their willfulness annoyed him to no end.

He turned away, back to the sky, to the pitiless view and continued his search. While the loft was empty, it had been occupied by someone.
There was a little bed in the corner, with fluffy bedding and bits of straw. There were tools of carpentry. Hammers, saw belts, nails, Masonry stone…

There were only three unsightly gargoyles seated about, with large mouths gaping, as if gossiping.

Adam shook himself of his own dismay.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" His own voice echoed back. "I am looking for…” He stopped. In all their talking, the man had not given Adam a name. He gave a sigh, feeling rather stupid. "And...you're not even here, are you?"

He turned back to the view of Paris. From up so high, it only looked more imposing. Adam could feel his heart starting to thunder in fear. Why did he so often set himself up to fail? Who else was to blame, if so? Only himself?

….That damned horse?

He backed up once more, trying to calm himself, only to smash his hip into a large table. The sound of tiny items spilling over, knocking along wood, caused Adam to frantically reach for them as quickly as he could. Without thinking, he set the items back along the table, bent at eye level, before he realized he was staring at a familiar sight: his own castle.

His grip over the figures in his fists loosened, dropping them to the floor without care.

His castle was before him in incredible detail. It was nearly as tall as his forearm. The windows, his gardens, the arching bridge that connected to the forest edge. It was all here. All in miniature.

Along the table's edge set Villeneuve, a collectively small little sort of cottages and farmland...and, there, far more detailed than the rest of the little wooden world, stood Paris. The clock towers, the hand painted river…

"Notre Dame," Adam whispered in awe. He had walked towards it unconsciously, fingers raised to touch in wonder at the real, tiny glass that made up the church's windows.

Then, as if to break his reverie, Adam watched in horror as the little window snapped, cutting his finger along the glass.

He had broken Notre Dame within seconds of discovering it.

"No…” Adam's voice wavered. "No, no, no…”

And, at this tiny sound, a large shadow blocked the sun of the low set parapet behind him.

"I'm sorry!" Adam turned, his eyes wide in shock, desperate to reverse time, the table and its tiny citizens now blood smeared pieces at his feet. "I am sorry, I'll pay for—"

There was no man before him. Not one Adam had ever seen. This human was bigger than the biggest of his father's guardsmen, but he was all unnatural angles. His spine shaped upwards and out like a hump. His forearms thick as tree trunks. And his face...

This...person watched Adam through misshapen eyes, its hair bright red in the sunlight behind him.

Attempting not to show his fear, or disrespect, Adam staggered his breathing, keeping his eyes tight to the huge, powerful looking being before him.

"...What are you doing here?" Its voice was male. Its tone was awed.
Adam twisted about helplessly, grasping the tiny carvings at his feet to shove them back on the table. "I—I am sorry. I didn't mean—I never meant to upset you, sir."

With a loping grace, the man moved determinedly, rising a hand the size of a bear's paw to easily shuffle Adam out of his way, his eyes scanning his work for further damage. While his fingers looked clumsy and large, Adam watched with great amazement at how easily this man turned the pieces of glass in his grip masterfully, without a scratch to his skin.

The man's larger eye turned to study the man before him with little difficulty. He was dressed far nicer than anyone he had seen in a long time. His long hair tied up, his blue eyes flashing around the room as if contemplating a plan of escape.

He gave a single sniff of the air. He brushed a great finger over the bloodied skirt of the baker's wife. The trail ran smoothly over the paints...into Notre Dame, her window broken inwards.

"You're bleeding," The man intoned. He took a step away from Adam, his smaller eye narrowed. "Were you looking for something? There was no need to harm my work…" He looked away, towards the gargoyles in annoyance. It almost looked like he was...listening for something.

"Sir...I am so sorry. I hope there is something I can do to make up for my disturbance in your, um, home." Adam moved himself closer to the passage of the stairs. "I have plenty of money to repay for what I've done."

This man seemed uncaring. He picked up the little figures and placed them in a sort of order, turning them just so. He turned back to the open view of Paris, paused, and then adjusted the figures again. He then turned to Adam, his voice low.

"Why did you do it? Why did you come here?"

"I never meant to!" Adam rushed, his stomach twisted in nerves. "I was simply looking for someone! The priest below spoke of a man who lived up in the bell towers—I didn't know it was yours! I—"

Adam found himself running low on excuses. He presented the blood on his hands before him as repentance. "This is my fault. There is no real excuse." Adam found himself staring directly as his castle once more, the detail, the precision of such intricate craftsmanship. "I just couldn't help myself. I always ruin beautiful things. You'll find I lack any refined motor skill such as yours…"

If the man before him noticed the uncontrollable shaking of Adam's hands, he made no mention. He simply dragged out an old cloth, wetted it with a cask of wine from under the work table, and held it out to Adam.

"Infection. My paints can lead to illness. Please, for the cut."

Adam blinked, unsure. He took the cloth without a word, pressing it to his finger, ignoring the sting. "...Thank you."

The hulking man said nothing. He turned once more to inspect the room. When he found nothing else had been moved, he seemed surer of himself.

"...My name is Quasimodo. I am the bell ringer of Notre Dame. You have found the man the priest spoke of."

"My name is Adam. I am the fool that invaded your home at the behest of Father Jean. I hope you can forgive me. Whatever your commission price is, I'll pay it in triple. I don't want any trouble. Your work is far too beautiful to be wasted by my hand."
And, much to Adam's shock, the next question the great man asked seemed demure, equally nervous himself…

"...You think my work is beautiful?"

Adam stopped to repose himself. "I...but of course. Your talent is obvious. You have crafted an entire city to a likeness I have never seen. Please, I implore you. What is your price?"

This man, this giant, unnatural man, swept his eyes to Adam as if in great dismay. Adam felt as if those eyes were memorizing him, as if, somehow, he too, were being made into stone. Adam felt his heart fill with sudden grief as his mind pieced this man's life together within that one, honest glance.

The hidden bedding, the lonely statues, the beautiful view just out of reach...the shouts of the happy people below….

...His monstrous form.

This man was just like him.

"I don't want your money, sir." Quasimodo said quietly. "They fetch no price."

Adam struggled to convey exactly what he meant when he said: "You...you think your work has no value? Don't be a fool."

Perhaps it came out harder than he meant.

"...It makes my heart glad to know you wish that so. But you misunderstand me. They are not for sale."

Adam quelled. "I do not wish to take them from you. I just want to make right what it is that I have done. My money would—"

"You've done nothing wrong," Quasi countered quickly. "I believe you in your accident. And if you think you have, your blood surely paid in price."

Adam pulled his hands closer to his sides, unused to his offering of money to be so easily dismissed. Everyone wanted something from someone. That is the way in which the world worked.

"Quasimodo, as a patron to many different craftsmen's, I have to keep my word to this. What is it you want, if not money?"

"For people to not come into my home and touch my things," Quasi replied, but the look on his mismatched features looked amused by Adam's words.

Adam felt locked in by this. With nowhere else to go, he turned back to the view of the city. "...Yes, on that price, I feel I must agree with you. I am sorry, sir."

"It's quite alright. I've had far worse a conversation with strangers. At least you did not run screaming when you saw me."

Adam turned back, his brow puckered in thought.

"No. No, I was startled, but clearly someone that can see such beauty in wood and stone is not out to set the world ablaze." Adam studied Quasimodo's features again in an unspoken question.

"...I was born this way, and raised by this church. The man downstairs I now think of as my rightful
father.” Quasi revealed, his tone unremoved. "If he sent you to me then you mean me no harm.”

Adam nodded in understanding. "I can tell you were raised well."

Quasi returned this decidedly. "And I can tell you were raised in far higher social class than I. And, I will tell you now, I don't need nor want your approval. Despite how I may appear, I am a good person. And I mean not a soul any harm. So if you seek business with me, I will respect you the same."

Adam took in Quasimodo before him. How in his bulk and strangeness, he appeared almost glowing with confidence in the light of the sun, heaven sent and demon crafted. He balled up the cloth in his hand and held it out to Quasi, hoping to show he understood his words.

"...I believe you, Quasimodo. I've met men that would rather watch others bleed than attempt kindness." He studied his cut, attempting his best not to get blood on anything else. "I wish you no ill intent."

"Good." At this, Quasi seemed to relax.

He turned to his beloved town again. There were faded chips of painted glass tethered to strings along the ceiling that caught the lights rays, casting tiny raindrop like rainbows over the strange man, as he were art all his own. "Now, I truly wonder, why are you here?"

"I am looking for someone. A woman. She is fair and young and I must find her again. I was hoping you might tell me where she went."

Quasi looked at Adam suddenly, his expression, while harsh, curious. "To this woman, do you mean Belle?"

Adam felt relief just to hear her name. "Yes, yes, she was here with you, was she not?"

"What do you want with her?" Quasi asked slowly, turning from his work to gather Adam's stare. "Her business with me is hers alone." At this, Quasi stood, his stance protective. "And she made no mention of you."

Adam was a taken back. "She...she didn't say a word about me?"

"No," Quasi continued. He leaned his head a little like a dog. "So I will ask you again. What do you want with her?"

Adam felt his heart skip a little. "She is...she is my wife."

"Ha!" Quasi threw back his head in laughter, his whole frame shuddering. "No, you're not! However could that be?"

"Pardon?" Adam felt his face grow hot to be laughed at. "What did you say?"

"Belle has never mentioned her husband accompanying her anywhere. She said he is a man that would rather leap from Notre Dame herself then come to Paris. And on the Day of Fools?" Quasi shook his head. "You? Not likely."

Adam stood, appearing to not feel as cross as he felt. "I...I knew she felt that way, but..."

To hear a stranger say it so clearly to his face, Adam felt his mood falter. Perhaps parading himself about with Belle was not what she wanted after all?...
"Huh," Quasi gave a sincere once over after seeing the look of hurt flash across Adam's face.

"I mean..." He leaned closer without warning, but Adam did not shrink away. "...She's just so
secretive about her husband. I, um, I didn't mean to come off so harsh. It's just, Belle and I have been
friends for almost a year now. She's inquisitive, resourceful, but I always get this feeling she's not
telling me everything. That she wants to keep it that way."

Adam felt his cut sting as he flexed his hands. "I am hers," He inclined curtly.

He had little else to prove this worth, he merely stood onwards, pinned by the intense examination of
Quasi's keen eye.

Quasi seemed alarmed himself to have come off so dismissive. "I can understand why she would be
so protective. I mean, just as I love this church. My friends..."

If possible, Quasi seemed to make himself appear lower, as if ashamed. "...I can get carried away in
the lives of others. Perhaps Belle does not wish me to get involved where I do not belong."

He picked up a figure and presented it to Adam.

"See? The Baker, a street below." He chose another. "The Mason guild, M. Rowbren. And..."
Quasi held out a final figure, one Adam recognized down to the last detail of her eyelashes. "Mm.
Belle..."

Adam could not help but reach for the little wooden doll. It was more than just Belle he felt he held
in his hands, but a world outside of his life with her that he was so blind to. Was he so removed from
others that he could not see Belle would have found joy in the talents of a man such as Quasimodo?

"She is...perfect." Adam could find little a detail out of place. His talent was unmatched. Talent,
Adam had now tainted with blood. His stomach curled again. "I cannot give you enough praise,
Quasimodo. I can...I can see why Belle would be honored to have a friend like you."

Quasi snorted at this, as if he found it funny. "You're too kind, Adam. But I am not without my
flaws. I mean, doesn't it strike you odd that I would rather be up here than in those crowds below,
making little figures?"

Adam allowed a tight, flippant laugh. "I hate crowds. I find this place far better to be in."

Quasi looked at Adam in deliberation. "Belle told me that she doesn't care much for crowds, either.
She didn't like how much people stared at her."

Adam settled the little Belle back onto the table. "Did she?"

Quasi nodded. "Yes. And that she could understand why people like..." He paused, as if unsure
how Adam would react to his next words, but pushed on. "...us wouldn't want to deal with others."

Adam listened quietly, unoffended. At this Quasi continued hopefully.

"But, even if she understands it, she never wanted to stay that way. She never spoke forcefully about
her husband; she loves the man, clearly. "Quasi countered to the look of guilt across Adam's face.
"She's the second kindest person I've met in my entire life. She hasn't visited me so long..."

Quasimodo turned his large head to glance behind him, as if inspecting something out of place.

"Belle seemed...upset this time. Like something has changed." He glanced at Adam again, searching,
but he found no answer. "If you really are him...tell me this. Can you look upon my table and find what detail is amiss?"

Adam met Quasimodo's challenge in great distress. "And If I fail, bell ringer? Will you send me away with nothing more than tarnished pride and wasted time? Or will you ring those bells to announce my extraordinary oversight?"

Quasi grinned. "Come on, it's an easy enough game."

Adam stood over the table with little patience, with the sun sinking lower in the sky, and not a moment closer to his wife. He swept his eyes over the board as in a game of chess. He had little knowledge of Paris, or even Villeneuve. But the castle. His eyes could not be torn from it. That he knew far too well. And, without a moment's hesitation, he knew exactly what was wrong with it.

With a shaking hand, he carefully picked up his garden, twisting it closely to his eye, his expression concerned. "...My roses. My flowers. They are gone."

He presented the piece to Quasi, attempting to steady his hand. The sting seemed to be growing, biting into wrist. He would have to push this game faster. "Such daring you have to quiz me of my home and purge me of my passion! Why did you remove my roses?"

"Belle's favourite flower!" Quasimodo nearly leapt for joy, his large arms opened in delight. "So, it is you! At last! Oh, I cannot believe it! What a fool I feel like! Oh Monsieur, please forgive me! Today is the Day of Fools and I was worried I was being japed! But to meet you, sir, means..."

Quasi's eyes went wide, his larger eye nearly popping from realization. "...You are a King."

Much to Adam's shock, he watched the bell ringer sink to his knees. "Please, your Grace. I didn't know. I didn't mean for my own foolishness to get in your way. I..."

"Please, Quasimodo," Adam began, clearing his tone of exasperation. "I was the one that invaded your home, remember?"

Nervously, Quasimodo returned to his feet and moved around his modest home, unnerved.

"Of course. Of course. But still. Please. I am sorry." He glanced at those three gargoyles once again, flushed with anger, as if he meant to yell at them.

"Quasi," Adam continued, feeling himself worn between priest and conversation. "Will you tell me where my wife is?"

Quasi nodded rapidly, but the grin grew on his face. "It is such an honor to meet you, sir. May I call you 'sir'? Is that appropriate? I've never spoken to a king before...and Phoebus thinks himself so clever for all the kings that have knighted him..."

Quasi paused, his eyes to the gargoyles again. "...That is, sir, I never expected to be in the position of a royal translator. Belle..." He whisked away and then returned with two thick books. Books Adam recognized from the night before. "She asked me to translate these into French."

"At her own request?" Adam inquired, his voice perplexed. "You...a translator?"

At this, Quasi blushed. "She said it was at your request, sir. And she said she would be very cross with me if I told anyone about it. That is why I did not tell you at first..."

The books before Adam were written in Latin and Greek. Absolute, maddening human puzzles to
his brain.

He found himself looking on at the hunchback with gracious awe. He dropped his eyes, feeling all the respect Quasi had shown him feel very much undeserved.

"...You are a well-read man." Adam admitted, his voice stiff in jealousy.

"People often assume that because of how I look, I am dumb. But I know four languages, worldly architecture, and I can even read music."

Adam stared at the floor, at his shaking hands.

"I cannot read." Adam confessed honesty. He could stand here no longer in polished clothes and pretend. Not with his blood all over Quasimodo's beautiful art. He was beyond his wits end at it all. Quasi stuttered in shock. "Pardon? You mean in Greek? Latin?"

"...I cannot read at all."

Silence. Quasi blinked into the remaining sunlight. "...Cannot read at all? Why?"

Adam lifted his hands and crossed his arms roughly to hide them, but he knew it in vain to someone as detailed as Quasi. "It is of my own concern."

"Belle is very worried..." Quasi remarked, his large eye wide and sympathetic. Adam did his best to not appear as uncomfortable as he felt. He did not want his likeness, perhaps his last likeness of his self-image, to become one of Quasi's prized figures but he knew he had little say in it.

"Are you ill, sir?" Quasi asked this gently, his voice heartfelt. Adam knew he meant well, it was so painstakingly pure, but he could go no further. Not even for a friend of Belle's.

"You are a kind man for doing what Belle requests for you without questions, without demanding to see me. I do not know what she is planning, but I am in your debt, Quasimodo."

Quasimodo looked at Adam in quiet disbelief. "...It is not any trouble, sir."

"If you feel comfortable enough, I prefer my name. Adam."

"Adam." Quasimodo returned lively. He grasped a large hand over Adam's arm, patting it warmly. "Belle's husband and on the Day of Fools...oh." He paused. "Oh my goodness, The Day of Fools! It's nearly over!"

Quasi made tracks for a well-worn cape and threw it over his shoulders in great haste.

"Come on, then! I'll get you to Belle quickly. We have the hurry, or we'll be lost in the parade. It starts at dusk. Hurry!"

Adam found himself left with little to argue. He wanted to get to Belle as soon as he possibly could. But he soon found Quasi had little notice for stairs. He was half out church's roof, one massive arm wrapped about a rope. "You look like a strong guy. Surely you don't mind heights?"

Adam stared at him dimly. "...I'm sorry, what?"

Quasi gave laugh. "You haven't lived until you've swung from Notre Dame!" He made for the window again. "No crowds this way!"
Facing the outer limits of Notre Dame via rope is not what Adam had in mind for the Festival of Fools, but he found himself unwilling to back down.

...If he got his hands tight enough around those ropes, he would feel free again. No pain, no people. Just hurtling startlingly close to death....

_Hm,_ Adam found himself surprisingly unfazed. _I've climbed my own towers in rain, while wounded._
_Scaling Notre Dame?_

He smiled to himself, blood already rushing to his ears in excitement. That sounded rather…

_**fun.**_
AN: Have I introduced everyone to my bae, Quasimodo? He's the ultimate dream boat, plus, spiritual adviser, amirite? I know, ladies and gents, I know...try not to be jealoussss…

Also this chapter is, like, triple the length this story originally started out at. I think I'm going crazy, guys. I think that's why I've been doing every other day updates.

I mean, I'll do my best to do every day if I can, but man, sometimes these chapters just get away from me. I hope that doesn't upset you all too badly.

Thanks!

What part of him enjoyed the rush towards death the most? The man? The animal? It wasn't a wish for suicide that drove Adam to seek out this truth, but for the understanding. Could both parts exist at the same time? Or was mortal fear like a soul, separate from the body, something that was missing from the rational part of Adam's brain that scream for him to stop?

But he leapt.

The rope strained, knotted around tight fists, and he swung after Quasimodo, with the golden air and crisp cheers of the people below thundering below their hurtling bodies.

Quasi was not a man to underestimate in any fashion; his twisted form melted away within the motion of acrobatics. He had spent his life moving through the bars of different cages, the metaphorical, the physical, and he had outfitted himself to move along the platforms and fractures of Notre Dame as needle through thread, a human pattern, woven and laughing, through unfeeling stone.

Adam tried not to keep up, but to balance, meandering weight and gravity under his feet, leaping along stained window edge and out over precipice, daring himself to not look down.

He had, after all, navigated his towers as a Beast, not a man, and he did not know for how long he could maintain himself, cuffed to rope, the sheer idea of what he was doing, what he was after, blocking out all reasonable doubt that he could easily die.

But Adam found he could hardly care.

The feeling of movement was incredible—and Paris, so large and formidable, appeared before Adam as Belle might have seen it. Beautiful, sprawling, a city that was not the cries of a mob or the cold faces of witch hunters, but within reach.

His hands had stopped their shaking. Adam forced his entire body into every step, every leap, forgetting them entirely, as he followed the hunchback through corridor attic and back onto aqueduct. As they descended lower, he caught Quasi's curious eye, as he was able to turn himself without concern to face Adam as he swung.

He called, "It's usually at this point in my plans that I have to catch someone from falling!"

Adam kept his head staring straight forward, dragging himself across a vexing leap of faith along the
chapel roof. His heart was beating so hard it felt more inside his skull than inside his chest.

"Fair, but you'll find that what I lack in grace I have to spare in vast amounts of regret! But this," He laughed at the crowds below, how small and senseless the Festival seemed compared to the adrenaline coursing through his veins. It was so familiar a feeling, like hunting, like strength, like he could, after all, master what he wanted to do. This eagerness to rip himself from rope and climb with his own hands was a temptation he had trouble ignoring. "This I could do for hours!"

Quasi grinned unexpectedly. "You surprise me! Belle painted a picture of someone so different. Usually, my friends scream in fear of heights, not enthralled by it."

At this, Quasi reached out to haul the ropes to a stop, groaning the old church roofing under the strain of his massive arms. He half expected Adam to drop to his feet, shivering from the anticipation from the free fall, but Adam skittered to a ungainly stop close by, his knuckles white over the ropes, but his serious face open in unbridled joy.

Adam turned quickly, eyes blown wide to take in the height by which they had flown, his chest heaving excitably, as if he had unspoken hopes of doing this a second time.

By this moment, Phoebus usually said he last will and testament, and even Belle had quivered, breathless and white, asking meekly to put down on the Paris grounds once more.

To this, this moment of watching Belle's troublesome, irksome husband looking for all the world like a child, stunned by his own ability to risk his noble nature for something wilder, less secure in his footing…

"Are you alright?" Quasi asked carefully when he noticed Adam had not let go of the ropes. "I won't let you fall, even if the drop wouldn't exactly kill you from where we are now."

His voice spiked with the rush of near flying, Adam turned on his heel, his expression unnervingly passionate. "That was amazing!"

Quasi threw back his head to laugh. "Sincerely? You weren't an ounce afraid?"

"Of what? Of dying?" Here, even Adam laughed, "I couldn't be bothered to think, let alone be reasonable! I mean, look! Look at where we are now!"

Quasi did look. A sea of people, hundreds, maybe thousands, all loud and conceited, with just the view of Paris, the green strains of the river, for them alone.

The parade had started, much to their dismay. Even closer to the grounds, Quasi knew they would have to return on foot to find Belle now.

"I'm afraid I allowed our fun to go on for too long. We'll have to fight the crowd for Belle, Adam."

But the man before Quasimodo did not listen.

Adam merely stood still, perfectly still, as if he had felt a rush of release spill from his breathing alone. He walked fearlessly to the edge, bent low, as he cried out: "And you lot don't even care, do you?! So safe below! Where's your daring?!"

Nothing. Not one reaction. Not a soul to know. No one cared.

No one could bother to stare.
Adam smiled, his whole mouth hurting from the delight of it all. He shook his head, the closest he could manage to collect himself, to throw himself away from this near insanity of making a scene.

How long had it been since he could act without the weight of his title? How long would it be again until he could just be impossibly alone, no more a mockery to be made, no adherence to plan or social agenda?

Adam lowered his tone, speaking to Quasi and Quasi alone.

"To sit and make idle talk, to be forced into dinners and reverie below. Is this freefall the way in which you've learned to block out the world?"

Quasi considered this. He rested a hand over the neck of a protruding gargoyle, petting it fondly. "There is nothing to avoid. I make my time through my own choices. I don't see Paris as you do."

Adam blinked, finally returning to the reality of where he was. Of who he was with. Quasi made no further attempt to explain himself. But Adam understood.

"Paris is not a cage to you." Adam admitted, his voice low.

"No," Quasi returned faintly. "It's my home. This whole place is mine. Why would I pretend otherwise?"

"And you can walk about in the light of day? Without fear?"

"People stare, but people will always stare. That does not stop me."

"Yes," Adam agreed simply. "They do."

Quasi looked at Adam quite grimly.

"What do people feel the need to stare at you for? For being royalty? For being married to someone as beautiful as Belle?" Quasi laughed in jest as he made his way forward, only, without warning, he stopped.

Adam felt his stomach churn at this question. He looked towards Paris, the church grounds, thankful that the gradient shadows from the sunset moved over them in a limited shadow.

But he still felt Quasi's eyes upon him.

Adam turned back, blue eyes meeting the man before him. "What is it?"

"Your...teeth," Quasi said slowly, mimicking his own giant fingers to pull at his own lip. "They're..." He could not bring himself to say the words.

Adam clasped a hand over his mouth. He dragged his tongue along his teeth to suddenly prick himself over two distinct sharpened points resting over his human canines...

Oh, God. Oh, God, no. Adam grasped his mouth harder, fingers contorted over his jaw.

His fangs. His fangs that caused his once pleasant tone to be muttered and his articulation abysmal. Those inhuman fangs that had so horribly disfigured his perfect teeth. They had returned.

He had spent so long knowing them, feeling their awful, predatory shape, speaking with his lips held tight to cover their glinting, terrible points, that he had refused even Belle to see them for as long as he could...
But here, without thinking, single minute of forgetting himself, and he was ruined.

He pulled himself away from Quasimodo, unsure of what those eyes had seen of him. Did he have fur? A tail? Horns? Adam raised his hands to rip through the length of his hair, only to find nothing. The skin on his arms was still pale, now pink, flushed with exercise. Flushed with realization.

Nothing, nothing else had changed but his accursed teeth.

From between trembling fingers, Adam forced himself to face the wide eyed stare of Belle's companion, feeling all her plans, equally ruinous. All because he had allowed himself a second of pleasure, had laughed, exposed his smile, his selfish desire to escape, had now endangered Belle…

That he had forgotten who he was.

What he was.

Quasi had backed away. But not in the horrified way Adam had expected.

It was almost out of respect for his sudden, indiscreet panic.

In the fading light, Quasi held strong, leaning out over the edge of Notre Dame, one arm holding the spire, his red hair aglow in the sun. In this way, his shadow grew large and monstrous along the tiles, over Paris herself, but he stayed calm, as if a part of the church, unmoving and refined. "...I won't say a word."

Adam dared not to remove his hand. The view, once so spectacular, now spiraled before him in vertigo.

"...I...I...please...please don't revoke Belle. She did nothing to cause this."

"Revoke Belle?" Quasi snapped, his voice gutted. "Revoke Belle? By the Good Lord above, why would you even think that of me?"

Adam fell into silence.

"Have you no faith in what I said to you, Adam?" Quasi asked again.

"What you have seen is just a small piece of what I truly am." Adam turned away, a hand over his eyes. He felt he had no choice now. There was nothing left to hide. "She means to use your talents to save me from my fate. I only fear for her."

"You...this...this why she said you would never come...you are cursed?" Quasi took in a slow breath to center himself. "Born...this way?"

"You...this...this why she said you would never come...you are cursed?" Quasi took in a slow breath to center himself. "Born...this way?"

"No. But cursed, yes. Damned. Demonic, if you consider it all the same. I do." Adam wanted nothing more than to disappear. To never return to Paris. To never risk laughing again. "This is why I fear those below. I have been hunted before."

"You fear nothing from me," Quasi stressed, his large form moving with grace, without pause, a few feet closer. "Are you so blinded by your repentance that you have not looked upon my face?"

"You still look human, Quasimodo. You have not seen my true body."

"I am named for a being that is half-formed!" Quasi thundered. "You are still a man of noble birth and a husband as well. Do not speak to me about the finality of fate!"
Adam sat, stunned, but his heart merely throbbed inside of his chest. "I have come into your home, upset your work...and I have lied to you. I have no control over what is happening. I have little idea as to why it is occurring now. But, I implore you, I have no ill intention."

Quasi dropped his aggression, his own lungs heaving from where he stood. He had never had the moral high ground so solidity, but he felt nothing from his perch. He merely sank lower, until he had managed to get as close to Adam as he could without upsetting him.

"...Please, don't be afraid of me." Quasi said softly. "I could sense something was wrong but I had no idea it would be so physical, so demanding of your literal body. Belle was so deeply upset that I took the books without question. And, although I will not say I wish I could take back what I saw, I can see this without a trace of doubt: There is good in everything." Quasi glanced at a nearby gargoyle, as if to confirm this. "Is your curse so cruel that you smile and, like an open wound, you are revealed? It's not a wonder you never wanted to go anywhere."

Adam considered the hunchback's words, feeling he had so little to offer back. "I am humbled that you aren't sicken by my vanity, with all the suffering you have known."

Quasi look away demurely, then back.

"When I was younger, I probably would have been. But, I've changed. I've accepted who I am. And if I am treated with respect, then I give it onto others. It is more than scripture; it is how I feel. So...your teeth are a little...sharp...that doesn't mean much to me. And, on this day, the day of Fools? I can tell you from experience, no one will notice."

Adam sat up a little ways, his hand drifting from his lips. He could feel the tension of his fangs prodding him with every twitch of his jaws. "You have ventured into crowds with unchecked bravery, Quasimodo."

Quasimodo gave a hard laugh, unconvinced. "It was not over night that I changed." He then stood, offering a large hand to his friend along the roof. "Come on. I have an idea where Belle might be."

But Adam did not move. He rested his eyes over the crowds and sunset once more.

"Thank you for showing me this incredible view, Quasi. You are a good person."

"And so are you," Quasi nodded, his mismatched eyes glowing from the praise, but he stayed composed. "Belle always tells me that. But, now that I've finally met you, I can believe that."

Lifting himself by Quasi's own strength, Adam forced himself to speak, to not begin his years of habit to speak unclearly. "May I ask what you will do once we find Belle?"

Quasimodo pondered this shortly. "That we met. And have become friends. And that you wanted to see the Festival from a local view." He looked down to Adam with a careful smile. "And I won't mention getting you to jump from Notre Dame."

Adam felt himself feel slightly more at ease, but he kept his eyes low. He had been so distracted by his mouth that he did not notice his hands shaking once more.

But there was no pain. There had been nothing to fight, no willfulness to maim. Where did this change occur? What was the reason?

He had felt so...free.

...Could he hold himself together a few hours more? How long before the safety of his castle? His
"I don't understand why this happened." Adam confessed gravely. "I never meant…"

Quasi looked out into the sky, his mind clear. "Maybe it's not about what you meant. Maybe it's just what was meant to be. Only God knows, my friend."

*Meant to be,* Adam repeated to himself, tongue useless and thick against his fangs. *But to what end?*

"Quasi! Over here!" A man's voice was hollering over the din, the pressed in bodies all around the pair as they walked.

Much to Adam's surprise, few people turned to ogle Quasimodo, let alone himself. They were all one with the crowd. Adam kept to himself, eyes in front of him, shuddering away if bumped into. His lips fixed into a scowl.

"Quasi, I've been wondering when—" The voice began, only to stop when he came face to face with the long haired "No one" from the courtyard. "You?!!"

Adam blinked back in alarm, attempting to not open his mouth too widely in surprise. *Phoebus?*

"Do you two know each other already?" Quasi said in great amusement, his large head swapping between the two men.

"His horse nearly took off my head this afternoon," Adam returned minimally, none too happy to be squeezed between crowd and his latest mishap.

"Achilles did no such thing, and I apologized for that!" Phoebus remarked warningly. "It's not my fault you turned down free beer! Quasi, wherever did you find this fellow in your care? He's certainly a barrel of laughs, isn't he?"

"I don't want your beer, I wanted your horse to leave me alone." Adam rumbled, affronted.

"Phoebus, this is Adam. He's looking for Belle. Surely you remember when I introduced you to Belle?" Quasi explained quickly, feeling sparred between the two men.

Phoebus looked at both Adam and Quasi as if he were seeing double. And, perhaps he was, as this was his fourth mead, but he managed to keep his tongue squared in his mouth, swallowing a joke. *Sheesh, pal, how long can someone lose their wife for?*

"Didn't think you would be interested in the Festival." Phoebus commented, his voice testy.

"Quasi has been very generous to me. He has shown me a side of the city I had never known before. But yes, you are right. I don't care for *this* Festival."

"Yeah," Phoebus snipped. "And I'm sure your own parties are *just thrilling.*" With this, he turned to Quasi. "Did you know you're just in time for Esmeralda's next performance?" He raised his light brows at Quasi in one smooth, confident look.

Quasi drew back, clearly blushing. "I had figured, from the largeness of the crowd- but we can't stay. I've got to find Belle, its urgent and—"

The rest of Quasi's words were drowned out by the screaming of the crowd around them, crushing
the three men closer together at either side.

"Oh!" Phoebus' face lit up. He gave a smack to Quasi's shoulder, pulling him forward. "Come on! She's been working hard all year! She'd love to see your face in the crowd! You know she can't miss it!"

Adam struggled behind, unsure of where to, how to respond. He moved quickly behind Phoebus, noting a small parting of the crowd where a large platform has been built, lining the crowd from either side.

A loud, boisterous voice cried out from the towers: "AND. HERE IT IS. THE MOMENT YOU'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR. THIS YEAR'S FESTIVAL OF FOOLS PROUDLY PRESENTS: THE LOVELY, THE LUSCIOUS, LA...ESMERALDA! DANCE!"

Like a wave crushing over his ears, Adam felt the crowd roar in response- and with the stirring of a massive amount of instrumentation, the stage was filled with smoke.

And then, standing before them, her long, glossy hair falling to the middle of her back, stood a tan skinned young woman...practically naked before the crowd. She had on nothing but a tied gossamer cloth around her chest, a short cloth about her waist, with her ankles and wrists covered with golden bands that made tiny sounds as she moved.

And she moved. She was like a flame along the head of a match, leaping flawlessly from toes to the ball of her foot, flickering and fanning herself in the heart of the city. Her green eyes were not like Rapunzel's. They were vivid, flirtatious and exquisite, scanning the crowd of faces as she snatched coin after coin from the air. With every coin she collected, she added with a shimmy of her waist, clinking the metal together in time with the music.

And music it hardly was, at least to Adam's ears. It was nothing he had known before, exotic and energetic—gypsies!

This whole mess, a celebration of a naked woman for all to see?

Adam felt his face instantly redden.

He lunged back, twisting his way out of the crowd, feeling the sweating palms of multiple men pushing forward along his back. In all his life, in all his many parties and disputes, he had never felt so shocked. He had no sense for crowds, for half naked women, for the dancing of gypsy music. His mother had often had her bit to say about the outskirts of France, its lower class entertainment.

Even if he had only know a world of the upper class, he preferred it to the booing, the cries of the unwashed masses, their intensity over that woman's body, like she was some rare animal to be slain...

Emotionally worn, mortification could not begin to describe an inch of what Adam felt. He merely wanted to crawl out of his own skin faster, forget Quasimodo, forget his word, or that fool, Phoebus, but to see Belle once more...

But he was trapped, being forced forward again. He was pushed, hard, finding himself breathless against the crowd, finding himself pulled back into Esmeralda's dance.

From somewhere to his left, Adam felt eyes upon him, and he turned to meet the knowing grin of Phoebus. He looked like a man proud about the— the intimate dancing of his own wife, as it must have been her, that woman he had spoken of.

"To think, you could've gotten that alllll to yourself," Phoebus gave a howl of laughter, clasping
Adam's shoulder at his own joke, "Oh, lighten up, your highness. This is all in good fun! Even Quasi gets it! God, but that look on your face is hilarious!"

"Let go of me," Adam hissed, his eyes tight and his breathing shallow. This was too far out of his own comfort, his inability to find a way out causing his panic to rise to his face.

When Phoebus let go, it was with great, startling strength, as if the man had been startled back. His eyes were transfixed to Adam's face, his skin paling.

"Thank you," Adam growled, his tone blisteringly controlled as so he would not roar in the faces of those around him. He continued to shove his way back out, cursing himself and the crowd, for he had thought it would be so easy to leave.

Even Adam could not deny she was beautiful, a fantastic dancer—if one dared to call it dancing, Adam found he had other words for it, words that Eugene might use, but not him. He turned, digging his fingers into the shoulders of the men around him, forcing them back.

Then, as if finally spared, Adam somehow returned to freedom, an inch of the square not rotten with people. He pushed himself against the cool of the wall, fingers pinched to the plaster…

His fingers...his nails were now long and sharp as well. Human still, but daggers all the same. With a deep inhale, Adam hid his hands behind his back, feeling his heart skipping, unable to keep up.

No...no, stop. Please. He swallowed drily, his head daring to split open from the chaos around him. Please...

Adam closed his eyes in an attempt to shove it all away. The screaming of the crowd, the clanking of the bells, the smell of Belle's hair, suddenly close to his face.

He opened his eyes.

Belle was there before him, her eyes wide in disbelief. She threw herself into his arms, her own tight around him. "Oh my God! Adam! Adam, I am so sorry! Where did you go?! What happened?!!"

Adam stiffened, unsure to trust all he was seeing, feeling. "Belle?"

She had cupped his face in her palms. "Are you alright?" She smoothed her fingers over his cheek, the tip of his ear…

Adam nearly buckled from the relief of finding her at last but he stood firm. He smiled at Belle weakly, unable to find the words. He suddenly realized he was so tired. So, dreadfully tired. "Belle...Belle, we got separated and...and it's so late…"

Suddenly, Belle gasped. The sound punctured the air like a bullet, slicing Adam's explanation. He stopped. Shut his mouth discreetly.

Quickly, Belle pulled Adam along, one hand over her mouth in shock. It wasn't long at all until they arrived at their carriage once more.

Adam did not need to be told why. He stole himself inside, quiet and cool and, finally, finally safe. Belle followed, her eyes large and threatening tears.

Adam could feel himself becoming more brittle just to watch her.

Slowly, using the greatest of care, Belle rested her fingertips along his chin, moving his head closer,
so that she could clearly see the fine points of his fangs. "Does it hurt at all?"

"No," Adam whispered tightly. "I had no idea anything had changed until I saw the look on Quasimodo's face."

"Quasimodo?" Belle gasped once more. She turned to glance out the window. "You...you went looking for me."

Adam picked up her hand, folding her fingers carefully to his lips. The action was a natural one, so easy to slip back into. How quickly he could learn again to avoid his fangs in all things…

He gave a sad, weary smile against her skin. "I tried. And I met Quasi. He was very kind. How could you hide such a talented friend for so long from me? Belle?"

She did not respond, lost in her own thoughts.

He raised an arm gently to gather her attention back.

This time, his heart skipped. His fingers had returned to normal, his nails cut square and blunt. He relaxed back into the seat. He could no longer fear to touch her thoughtlessly.

"...Belle, I know about your plans..." Adam confessed honestly. "And...I must tell you, Quasimodo, he knows."

Belle turned back to her husband, her eyes wide. "He knows..."

Adam locked his jaw, helpless in defeat. He lowered his lips, allowing the tips of his fangs to be exposed. "I am so sorry, my dear. I don't know how...or why...I thought I had more time."

Belle moved herself closer. She simply ran her fingers along his jawline, examining him. The only pair of eyes Adam wanted to look at him, no matter what.

And she looked at him so openly, for a single moment, Adam felt he hadn't changed at all.

"We do have time." Belle stated simply. Clearly, now was not the time for them to open the debate once more. "This changes nothing. I just..."

"You thought that Rapunzel's spell, perhaps, held more sway?"

"No...no, I...and even if it did, she is no one to rely on. I just...only your teeth? How odd..."

"Odd?" Adam asked, his voice soft.

"I just have a theory. A small one. Maybe. Maybe there is something else holding it back now. I..." She sighed in frustration. "I am not sure yet, but, I'll let you know. Soon."

Belle flustered, a hand to her hair, away again, to touch him. She looked up at him, her face scrunched in disbelief.

"You went to the Festival of Fools with me." At this, she returned to a look of muted happiness, her eyes light with tears. "You did all of this for me." She threw her arms around him once more. "Thank you. Thank you, Adam."

"Can we not do this for long while, Belle?" Adam asked exhaustedly, head sunk back into the crook of her neck. "Please. I'll send the staff and they will buy a thousand, foolish prizes for the entire castle if it means we do not go again. There is so much I do not want to see again. Please."
Belle gave a small, girlish giggle against him. "Dare you to do so much and tell me so little! Tell me! What about your day! What all did you see? What did you do?"

"Quasi showed me Notre Dame. And the sunset along Paris. And even his beautiful art of the townspeople...of our home." He skipped over Achilles the horse, and, of course, his horror and astonishment during performance of the gypsy dancer, alongside his utter lack of finesse in a crowd. For now...

Belle considered this quietly, her face playing with an inquisitive emotion. Adam felt nervous just to look at her. "Did Quasimodo tell you of his best possession?"

"No?"

She gave a slight smile. "Her name is Esmeralda. She is perhaps the best figure he has ever crafted, and that's saying a lot."

Adam felt as if a great weight had been dropped on his head, colouring him more oblivious usual. Esmeralda. The same gypsy. It was little wonder he could not break Quasi from that crowd.

"But...isn't she married?"

Belle fixed her eyes to Adam's face coyly. "Why yes, she is. Her husband, Phoebus, is a very sweet man. He thinks he's very funny."

"I met him. And he is not funny." Adam scowled.

Belle pushed against him playfully. "Did you meet all of Paris while I was searching for you?!"

"I promise, my dear, I tried to hide from every last one of them."

"Adam!" Belle laughed, but she cupped his face again, thumbs lovingly stroking his skin.

She tried not to wonder her eyes over his lips, but it was hard to ignore a sight set on his pretty face when those fangs had so long be assigned to the Beast she had known. She reached up to bring a kiss along the side of his mouth.

"I...have an idea that might make them go away," Adam murmured nervously, feeling exposed by the kiss. "I don't claim to have a better idea than what you are plotting, but...I want you to know I am going to try."

Belle sat back at this, her dark eyes impervious. "Go away? Like...as in control over it?"

Adam studied his hands. They stilled with Belle so near. "I am willing to find out."

"Whatever are you going to do?"

He looked at his wife and offered a tiny smirk, the only good faith he could give her from everything he had been through from the long hours before. "I am going to write to a friend to ask for help."

Belle looked surprised, then softened. "I am sorry I didn't tell you about my books. Or Quasi. But that is more for his sake than yours. He is so, so very intelligent. But sometimes, he's too much. You have seen the detail in which he has crafted our home? That is from my description alone. And, between that and Rapunzel..." She tighten her voice. "I just want you to myself." She looked at Adam with beautiful, guilty eyes. "See? I can be selfish, too."

Adam gave a drained laugh. He leaned forward to give Belle a kiss to her cheek, his lips barely
brushing her skin.

"Can we leave this place and never return?" Adam asked, his request low in his chest.

Belle glanced her eyes over her husband's worn expression and relented. "I have to return when Quasi writes to me about my books."

"Of course," Adam replied. "I have no doubt about him. When he saw my teeth he seemed uncaring. I owe him much."

Belle sat quietly for a moment, looking out into the Paris dusk, certain she could see the staff over the distance, a loud, happy lot of them all. "Have you thought of what to tell them?"

"Hm?"

"Our family, Adam. The staff."

"It...it can wait a while more." A pit opened in his stomach as he imagined the look of fear over their faces. Fear that they would return to their old lives, effortlessly as Adam seemed to be falling into his. "I want them happy. For as long as I can make it last."

Belle collected his hand in hers. "And you try so hard to appear as if you don't care."

Adam smiled faintly. "Shush, don't go telling the whole world about it. I do have an image to retain."

"Adam," Belle chuckled. "I love you."

"And I, you." Adam said carefully, making sure his articulation was perfected over those three words. "And I, you."

"...Master?"

A soft, motherly voice was calling to Adam.

With a soft grunt, Adam struggled to pull himself upright. He was seated at the writing desk in the West Wing, his neck aching from the angle at which he had fallen asleep. He blinked into the remaining light in the room. A single candle, glowing dimly at his side, seemed to hover in the air.

"...Mm...yes...?" Adam responded blearily, his thoughts muddled.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark. Before him, one hand over the golden handle of a candle holder, was Mrs. Potts, her own nightcap hanging loosely to her shoulders, her face nonplussed.

"Master, this is the third time I've come in here and told you to go to bed. What am I to do with you? I am in no mood to be a mother to another child."

Adam blinked at her sleepily, brows tight in misunderstanding. "...Have you really?"

"Agh," Mrs. Potts huffed. She placed the candle down on the desk, one hand firmly planted on her hip. "And you don't even remember! Heavens, Sir. You are the very reason I have grey hairs at all."

Adam pulled himself away from the desk, rubbing at his face. "...I'm sorry, Mrs. Potts. I just have to
finish this letter. And that is quite hard, as I don't exactly know if a word of it is correct." He half-heartedly motioned to the grammar books seated near his elbows.

Mrs. Potts quickly dropped her clipped tone. She moved the candle to spy the number of ruined ink pots and crumbled papers all over the desk. "Oh...I didn't know, dear."

Adam waved it away. "It's alright. I know I shouldn't be doing this, when it's this late, when I'm this tired, it's just..." he lapsed into silence. "I've realized that I have to do something...."

He stared into the dark as if soon to finish this thought....

...before his eyes began to slide shut once more.

Mrs. Potts went to fetch a chair, squeezing herself nicely into it, and edged it to Adam's side. "Come now, come on. What is this all about? Is this all about all that tomfoolery in town today?"

Adam snapped awake at the question, his heart suddenly pulsing.

Surely, he thought, Belle didn't say anything...

"I'm sorry. What was that, Mrs. Potts?"

"All the fuss over the Festival of Fools. The entire house came home right knackered and, to be perfectly honest, Master, I am done with today. I simply don't understand the need for it. All the fuss and drunks." She shook her head. "I'll have none of it."

Adam slowly smiled at her. "...it was just that, Mrs. Potts. Loud and crude. And loud."

She gave a small chuckle at this. "But you sure made Belle smile. I haven't seen her glow like that in months."

Adam dropped his expression. "Yes...I know that." He turned back to the paper, his fingers flexed over the quill. "Was that stupid of me, Mrs. Potts, to go with the staff? I mean, I am...told...that I don't know how to behave myself, to have a good time...but I cannot stand it. How do they do it?"

Mrs. Potts grinned at Adam in endearment. "Are you suggesting that just because I'm a year or two older than those trolloping dandies that I don't know how to have a good time? I don't care for places like that, either, but does that make all of them right anyway?"

Adam couldn't help but grin mournfully at his words. "No, no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"I know, dear." Mrs. Potts replied gently. She reached out to pat Adam's hand. "Now, come on, you always have the hardest time getting to what you want to tell me, even when you were just wee lad. What is bothering you, love?"

Adam found her eyes in the dark, warm and comforting. He could not stop himself from saying it aloud.

"I'm terrified."

Mrs. Potts gave a stern, protective look. "Whatever for?"

"That I'm failing. Everyone. Everything."

"Dear..."
"I cannot read. I cannot write. I cling to Belle for nearly everything. I... feel...pathetic."

She squeezed his hand and was not surprised to feel him squeeze back. "Love, how long have you been carrying this around?"

Adam sighed lowly. He said nothing more. He dropped his eyes into his lap. If it was out in the air between them, there was no taking it back.

Mrs. Potts stirred into the dark, her face musing and thinking, until she seemed to agree with herself, a low 'hum', popping through the quiet.

"You know, dear, I taught Chip how to read, even all those years spent a cup. It is no big deal. I would be delighted to help you, your Grace."

"...I couldn't ask that of you. Not when Belle...she's tried and…" He faltered. They had been making process, but it was slow. And, with the curse returning, she was more busy reading herself than teaching.

"Oh, pish-posh, I would be glad to."

Adam glanced at the letter on the desk, grasped it lightly, and held it out to her. "It's to Mademoiselle Ariel. She had asked me to write, but...It's more than that, now. I wish to write back."

"Oh," Mrs. Potts brightened. "A friend?"

Adam felt himself blush. "...I suppose she would be considered that, yes."

Mrs. Potts grinned. "I would be honoured to help. What are we writing about?"

"...I have some questions about her life. Her life before her husband. And her ability to control her emotions, to refine them...and I wish to ask about a certain pirate."

"My, my," Mrs. Potts began mindfully. "That is a very large task to begin with, isn't it? No wonder you've been here all night."

Adam shrugged, the motion stiff. "I don't wish to bother you with this."

Mrs. Potts gave Adam's hand another little squeeze. "Not a bother at all. And, you know what this means now?" She twittered happily. "Midnight tea!"

Adam gave a loud laugh despite himself. She was too precious. "Now, that is a party I can thoroughly enjoy. Might I help you?"

Mrs. Potts was already out of her chair. "Oh nonsense, nonsense. Just stay right there and…" She paused, looking at Adam with great fondness. He felt himself give an awkward smile at her. "You like two lumps of sugar, yes?"

"Yes," Adam replied, scratching his nose self-consciously. "Please?"

"You know, you do have a lovely smile, your Grace." Mrs. Potts said smartly, reaching up to tap at Adam's cheek. "You should do that more often. I'll be right back with the tea, then."

Adam attempted a nod, but found himself anxious until Mrs. Potts finally left the room. Then, he peeled his lips down, fingers tangling over his teeth. He had forgotten! She was so close to him and he had nearly lost it all!
But he could no longer feel any sharpness along his fingertips.

His fangs were gone.

**AN:** Adam and Mrs. Potts having midnight tea time is absolutely, assuredly a real thing, yet another of my headcanons, they are un-dee-nye-a-bull.

I continue to be overjoyed with the love and support this story has gotten! Seriously, THANK YOU GUYS for enjoying! I know Phoebus and especially Esmeralda sped by but have no fear! They will be back! They WILL BE BACK, maybe after Adam stops being judgmental af, you know? Tsk, tsk, if Esmeralda hears you thinking that boy…

Onwards and upwards, lovely readers! Please keep me informed for what you think and any and all suggestions!

(p.s Totally get that the term 'mademoiselle' is usually for unmarried women, but...I can't help it, it's too sweet and cute to use. Much more adorable than 'madame' everywhere, hey?)
AN: Why hello everyone (and all the new comings, hi, hi, nice to meet your eyeballs, hi)! I hope you're doing well! Please let me know what you think, and, um, maybe go a little easy on me, because this is my very first Disney villain scene! /crosses her fingers/ Let us hope I get it right for you guys! I promise, I know these last few chapters seem pretty dark, but they won't be like that always. I have a fun bit involving a few Disney couples coming up soon…perhaps one from the pairs is named…Aladdin? (HINT: YAS HONEY)

All around Adam, he felt at home.

Snow. Snow and ice surrounded him. It was inside his castle as well as out. Snow covered his gardens, frosted the windows into a pale, silvered radiance. The forest outside was quiet, muffled and alone, as the winter winds rattled their branches. No people. No servants.

The castle empty in its entirety.

He sat on a throne, one he didn't question being upon, where the arms and legs of the chair sprawled outward, then curled, thickly, into black thorns. He was not surprised as how little it hurt to rest upon it. White flowers, a fragile army of Foxglove, circled between the thorns, peering out in small comfort. Adam reached carefully to stroke the faces of the deadly plant. He knew, with morbid affection in his detail for gardening, that if these flowers were to be eaten, or extracted improperly, the tiny buds could stop a man's heart.

From the dim, a low blue light was flickering. It did not move as natural flame might, greedy and seeking. This flame seemed ethereal, rising up, lighting up the path to Adam's throne in announcement of a visitor…

Adam found he could not care. What mattered, who came and who went? Not when he could feel two eyes searching through his skin….and it was so.

The Beast. With large black eyes in its contemptuous body, rising up in mockery of human movement. It stood from within the halls, its face at the windows, its voice the howl of the snow storm outside.

Adam would not allow it the pleasure of knowing his fear. He returned to the flowers, pulling at petals in anger, destroying their faces, their small, bell-like bodies crushed between fingertips, now sharp and glinting…

Could I kill it, Adam wondered faintly, and if so, how? Would anything ever be powerful enough to stop him, his true heart, the heart of the thing still deep inside of him? It watched him with plaintive eyes, lurking along the shadows of the throne.

And then, with a hush, the blue lights grew stronger and Adam forced himself to call out to this new guest, but not in the way he was expected to respond. He stared into the pale dark and felt his teeth clench inside his jaw.

"Who dares? Why don't you leave? Can't you see there is nothing here?" Adam shouted, the thorns rising up with his voice, snaking higher, his throne growing, biting into his skin.

"...But you're here," A masculine voice answered. With each work spoken, the blue flames climbed up the walls, gilding along the ceiling. "I'm just a humble traveler…"
Before Adam, a large shadow stood, with hair of blue fire and its face trimmed gaunt and narrow, somewhere between living man and stone carving. It fixed its long fingers together, an image of a demon asking for forgiveness.

"No one is welcome here," Adam seethed. His teeth had widen, growing long and heavy, but he did not care. If he were to return to that body, may it have a singular purpose of driving away all who sought an audience with him. "And if you have come to stare at The Beast, you are a pitiless fool."

The shadow smiled with rows of sharp teeth exposed in deep pleasure. "You'll find I'm the kind of man that doesn't ask for much, little king." It responded at calm length. "I'm not here because of what you are. I'm here because I had to see what she had done to you. Because, from where I'm standing, she isn't done quite yet. I can practically smell her on you."

Adam reared back, eyes tight to this man, this demon. "There is no one here for you."

"I think not. Don't fool a trickster, kid. I know exactly what I'm talking about. She may not be here, but she's not done away with you. I already know what she did...and she owes me."

"Leave," Adam hissed, rising up, his castle nearly groaning from the weight of the snow outside. It had started waning its way into the heart of the throne room, dripping down walls, freezing over the flowers, icicles stagnating the Foxglove at his side.

"I can't leave a place that doesn't exist." The creature purred. "And, it's like I said, I'm just a humble watcher. A searcher...like you. You see, I'm in pain, too. Emotional pain. And I think we can help each other."

Adam attempted to move from his throne, but the thorns and ice had laid heavy over his body. "I—" He looked down, at frozen petals and his pale human form. "...What is this?"

"Need a light?" The creature asked, spilling closer without the movement of legs. It snapped his fingers, spouting flame over fingertips. It seemed amused to watch Adam struggle.

"What have you done to me?!" Adam growled. He could feel his rage thickening his blood, pumping through heart and lung, but the ice would not melt.

"Me?" The creature was closer. "I haven't done a thing to you." As if to prove this, he pointed a finger and spread the flames over the room...but nothing changed the frozen, waiting world of ice.

"And I can't do anything to you." It continued. "This isn't my deal. I don't do cold, if you can't tell. This is between you and her. And she's not happy with you." The demon ran his fingers through his flame like hair. "She's not a person that is easily pleased. Take it from me."

Adam knew at once to whom this creature was referring. It could be no one else.

"The Enchantress," Adam whispered dully. The fight drained from him as he sat upon his throne. "You know of her."

It was not a question. The demon smiled cruelly, eyeing Adam with large, yellow eyes. Adam felt his stomach twist. He had seen those eyes before. In a dream of fire, not ice, where smoke had burned his eyes and men had called for his death.

"...If that is what she is going by now." It concluded slowly. "I'll be straight with you, kid. What I want is very simple. And what you want to be is easy to provide. Although, I must admit, usually she picks people with the," At this, the shadowy figured gave a roll of its eyes, "'ability to be noble'..." It then fixed its glowing eyes on Adam. "But I gotta say, I've been around for a long, long, long time,
and I've never seen her deal with someone that tries so hard to not be a hero. I mean, not that I'm judging. I just find it very...refreshing."

Adam's hands had become numb. His breathing had turned visible in the frosty air. "I don't want anything from you...or her."

"Ha. That's problem: you mortals think I care about what you want." It flexed its fingers again. "I don't. And she doesn't, either, if you really want to even the score. But that's the beauty of being a god. Here you are, just minding your own business, and then, bam, you get all ensnared in someone else's handiwork."

"I...don't understand. Should I know you, as well?"

The creature chortled darkly. "I'm not such a bad guy, once you get to know me. Care to take a guess?"

Adam looked at this man, this horrible thing, but nothing returned to his memory. "I don't know you."

The man shrugged at this, nonchalant, before his flames sparkled brightly, clearly repressing the irk that Adam's words had caused him.

"Really? Well, I can't say I'm too offended. We only met ever so briefly..." In a rush of blue flames, the creature met Adam face to face, its teeth bared. "No one ever wants to remember their own death, do they?"

Death. Adam swallowed ice, rushing it down his throat. Those eyes, that mouth...was it not the Enchantress he had seen...but finally, Death?

"You...are Death?"

"I have a lot of names. I go by many, many things. But yes." It smiled. "Hades. Lord of the Dead. Pleasure to meet you again, little king." The creature sneered, staying close, its mouth open as if ready to rake Adam over his sharp teeth. "Did you know you were once mine?"

Death. When that hunter, when that Gaston villager had wounded him...he had died. Adam had tasted blood and felt Belle fade from his grasp...

"No...The Enchantress...she brought me back..." Adam struggled to speak, with the creature, this Hades, but with those demon eyes so close, he felt weaken, as if just speaking to this power was killing him.

Then, another small thought burst forth. A rush of light to his lips: Belle's love. Belle had saved him, too...Adam willed himself to take strength from this. And, with this moment, he realized:

This is not where he wanted to be. He wanted no throne, no palace, no darkness...

What was this place he had created? Where was the most pivotal heart of it all?

Where was Belle?

"Exactly." Hades murmured. "You see, I don't usually care so much. Mortals come to me, sometimes they leave again; they call themselves heroes and talk about their deeds, their petty little purposes...but not you...You're no hero, are you, kid? No, nothing saved you but your precious Enchantress. And she and I, we have history. And I'm afraid I just can't get over it."
Adam gasped, his throat closing tight as Hades brought up his long, boney fingers to wrap a hand around Adam's neck.

"I have handled every soul that has ever died. And kid, I know what you are, what you really want, because I've seen it."

In the reflection of those terrible eyes, Adam found a mirror. His humanity gone, his hands to claws and skin to fur. There was no Beast stalking the grounds. It was only him.

It was always him.

Adam's voice was a deep rasp, his animal features harder to subdue, no matter how tight the hands upon him. "Are you turning me into a Beast once more? This pain I feel if I refuse the change… All your doing?"

"Oh no," Hades smiled once more, pointed and delighted. "That, kid, is all you. And isn't that the most exciting part?" He leaned in to Adam's ear, his voice low. "I don't have to lift a finger. It won't be long before someone else, some irrelevant little mortal, kills you for me. Out of fear. Or, heh, protecting a loved one. Sooner or later, you will be mine again. And she and I, our score will be settled."

He let go, misting away, the flames dimming and shuddering back again. Adam fought for air, coughing, shaking his head, his horns, their weight, suddenly tangled in thorns, like chains…

Hades studied him with a passionate expression, as if he had so much more to say, but could scarcely hold himself back.

"You think you're the most deadly thing to walk this earth, kid…but you have no idea what I can do. I can't reach you yet, but when I do, hoh, when I do…"

The Lord of the Dead reached forward to grasp Adam once more, the strength in just his fingertips rendering Adam, with all his Beast like power, locked in its iron will:

"In your dreams, I see it all. I know your fears. I know your hate. I have watched you with the eyes of anyone that has thought to hurt you…to send you back to me. And I don't care what she plans to do with you. There are laws in nature and she has broken one of mine. Deliberately." Hades chewed on this last word, stretching every syllable in delicious hatred.

Then, Hades let go with great reluctance, fingers sliding away from a prize so close to his side.

"I couldn't hold back any longer. I just wanted you to know. I'm watching. And I cannot wait," Hades nearly choked on the word in anticipation. "...to get my hands on you, little king."

The flames flashed, and, in all the flame and smoke that he had arrived in, Hades was gone.

And Adam, he could not move, still and bound, his mind a castle of ice, body a throne of thorns.

Adam did not wake in bed, Belle curled to his side, as he was supposed to.

He was standing in the ruined debris of the West Wing. His arms were raised above his head, coiled fists, meant to rain down upon a chest of drawers in front of him.

There was bits of wood everywhere, of glass from the smashed windows, torn cloth, twisted mastered bedframe, ripped pillows, half tortured paintings, strewn to the floor…
Adam froze, confused, his legs suddenly weak from under him. The room spun faintly, with the whisper of voices forcing him to look all around.

*But there is no ice?* His mind revolted, grasping for reasoning. Morning light flooded through slashed chest of the windows. *There was no thorns, no snow, no howling through the trees...*

There was no Hades.

*A...dream?* Adam thought senselessly, hands mindlessly patting over chest, face, skin to check his body. Hair, eyes, nose, legs, human...all human. He reached up to touch at his skull, breathless to find he had no horns. No thorns lost in his hair. A sweep of his teeth found no fangs at all.

And, further yet, no pain. Not since that night in Corona.

But there were eyes, watching as before, with horrified expressions.

Adam turned, unsteady, to find himself on his knees, just beyond his staff. They all stood at the doorframe, hands clasped to mouths. Some had their eyes closed, others turned away. Some held each other close.

"M-master...?" A familiar voice called, timid, shaking.

"Lumièrè?" Adam found his own words, that friendly voice reminding him to speak. "Where...what happened?"

Lumièrè made his way past the crowd and into the room, his dark eyes wide in disbelief. "You….you flew into a rage, sir." He pulled himself down beside Adam to grasp his shoulder. "You were hallucinating….talking to someone that was not there…nothing could wake you…"

Adam stared at the wreckage of the room. He took one look at his staff and felt his heart fill with terror.

He asked, his voice a mere whisper, "...Did I hurt someone?"

"No, oh, no, sir." Lumièrè was quick to comfort. "They are scared for you, Master." He turned to the rest, his face stern and hard. "Are you to gawk all day, then?! Go! Away! Away with you lot, now!"

The group coiled away, dizzying and squirming to escape in any and all directions. Lumièrè snorted harshly, as if he had expected better. "Sir, I was the last they called. If only I had come sooner, if only..." He picked up Adam's hand, carefully inspecting the damage of knuckles and smashed fingers, bruised and bloodied. "You think of them, but you have only harmed yourself..."

Lumièrè said this solemnly, as if he believed this was his own doing. Adam stole his hand away, scared to be touched, of what he could not control.

"What would you have done, old friend?" He asked softly. "I could have hurt—"

"Something more!" Lumièrè interrupted with a fury, his face pained. "I would not have watched you like some animal in a cage!"

At this, Lumièrè reached to touch Adam's forehead. "It is as I thought. You are ill, sir. A furious fever explains this. Burning like a lantern."

Adam did not bother to brush the affection away. He could barely bring himself to move at all. The room still tilted, surreal. While the eyes were all gone, he still felt watched where he sat.
I am always watching you, that Lord of the Dead had told him.

Hadn't he? It? What was real? What was the dream? What was happening to him?

"I'm sorry—I'm so sorry. I didn't know." He felt his words break upon themselves like ocean waves to a broken shore, his emotions flying apart. "I don't know what is wrong with me! I don't know what is wrong, Lumière!" He could not fight the hysteria building inside of him. Between his waking, terrifying dreams, Corona, his inability to control an ounce of his life. He could bring himself to feel ashamed of who heard. "I am mad, at last?! I'm going entirely mad?!"

Distressed, Lumière struggled to control Adam, attempting to wrestle such strength from broken glass and torn open fingernails. "Sir, please, please! You are hurt!"

"Then let me be hurt!" Adam roared, his eyes tightly closed. "Let it be done!"

"Please, Master! Stop." Lumière could not remember the last time he had physically go toe to toe with Adam, but he found it within himself, for Adam's sake. He locked his fingers around Adam's arms, a shackle, and pulled him away from his spot in the center of the broken furniture. "Please. Listen to me. Listen. It's alright. It's okay. You will be well once more. Come."

He paused, glancing around the room once more, his face saddened, and he pulled at Adam's wrist to guide him. Adam did not fight him. He walked without a word in front of Lumière, his eyes distant, teeth clenched.

Something is terribly wrong, Lumière thought to himself. And someone is going to answer for this. I cannot allow this to be unspoken any longer.

He cared about M. Adam too much to watch him suffer like this. Whatever was happening, it could not be put off any longer.

He would approach Mm. Belle and demand the truth. …A truth that he, too, had avoided.

Lumière felt his heart sink in his chest. At the spot in the garden, weeks ago, he had known it. He had watched Adam lie to him and he just turned away, too happy to indulge in his own plans at the Festival.

Lumière sighed in remorse, knowing his Master would not hear him. "I am the one that should be sorry, sir." He thought of the staff, of their reactions, of such immobilizing fear, and not a single thought to stop Adam in lieu of pain.

There is often compassion found within the risks of pain, Lumière scolded himself, and, later, his family, as he moved forward. And we all watched anyway.

"Lumière?" Adam asked, voice empty. "I fear I will hurt someone. Soon."

"No, sir." Lumière replied, willing it to be true. "Belle will know what this is."

But even Lumière could not hide the raw fear his king's voice. The reality was here, violent and undeniable. But it was different from before…

Adam had been doing so well, until now. Truly changed. And yet…

What was Adam truly getting it, this fear of hurting someone…
To strike as a Beast, the curse, returned? Lumière questioned silently. But how? And why did we not change, too? And the rest of the staff? Need they suspect? Can I keep this close to my chest?…Or...

Or, perhaps, a remnant, like memory, it had repeated itself, in the shadow beyond the Beast, beyond those years spent cursed, but long before, when Adam had been a trembling child before Lumière, caught under the wraith of a vindictive father, bruised, bloodied once more...

Lumière place a hand over Adam's shoulder, tightening his fingers there as he walked, unable to express the conviction he felt, so strong and potent, he worried he might snap bone.

I will not let you go. I have been a part of your life since the beginning. We have raised you and seen you grow. This is not you.

"You are not your father," Lumière confirmed, his voice unable to contain the vain hint of hatred he felt over his previous Master. It was unspoken among the entire staff that Adam's father would be seldom spoken of, if ever aloud.

"I could not protect you from him," Lumière confessed gravely, "I was a younger, stupider man, and I did not know how…But this, sir. This I will fight. Till the end of my days."

And he meant this. Over trembling heart and knotted fingers.

This, a promise he would keep.

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**AN:** I can't say I'm sorry exactly for making darker themes but I can understand if that makes readers uncomfortable in terms of Disney canon. Like the cursing and such. But, like, I said, do expect more lightheartedness as this story unfolds as well. I get so nervous upsetting Disney canon, but, at length, for things to work and for this story to be well-told, I have to force my hand. I do so by trying to keep everything (motivation, time periods, characterization, love, death, parental-themes (via usual Disney killin' every parent ever) that I possibly can in mind. So far, you all have been so generous and sweet in enjoying this work. I am open to any and all suggestions and only hope to improve. Thank you for your time. See you soon, lovely readers, and, if you have a moment, please let me know what you think!
Epiphany

AN: Alrighty guys. Sorry this took me so long. My work…and now my car…has me a dealt me a really bad hand of cards lately. But. BUT. But this a chapter that had a LOT to cover. Buckle the hell up. Things were already getting real, but now, now things are gonna get really, REALLY….real. #tinfoilmickeyhat (also I am SO sorry, I didn't get to the princes in time YET because of everything I have been dying to reveal. BUT SOON. LITERALLY THE NEXT CHAPTER. I PROMISE. I AM SO SORRY. BUT THIS CHAPTER HAD TO HAPPEN BEFORE THAT. OBVS. PLEASE FORGIVE ME. ALSO THIS CHAPTER IS THE /LONGEST/ YET, SO, LIKE, PLEASE, I HOPE THAT MAKES UP FOR ABSENT UPDATES!) NEXT CHAPTER THIS SUNDAYY-tomorrow night!)

Lumière did not know what to do with himself, but doing anything, anything at all, particularly after spending ten years a candelabra, was better than standing still. He paced, feral and unkempt, back and forth, back and forth, before The Master's chamber. He had watched Belle take Adam into their bedroom and relentlessly awaited for her to step back out.

He was not done here, and, perhaps, his Queen knew this, counting the minutes out due to the staccato of his heart. He had it all planned out. Everything he had hoped to say. Certainly, he was frustrated and angry, but not at Belle. Belle never made any excuses in her nature nor hid her flaws. She could be secretive, guarded, and distracted by her latest intrigue, often experiments, more often, the plots of her books. To contrast her radiance and smiles, it could be hard to guess what she might be thinking when The Master's more passionate opinions showed so fully (and offensively) on his face. But Lumière was raised in grace, and he knew how to talk to a lady.

Mm. Belle had to know. She had to have some inkling of what was going on with The Master.


He could stand it no longer. Lumière raised a fist to rap on the ornate doors when a haughty voice intoned:

"Aren't I supposed to do the mother henning around this castle, my friend?"

Lumière stole a breath to calm himself, swinging on the heel of his shoe to face Cogsworth. The Majordomo looked ruddier than his usual collected person, his great cheeks flushed firmly from the race on horseback through the gardens and palace gates.

"Ah, Cogsworth, whenever you leave, it is as if a great, pompous, busybody spirit flies through the castle door to haunt my free soul." Lumière pouted promptly, meaning to sound friendly, but he merely riled himself more.

"I have missed you, too, Lumière." Cogsworth deadpanned. "And…whatever are you doing outside The Master's chambers?"

Lumière sighed, dropping his voice low. "Surely, the word has already gotten to you?"

At this, Cogsworth stiffened his lips, a straight and practice line. "Yes…I had hoped it merely rumor."

"Non, my friend, it is all too real. I inspected the damage myself. The room, it is ruined."
Cogsworth gave a clear of his throat, unwanted of the details, but needing them all the same for bookkepp. "I heard it was in the West Wing. The fourth room, unused for quite some time now. I have not looked myself but I can only guess: The Master's...his father's study, I imagine?"

Lumière nodded, rising his eyes to Cogsworth. "I don't think the house will want any of it repaired, anyhow. Good kindling, I hope."

"I couldn't agree more with you, Lumière." Cogsworth replied instantly. He gave a frank look at the closed door and stepped away, dragging Lumière along with him with a hook of an elbow. "Come, sitting outside their room like a whining hound shall not make this any easier."

Lumière tore himself away, wiping his hands over his coat in annoyance. "I do not want your advice on how I handle my own matters. You did not see him."

"Ah!" Cogsworth gave a drawn out sigh. "Must you act this way each time The Master gets upset? No one expects you to sort out every issue. You take on too much, Lumière. And, believe me, I know every square each of this property, so I should know what that feels like!"

Lumière, his frivolous personality, a shamble of its former glory in an empty hall. "It is different. This time, something is amiss. I just know it."

"Different, you say?"

"I must ask Mm. Belle for answers. The Master is very ill and I do not think he knows what he is saying."

Cogsworth considered this. "Ill...that is what I heard happened on their voyage as well..." Suddenly, his eyes widened, horrified. "Oh, Lumière, not the plague? No?!"

"No, no," Lumière dashed the very thought. "Just some terrible fever. I was flooded with cries and tears from the rest; they said he was hallucinating, fighting against someone...something? I cannot say."

Cogsworth dimmed. "Great, Lumière, you nosey brat, now you've got me all worried. What could that mean? The Master's greatest enemy has always been himself. He would get angry, smash something up to bits, then, it's over. It's done with. But...something else?"

Lumière returned to the door, raising a hand to knock, only to pull himself away once more. Cogsworth eased back over, a hand resting on his friend's slumped shoulders. "What more can I do, mon amie? Dare I knock? How much further do I push? I just—I don't know, Cogsworth. If this is what it is like in your mind, I want out."

Cogsworth gave a small smile. "Here. Distract yourself while we wait. Hold these."

A convoluted pile of letters, half tethered in thin rope, and half the length of a forearm, found its way into Lumière arms.

"What in the world is all of this?"

"While you stalk about the palace, moaning, dusting—I went to get the post from Villenuve, if you must know where I have been."

"Tch, don't flatter yourself. Your horse did all the work."

"Yes, yes, very clever," Cogsworth muttered at Lumière, grasping a letter to tear it open without
pause. Lumière watched with curious eyes, now more makeshift desk than man. "Interesting…"

"Oui? More villager inquires?"

"Some, yes, but, there are quite a lot of letters here. Hand written, unofficial. Some of these posts I've never seen…tell me, Lumière, do you know where Arendelle is? What a lovely name. It sounds like spring-time."

"No, I do not think I have heard it mentioned before. What else is there?"

Cogsworth pulled two more letters. "Hmm. These are addressed to Mm. Belle."

"Well, that is nothing new." Lumière returned fondly. "She is quick with her responses. She is not usually one to keep others waiting." He glanced at the door with a short tempted glare, before he returned to the post on hand. "You seem…concerned, Cogsworth. What is it?"

"Three of these are from…Paris, it seems. From Notre Dame, herself. And, another, I think, is from Corona—although, my word, this parchment looks…absolutely weathered. Whatever happened to it getting here?" He pulled another. "Ah, yes, this one I do recognize. Denmark once more. From M. Eric and his wife. I do believe it is in her writing." He flung open the post with a flick of a letter opening knife, a small thing, tied with leather around his neck. "It would appear that the copy of the post prior was one our Master had written to M. Ariel himself."

"Himself…?" Lumière intoned in wonder. "His own handwriting? I do not believe it. And, must you open every letter right in front of their door? Cogsworth, for God's sake, you are not privy to every last word."

"Excuse me, old friend, but ever since I took up bookkeeping here, all letters arrive under my own inspection. Besides, if it is all the same to you, I do have some permission from The Master, although some he keeps to himself. It is hard to maintain one's privacy when I must read everything aloud; shall we agree to this?"

"Justify it as you will, you old windbag, but Mm. Belle does not need your nose in her postage."

Cogsworth gave a sigh, returning Ariel's letter back into the pile. "Fine, fine. I won't read that one. But…" He gave sly glance at Lumière, a rare look of suspicion on a dutiful face. "You have been waiting for Mm. Belle a long while…care to see what it is she is keeping so busy with when not with The Master?"

Lumière blinked at his friend, amazed. "I do not believe what I am hearing. Are you, Henry Cogsworth, implying a scandalous read of Belle's own penmanship? Why Cogsworth, or shall I call you 'Cadsworth'?!...I am so happy you asked."

With a huff, the two men stepped away from the door and into a side room, preening through pages and carefully removing the papers inside.

Cogsworth gave a clear of his throat for dramatic effect before he began with the first of Belle's letters.

"This one, Lumière, from Notre Dame. Let's see here…. 'My Dearest Belle, I write in wholehearted sorrow on this day of celebration. I did not mean to lose your husband in the crowd but too many people separated our path. Adam seemed very upset and I was endlessly nervous to hear of some terrible fate but, yet, I have heard nothing. Your previous letter you had sent off seemed in high spirits, but seeing your face this morning has turned those words into doubt. In this, I must give confession: I have the translations you requested but I feel I have failed you.'
Cogsworth gave a noted glance at Lumière, a shared expression of confusion. He continued on: "These two books you have gifted me were child's play to return to you in French but I feel they lack any real consequence to your...search."

"Search?" Lumière asked quietly, his eyebrows raised at Cogsworth anxiously. At this, Cogsworth gave a modest shrug. On it went:

"The Greek book is nothing but sad, ancient tales of a long dead people, the legends, of their polytheistic gods—the other book, the one in Latin, is a merely a charms book, some sort of armature, fools' witchcraft or naturalistic shaman's book for Nordic healing. I can do nothing of the pictures, those creatures of stone, nor do I know of the minerals in the crystals they possess, but it would seem they, too, are folklore for curses and powerful magic."

"Curses," Cogsworth paused. He lowered the letter, his expression dampened. "Lumière...I have been such a fool. I did not even think of the Curse...returned?"

"I understand, Cogsworth, but there are so many unexplained accidents if so. If it is, why are we still human? Why is The Master not once more a Beast? And...does this mean, the magic, still lasting in this castle?"

"I...I do not know." Cogsworth confessed. "Everything seems so...normal."

"You see now, why I am so upset?"

"Yes...yes, I do." He scanned the letter again before he returned it to its post. "What does your letter say?"

Lumière gazed down at the parchment in his hand, unsure.

"It is a copy of Belle's response, alongside someone named Quasimodo. Ugh, what an awful name, Cogsworth, hmm, their prose is very pretty. Here it is. It says...'My wonderful friend: I know you have so many questions from all that has happened that day, the Day of Fools. Please, please know that I am only telling you this for your upmost safety first. I care for you and your many talents, and I cannot stand to get any more friends involved until I know what is fully going on. Yes—as you have seen, Adam is suffering. It is a Curse from long before we had met. No, I don't know why it has returned. It had been broken. We...we were so certain of this. Please, do not fret over your incredible gifts back to me; this books might just be the answer I am craving to understand. My father, and knowing you, has taught me that there are more mysteries in life that must be combated, never through ignorance, but by understanding. Those two books, I had no chance in understanding. You have saved me such pain, Quasi. Thank you! Thank you so much, and God bless. I will write to you sooner than you can carve the next section of Paris. Yours, Belle.'"

The two talkative men stood in ominous silence.

"'Suffering', she said. Suffering." Cogsworth murmured, the wrinkles along his face all the more defined. "That boy. That poor, poor boy...my God...so the Curse...it's back."

"Back for just him, perhaps?" Lumière questioned, but it was not to his friend, but the air, the ceiling, anything left to listen. There were no real answers between them.

Together, the two men did their best to shuffle back the paperwork, unsure of exactly how to explain their attempts at sleuthing. It was not in their forte to get away with lies.

"Perhaps, we shall tell her you fell from your steed and your fat body crushed the pile?"
"Charming, Lumière, but I doubt that will work. We shall just be honest. We both want answers."
He turned to Lumière, his old, silver face a strange mess of determination and uncertainty. "She will just have to understand why we did what we have done."

At their Master's chamber door, Lumière felt his heart begin to sink. "Belle…I worry she will feel entirely responsible. Clearly, she is attempting to solve a burden we did not need to know about."

"Well, I do not plan on telling anyone else. Do you, Lumière?"

"No, no, of course not!" Lumière replied instantaneously. "This shall be our secret, then?"

"I run a tight ship and I do not need the unnecessary panic." At this, Cogsworth turned to the door, his eyes low. "I do hope The Master will be alright. I was just in town…I might have brought something for his fever."

"It was sudden," Lumière consoled. "No one knew it was coming."

Cogsworth stared at his friend, woe in his eyes, chilled down to his heart. "Did we, my old friend?"

Lumière stared back. "If only, Cogsworth. If only we could have known."

"Why is it…" Adam mumbled softly, his eyes still closed, as Belle moved the cool cloth over his forehead, "…that I feel more coddled each time you do this?"

Belle moved a thumb to trace his cheek. "Perhaps once you decide to stop injuring yourself?"

Adam sniggered coarsely. He had not bothered to move his hands. They had been bandaged thickly, fingers tightened together, splinted and useless. "Not that I am complaining."

"No, not you." Belle replied smartly. "Just your pride."

Adam opened his eyes to look at her, her image not as fuzzy as it had been before. He was sure he still looked as terrible as he felt. It was as if someone had set a fire to his brain, sloshed it around, and laced it back into his skull. His hair felt itchy, maddeningly so, soaked to his skin. "I…I'm sorry, Belle."

"Please," She wetted the cloth again. "No more of that. This isn't your fault. No one is blaming you."

"I blame me," Adam said. "And I fear this will not stop. Belle, it's just…getting worse."

"Shh."

"Belle…"

Adam closed his eyes again. He could not stand that expression he had caused to lock over her face. Fear. Frustration. Bravery. Loss. How could such a beautiful person love him so? What did he possibly do to deserve her?

"Adam…I love you. I'm working on an idea. But I just…need more time. Please."

"My love, your plea breaks my heart; if only I could. I can only promise that tomorrow will come. The sun will rise. I will love you. But I cannot give you more than that."

Belle quieted, fingers gently moving his hair back along the pillow. "…Are you willing to help me?"
Adam moved into her touch, almost like being petted. It felt brilliant. "Hmmm."

"It's not too much. No more traveling, no more people…but…” She paused. "The staff, they're whispering about what happened. About you…talking to yourself."

Adam cracked open his eyes, humiliated. "They heard me…talking?"

"Yes."

"God. I thought such an embarrassment was over with by now."

"….By now?"

"Do you think this is the first time I have held conversation with myself?" Adam added, attempting honest humor. "A decade of thinking just to myself. I had time."

This breathed a hint of Belle's wonderful laughter back into the room. "You're so sweet when you're ill."

"Bah," Adam puffed, defeated. "The Mad King of Villeneuve. It has a sort of ring to it, no?"

"Adam. Please. Try to follow me here, I just wanted to see if—"

"And what will I get in return?" He gazed at her under heavy lids, weak under her hands, but he struggled to maintain some stake in the matter. If this was his last night a human, he would make the most of it.

Belle eyed him cleverly. "I don't see how you have any leverage here." But he continued to stare, unbracing, his blue eyes mild. "….And don't give me those eyes." Although, she smiled a little at him, when he attempted to make himself meek, buttering her up... "Stop it!"

He cracked a smirk at her, satisfied. He went to move his hands, to pull her down to reach her mouth, but he was pinned, Belle's frame easily forcing him to the bed. Her hair had come undone from its pins and fell, soft, light, to the sides of her face. She blew a bit of it from her own eyes. "This isn't a win. I have the upper hand, you stubborn spoiled man."

"I have a beautiful woman compromising me to a bed. Need I suggest more?"

Belle laughed, the sound making his head feel lighter. "I love you. But I need you to be serious. Please." She placed her hands upon his chest to push herself back up. "Besides, you're sick. If I tired you out before you told me what happened in that room, I'd be set back entirely."

Adam considered this faintly. "…I don't see how I would lose, though."

She placed a finger to his lips. "Adam. Please. Stop."

He melted under the command. "Alright. Alright. I'm here. Fully."

Belle smiled sadly at him. "What happened in the West Wing?"

Adam allowed himself to sink more into the bed. He looked everywhere but her searching eyes.

"I…I had a dream. But I didn't know it was a dream. It felt real. So real. Like everything was as it had been before. Snow, ice over everything. And I…I was alone." He paused sharply. "I was entirely alone."
"Not even the staff?"

"No one," Adam said quietly. "I was on my throne, that awful, gaudy thing, and...it was...covered in thorns?" He shook his head, only causing the room to spin once more. "Agh," He scrunched his eyes, blocking out the sensation. It was too close to Rapunzel's own spell, but with none of the floating after effect. "But there was something else. Eventually. A man...no...a demon?"

"A demon?" Belle asked suddenly, her tone remarkably shocked. "Whatever could--"

"Hades."

Adam whispered, the name hitting him, resounding like a swear. "That was its name. Or, rather, his name."

Belle looked on at Adam in shock. "Hades? Like...the mythos? The...figure head for the dead? The Greek people, their god, that Hades?"

Adam felt the sweat dripping down his face, burning into him. "I...I don't know what I was thinking. Clearly, I'm deranged, just only a little. My mind loves to play grotesque tricks on me, even while awake. I had that nightmare of Eric hunting me like a rapid dog, and the man even confessed that he has no love for the sport. What sense does it make, a demon, a man? The only thing that I truly recall was his mentioning The Enchantress—yet another of my own follies, I'm sure."

"You dreamt about The Enchantress?" Belle returned clearly, her voice soft. "Have you done so before?"

"Only...only a little." Adam answered her, his voice a coil of nerves. "And she never speaks, Hell, she hardly can look at me. She just looks...so sad. I'm sure...I'm sure, if she is still out there, watching me, then she must still be. She was not in the dream I had that destroyed that room, of this I am certain. I spoke...I was speaking...with only that man. I feel, Belle, that we are fighting a losing battle. Perhaps, this was only a matter of time; this Curse of mine, a fated punishment for all time."

"How," Belle snapped tightly. "How can it still be your fault? This was over! This was all over." She curled her fingers into the blankets, her anger jolting through her, seeping out, daring to break through her resolve. "What does she want of you? Why? This is just cruel, Adam. What did that creature say, this Hades?"

"Does it matter what he said, Belle? My mind is an ether of false memories, shadowy delusions of mine own insecure makings! It cannot mean anything!"

Belle shut her eyes in anger, her frame shaking. "Please. Please, just try. That's all I'm asking. What did you dream about? What did he say? I don't care if you think you're mad. I love you, I will always love you, and I will not let you allow yourself such deterioration. You are strong. You are brave. You have control over your own fate. We all do."

"Belle," Adam rasped weakly, touched at her words, but cold inside. "You see those things inside of me. But this world, this world sees only a ravenous fool."

"My Father was once considered a ravenous fool. You shouldn't let words matter so to you."

"Our love of books, Belle, and you dare to say that words hold no such power? Even unconsciously?"

At this, Belle allowed a short breath, caught deep in her chest. She dragged her fingers through her hair, placing her hands over her eyes, distraught. Like this, she stayed, as if more portrait than person. Adam raised a bandaged hand to touch her, unable to hold on, but at least he still had the strength to move. Her chest moved normally, deepening her breathing, as if a close comfort she could afford
only herself. Adam felt, for all the word, suddenly severed from his wife.

She was here, touchable and warm, but gone.

The very idea chilled his bones.

"Belle, what are you thinking? Please. Let me inside of that brilliant mind of yours. I know you don't give up. I know you are plotting and planning. But I don't know what else I can give to you, Belle. I don't know," Adam shuddered those last three words, choppy over his breathing, somewhere between begging and crying. He did not care to cry in her arms, but he was so tired, so tired of fighting this. The pain. The questions. The people, their easy lives, and how it he could easy become a target to attack. "If you dare to continue on, I will not fight you. But I am so tired, Belle. Every day, I wonder if it will be my last. I kiss you, and I think, 'how much longer?' I stare at myself in that little mirror…the years come rushing back. I was not content a monster, but I am happy with you…for as long as you will have me."

"You are not a monster, even as a Beast." Belle whispered. "I feel as if I only hurt you."

"Nonsense," Adam said, equally quiet. "You are the best of my life. I just don't want to see you suffer through this as well. I…I will tell you what he said, but I don't think I'm in my right mind. I don't think I have been since…since Denmark, to be honest. I have attempted to hide it. But this fire, this horrible heat, it is killing me, each time it happens. More than fever. It feels like a chain at my soul, need if I have one. Pulling me backwards. To where, I don't know." He closed his eyes, worn. "But I don't wish to go."

Belle returned to him, her fingers warm over the wrappings of his hands as she held them to her. "Just be with me. Right now. And, once you tell me this, I promise, I won't bring it up for a while more. I know you are tired. I know you don't want to hear this. But I will not rest until I understand. Please. Compromise in this. Trust in my faith in you."

Adam stayed to his word. He settled back along the pillow, scanning the bedroom through narrowed eyes.

"The castle was as before. Ice and snow. I had my throne, my flowers, and I was joyously alone. Then, fire. Blue fire. Hades. He claimed he knew me—me as my true form. He claimed he had met me when I died due to Gaston and the assault on the castle. He said that The Enchantress was someone, or maybe, something, he knew. Like…a shared, powerful magic. A feud? He said he was in pain due to her. That he understood what I felt." At this, Adam gave a bitter laugh. "He said I should not think of myself as such a wayward beast. That I am weaker than I imagine. He said that he was watching me. Then, he was gone." He allowed a glance at Belle, eyebrows raised, his last defense, his last confession of humor. "Clearly, he did not spy me scaling Notre Dame."

For a while, Belle was quiet, studying her husband's words without interruption. "….God, how terrible a nightmare. To have something like Death mock you. I…I know so little of magic in this world. It is enough to make machines that run as they should. But, surely, this might be a hint?"

Adam resisted a groan. "If Hades implies that I am fated to be soulless, that is nothing new."

Belle scowled. "As if I would let that happen, Adam. You and I, we will be together, always. You will meet my mother in the next life. And…" She soften. "I always wanted to meet yours."

At her loving expression, Adam could not resist the sentiment, of being with Belle, somewhere without pain, forever…and forever… "She would adore you. I tell you this sincerely. Even if my memories are few, she would share nearly every opinion."
"Like my believing that your own hardheadedness leads you to folly?"

"Especially your opinions about me," Adam drawled, teeth into a skittish smile.

"I admit it, you're very cute, but stop it. You won't play me as some frilly instrument like those maidens in your younger days. I am twice their match." Belle commented drily, unwilling to bend.

"Five times, really." Adam insisted. "If fact, I doubt I am much a battle for you."

"Reasonable," Belle witted back. She drew a breath to steady herself. "Adam. Thank you for telling me what you dreamt. What you were told. Maybe dreams are dreams...and maybe we just are missing something. I don't know...but...I am using everything I can." She picked up his injured hand to carefully kiss the dressing over his skin. "I don't know what could have frightened you to fight as if you might die. I am so sorry I couldn't protect you from it. Him."

"Protection," Adam murmured simply. He flickered his fingertips, unable to reach her, but he tried. "...I've been thinking, in our travels, I've met such younger men that...seem so quick to protect their wives." He stared into Belle's eyes, deep with concern. "Am I...doing my job? Caught with fright, clinging to you by night, feverish..." He laughed here, quite genuinely. "I feel so stupid to even ask this. But...am I...doing anything right? To...make you feel protected? As...a man?"

At this, Belle attempted a weakened, playful look of dismay. "Do you think I can't handle the sword?" She gave a quick kiss to his forehead. "You dream of knights too often, my love. Don't pretend these lively men aren't the very same as you."

He made a face. "If Eugene Fitzherbert and I are of the same cloth, I wish to be burned."

Belle laughed. "From what you've told me, he's practically the only person we've met that can stand you!"

"I know! Isn't it horrible? A friend, rather? God, isn't Ariel enough? You know, between Mrs. Potts late night tutoring, I have come to read his letters. They're...nice. I cannot believe it. You know, burn those letters, too, would you?"

Belle looked beyond amused. "I thought Rapunzel said there would be no correspondence. Cogsworth said nothing of Corona to me."

Adam looked sheepish. "Yes, well, you've been rather sore over what happened, so...I have collected his letters personally. Rapunzel said she wouldn't write. But I don't think anything of the sort would stop that man."

"Quite a roguish King, you are."

"Oh, please. They're quite short, and, I have theory that he is sending them way of nearly all those brutes in that bar he sat me in. They're always other little notes, and, oddly enough, drawings of tiny unicorns. I...I don't know." Adam brightened. "Would you like to hear his latest one? It was so short, it went something like: 'Rapunzel is cooling down. It's singing night here at the bar. I don't really know how to feel about the singing thing. Also, how is being a giant, horrible, rage-bear? Not that I'm prying. Just curious. - Rider."

"Subtle. He signs his own letters 'Rider'?"

"He thinks he's clever."

"And yet, here you are, smiling."
Adam dropped his mouth, shamed at being caught. "It's hard to ignore he's pushy, good-natured, friendliness. I...I do owe him."

"Friendship isn't a debt to be paid, Adam," Belle said meaningfully.

"And yet, here I toil. A slave to friendly people. How do you do it?"

She drew back at Adam's final words. "Wait a moment...did you not mention Notre Dame? Oh, don't tell me, Quasi's idea?"

"He did mention that he loved to bring his other friends into the freefall."

"And you did it?" She said this as if...delighted.

"You aren't upset?"

"No," Belle pushed the word fondly. "My Adam, a reclusive thrill seeker? I hated every second of the fall!"

"Afraid of heights, my Queen?" Adam jeered lightly.

"I do fine, if need be, but...yes." She said this shyly. "I'm just very surprised. When I found you, you had well, fangs, and I thought the absolute worst. But... I've always had a feeling you enjoy the danger you get yourself into."

Adam set his mouth in a hard line. "I don't understand how allowing myself expression only brings me closer to damnation. A puzzle with a terrible image."

"Shh." Belle inched closer again, capturing his face in-between her hands. She darted her eyes to the door. Her lips puckered squeamishly. "Oh, mon Dieu. I can hear Cogsworth and Lumière. I...I think I must go."

Adam sighed warmly. "Fine. I suppose I've captured you here long enough."

But...Belle stayed. Adam looked at her expectantly. "You don't wish go?"

"I...I think I'll have to talk to them...about the Curse. Is that alright with you?"

Adam only looked more exhausted. "It was enviable. I could not hide this forever."

Belle nodded. "I have some idea of how I might phrase it. I'll take care of it." She studied Adam's face again. "Will you try to sleep now? I won't be long. Do you need anything before I go?"

Adam took in the room once more, unsure. "...Yes. The desk, to that wall there, near the fireplace. There is a little drawer. Open it, and, if you might, bring me what is inside."

Belle did as she asked, sliding open the drawer with ease. She flinched at what she saw next: the enchanted mirror, just as it was before, as if time had no effect over its frame. It looked as damaged as when she had first seen it, but, yet, unremoved. She picked it up carefully and brought it back to Adam's side.

"I...didn't know you kept this." She commented apprehensively.

Adam gestured for it to be laid near him, and so it was. "When the Curse was broken, it became nothing more than a mirror. I knew what it meant but I couldn't bear to break it, or throw it away." He then laid his eyes to Belle's, wide and aware. "But...if it is returning...perhaps I might use it to
our advantage?"

Belle's eyes went wide, as if in epiphany. "So...the rest of the magic within the castle. Back as well?"

Adam looked at her worriedly. "I don't know for how long, or if it is tied to my form. But...yes. I suppose now, it is all quite possible."

Belle clasped her hands to her mouth carelessly. Adam nearly jumped at the sudden movement.

"Belle?"

She dropped her hands, alarmed. "N-nothing! It is nothing! I just...I didn't even consider the magic returned. It just...it gave me goose-skin."

Adam studied her wearily, but gave in. Slowly, with a painful prying of his fingers, he picked up the mirror. He glanced at Belle again, watching her, watching him, her face distraught. Then, from the hall, louder voices. Definitely Cogsworth and Lumière.

"You must go, Belle. I will be right here when you return."

Belle nodded slowly, picking herself up, moving to the door gracefully. "I'll be back, Adam. Try to rest, alright?"

"Yes, of course. I love you."

Belle locked the handle tight between her fingers, pushing it open with a moment of hesitation. "And I, you."

Then, with a door between them, nothing more was said.

Belle watched the sorrowful faces of her dear friends, her heart sinking to tell them the harsh truth.

"So, you have seen his Beastly form once more?" Lumière shook his head. "Oh, Belle. I am so sorry. It hurts my heart. It truly does."

"—This explains quite a bit, my Queen, if I may be so frank." Cogsworth continued. He and Lumière exchanged a single look, as if in agreement. "And...of your letters." He presented them gravely, as if expecting quite a row, but Belle took them without a word. "You will find that nearly half of them have been opened. That is all my doing, Mm. Belle. I am sorry. Lumière and I...our worries got away from us—"

"—But!" Lumière exclaimed valiantly, "We only want to know how to help." Lumière took another gulp of air, his eyes large and emotional. "Please. We have stood by for so long, with so little purpose as the Curse went on. Allow us a change of fate. Allow Cogsworth and myself to help. We will tell not a soul."

"Indeed! The castle shall run as it has been ever since that glorious day!" Cogsworth adjusted his coat, terse. "We just...have one request."

From their rapid call and responses, Belle felt herself being tugged in both directions. "...I see. Well...that is..." Belle struggled to calm them. She had expected far worse...but to be offered help in her search. She could not help but give a grateful smile at her confidants. "...Yes?"

"Please, my Queen. Don't leave us alone to worry and wonder. Let us help. Keep us informed."
"I know you are a woman with a great internal world and a passion for what is out there…but do not forget, Belle, what is around you." Lumière reached forward with a great delicacy to take her hand in his. "We are right here."

Belle felt her heart give a little throb. Everything she had been holding back, from harbor, to stolen letters, to her frustration at knowing so little, feeling so helpless. Hiding it all from Adam still. She felt tears dot her eyes. "Lumière, Cogsworth, I am so sorry I kept you waiting. I just…" She forced her tone not to tremble, caught, guilty, and relieved. "…I was scared, too."

"Oh, my dear." Lumière moved forward to wrap her in a hug. "There are no need for tears. I… I am sorry if caused any more trouble for you and The Master. I… I just want to be there—for all times I wasn't."

Cogsworth gave a deep nod, his expression remorseful. "The Curse over us may have lifted, but we will not rest until it is cured. The whole of it."

Belle held Lumière, then moved to Cogsworth, uncaring of how affronted he seemed to be hugged so tightly.

"You two! I should have said something sooner. I just, I just wanted to keep everyone safe. Since Corona. Since the first change. I didn't know how else to handle it. It's enough to just keep myself together in front of Adam." It's enough to keep myself together at all, Belle winced, angered by her own selfishness. "And I have so little to go by… it feels… so huge, so intangible… but I cannot sit here and watch Adam fade. It is killing him. He talked of a pain within his hands, but… it is growing. I can see it, even lying there still. Something is coming."

"…Your letters mentioned books?" Cogsworth asked quickly, hoping not to step a toe more out of line.

"Yes," Belle hushed, bringing them away from the door. "I know, I know it feels so obvious, but I've piled through the library so many times, there are only a handful of books that I cannot read. So, I felt, in a room full of everything I knew, I might start with what I needed the most: books that I did not understand. So, I've had them translated. And… well, I had an idea..."

She trailed away, turning slightly to look down the hall…

"Mm. Belle?" Lumière asked carefully, following her gaze. "Can we know more?"

Belle bit her lip, unsure. "Please. I promise I will keep you informed. But this, this first part, let me go alone."

Lumière and Cogsworth exchanged one final glance, but allowed it, thankful for having their Queen on their side, and how, surprisingly, she seemed removed from their invasion of her privacy.

"We will… see to the broken furnishing, then, my Queen." Cogsworth said, giving a formal bow before daggering his eyes at his friend and dragging him backwards with his will to give Belle her space. "Lumière?"

Lumière was quick to follow. "Yes—yes, of course. Belle, my dearest, if you need anything, anything at all. We will be in the West Wing. I'll send Mrs. Potts in later to check on The Master."

Belle could not wait to begin her newest experiment, thankful to leave without appearing rude. "Thank you, thank you both so very much. We will talk soon."

And with that, Belle turned, not towards their bedroom, but beyond the East Wing, down the stairs,
to her bag. The Greek book inside. She picked it up causally and brought herself into the library, being careful to not attract the eyes of the rest of the house as she went.

*I may only get one chance at this,* Belle thought to herself, willing her heart to stay calm.

But Adam's wanting of his mirror. His mention coinciding with the one book in his library that he could not read. Perhaps, there was more to his nightmares than just fever dreams...with Rapunzel's magic, with The Enchantress about, and the rage of the Plague, Belle could not think herself silly to at least try...one more time.

She approached the stand that held the Enchanted Book that Adam had shown her. The one that had spirited them away to Paris. She opened it with great care, as she did with all her books, blowing dust lovingly away. At first, the book looked nothing more than a great tome of a thing, buried and disused...before, like a clap of thunder, it came life, circles, a compass rose, a very real map inside those beautiful pages, *chattering away under her fingers*....

...The magic...it had returned.

Her heart sped up in excitement.

Fear.

She had to return to Adam soon, of course, but....

She pulled open the Greek book, pulling to Quasimodo's handwritten pages and notes, until she found the one word that would change everything about her life, all over again: Hades. Entire chapters, dedicated to his vast, darken legends, his pull over nature and life itself.

With one hand over the book, she began to read the first myth she came across, quickly and without pause, she fed the words into her brain, like sand shifting into grooves, water pooling over smooth stones, clear, boundless, hers alone, and she began to see it so clearly...

Hades' lair...so close, rising into view, a river of smoke, shadow, white bones...tunneling through the earth...she could reach out...and step through it...if she dared.

Adam, Belle thought, her heart trembling. *I will find what I can. I love you.*

And, like a whisper of the wind—Belle was gone from the library, as if she had never stolen her way into it at all.

"Show me...The Enchantress," Adam demanded, his voice rough, but he willed himself to sit up along the pillows, his hand shaking to hold the damn glass. "...Please." He added finally, a willful whisper.

The mirror, twisted and melted, as if it had always remained enchanted, and, perhaps, locked away, as was the fear in his heart for so long, Adam wonder if it had always remained.

Just like The Beast.

The small image revealed, but not in rare sight: Adam found himself staring out over a dark, stormy sea. Lightening flashed mutedly in the distance. A large, battered looking ship, roaring and crashing over the huge gallows of the waves. Irritated, Adam clutched the handle tighter.

"I said, show me The Enchantress!" He thundered, his hands shaking harder than before. "This is
But the image did not change. It only appeared more life-like, closing in, as if Adam's words were merely a means to open up the true door to his heart. At the helm of the ship, his long, braided hair twisting in the screaming of the wind, a single man stood, his expression determined and wicked. His captain's hat barely held to his head, as he hooked his fingers to dig it back into his scalp. He was thin, and tall, with angular cheekbones….

Adam's knuckles turned a pure white, taunt in exertion over the mirror.

*Captain Jack Sparrow.*

In his mind's eye, he was back at the bar, this man's greasy words dripping with foul intent as he stared, obsessed, matching Adam's glowering contempt. His senseless search for some poor creature that had made land from her home in the sea. Adam had never considered mermaids, or life below, or, much at all, outside of himself…but, suddenly, the lack of logic did not detour him.

Because, another familiar sight was floating just out of the ship's reach. A grand distance away, but slowing drawing ever closer….the home of a coastal kingdom, gleaming and grand, with smoking billowing out from the distant fishing villages.

*Ariel, Eric,* Adam thought, and then, he could think nothing at all. A heavy coldness wrapped over him. And, then, without the will to keep the image within the mirror, it, too, faded into a smooth, pale, looking glass.

*My God,* Adam snapped away, his body sweating once more, not from his feverish state, but from fear. *Eric. Eric had asked me to help him. He had told me to be weary…*

*Pirates.*

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**AN:**

WOW THIS CHAPTER SURE COVERED A LOT, MHM, MHM, WHOA, OKAY, SO, YEAH, I'LL SEE YOU GUYS SOON, PROBABLY TOMORROW NIGHT AFTER WORK IF I DON'T PASS OUT. THANK YOU SO MUCH AND I AM SO SOPRRY I REALLY HATE NOT KEEPING MY PROMISES BUT LIKE I THINK YOU'LL UNDERSTAND THE PACING ALL, AND DON'T WORRY, BELLE AND ADAM WILL DISCUSS WHAT TO DO FURTHER, (on both sides) BEFORE ANYONE LEAVES BECAUSE, YOU KNOW, THAT'S WHAT GOOD COUPLES DO, BUT YEAH, WOW OKAY GOODBYE
Belle walked for what seemed like hours. The dark, misty world she had stepped into stretched on like a mirage, summoning what looked like the figures of other people, other shadows, only to disappear as she moved closer. It was also unbelievably hot, sticking to her hair to her face. However, there was no sun, no heat, nothing natural about where The Enchantress's book had taken her. And, to be fair, she had expected something like this. This place, this myth she had summoned in her mind, would be nothing like her childhood room in Paris.

No, this place was definitely nothing like Paris.

Fingers shivering, she hitched her hands to her skirts as she walked. Her footsteps sounded as if she were walking on long, smooth stones. The flooring was impossible to tell from under her. A thick blanket of mist twirled through the air. The walls rose up and curved over her head. Every direction was like a cave, interconnected, delving deeper into…where, Belle couldn't be curtain.

But she had to try.

She steadied her breathing, narrowing her brows tightly, unafraid. There was air and direction. She could do this.

"Hello?" Belle called, but she nearly jumped, as her voice echoed back even louder. Even the hairs on her arm stood up in dismay. A creeping silence had returned when her voice died down.

She continued forward. If this was the Underworld, if this was the place that Hades, if he was ever real, had twisted himself away from to terrorize Adam, she would find him. She wasn't magical. Belle didn't believe in the idea of fate or pre-determined choices. She knew what she had always known: to be resourceful, to use her mind, and to throw herself into what she did not know.

Turning left at a crossroads of three paths, Belle stepped carefully over the fallen ceiling of the rocks that had unhooked themselves, sharp as wolf teeth, and embedded themselves in the stone below. Often times, Belle noticed cracks in the foundation of the road, but, upon further inspection, she only found herself staring into a darkness so black that the drop seemed to go on for an eternity.

She only came to a stop when she heard a faint sound. It was like a hum in the air, driving Belle forward…like someone was crying out. She placed one hand along the stone wall and gasped when she touched ice.

Ice? But the way she had walked felt sweltering before…?

She used a fingernail to scratch at the walls just to be sure. Ice. Small, vaporizing from the heat of Belle's own body, but there.

This time she chose not to cry out. She followed the crying, turning around when it softened, speeding up when it reached a steady pitch.

The walls of the cavern had started to define themselves into more recognizable shapes. The long,
drafting legs of stone columns. Square cut minerals that glittered faintly in the dying light, fused to ceiling and floor, staring at Belle with blind eyes. Soon, Belle found herself trailing fingers over the open doors of holding cells, the splintering of cages. Despite its narrow passageways, Belle found herself standing in a large, open atrium.

And, perhaps the grandest thing of all, Belle was standing before a woman.

She had thrown herself down over a particularly large ore, the minerals shimmering blue and black, as she continue to weep. All this time walking, and her image did not fade.

Could she be real?

"Hello? Are you alright?" Belle called nervously, fingers still wrapped in the cloth of her dress. She did not dare to step closer. "My name is Belle. I've...I've come looking for someone."

"Who is there?!" The woman startled. She threw her head skywards, her long hair, nearly grey in the dark, was cut thickly, square across, falling to the lower part of her back. She rose from the rock to look at this new stranger. It was clear she was the one that had been crying, if not from noise alone, but from her eyes. Tears continued to drip from her face, even her nose, but they, too, seemed surreal, almost as if they were frozen. However, all of her sorrow seemed to vanish in an instant. She burned her eyes into Belle. "You are not Megara! What are you doing here? Who are you?!"

"Megara?" Belle tasted the strange name on her lips. "No, no, my name is—"

Suddenly, before Belle had time to barely blink, the woman was closer, almost gliding over the flooring. She wore a dress with just one sleeve, long and fluttering with every moment. On the crown of her head, she wore a black ring made of glinting obsidian.

"If you're just one more wondering soul here to spy on me, I swear I will—" The woman began, but as soon as she reached out to Belle, she gasped, as if pained, and pulled her fingers away from Belle's arms. "You...you're warm?"

Belle took a frightened step away, grasping her arms. "Yes! Please, don't touch me. Who are you? Do you know of this place?"

The woman continued to look amazed. She flexed her fingers in wonder. The look of anger on her face had melted away. "You're not dead?"

"No, I would think not." Belle answered, her tone sharp. "But I know where I am. I have come looking for the master of this terrible place. His name is H—"

"No, no, no," The woman staggered forward, gripping Belle again. "Do not say his name!"

Belle swallowed the word. The look of fear over this woman's face convinced her to mind herself well. At this, Belle lowered her voice. "Is that like a calling card, his name?"

The woman nodded. She looked around, suspicious. They remained alone, but Belle felt the hairs on her neck start to rise. "Yes, please, don't say it. Not now. I don't know what a living mortal like you is doing here, but you have to leave. He doesn't know you're here because the mewling of the dead overwhelm this place. It's hard to pick out what is amiss when your body covered in the chill."

Belle picked at the word. She held the woman's face with her gaze, feeling the as if the floor was coming out from under her. "Mortal? As in—me? And, and that would make you...?"

"A goddess. Clearly," The woman gave her a once over, as if rather unimpressed. Belle had not
noticed it before, but, this woman did seem to give off a kind of inward glow, as a subtle lightness shining from her skin. She seemed particularly interested in Belle's clothing. "I am the goddess Persephone. And I don't know what it is you are doing here, but unless you wish to enter death before your time, I suggest you go back from, um, wherever it is you have come."

She declared this pointedly, but her tone seemed hesitant. She reached up to wipe at her eyes, sniffing. "You shouldn't have come here, little mortal. Whatever do you want for all the suffering in this place?"

Belle stiffened, cold, and, suddenly, feeling extremely alone. "You exist." Her eyes widened. "You touched me, and you felt real, and I heard you crying and….this is real." Belle took in the swell of the cavern around her. "This place is real. Just like Paris. So what Adam dreamed…"

Persephone looked a little offended. She sniffed again. "You are outrageously imprudent for a mortal! Of course this place is real. We are worshipped. We are nature." She gave Belle an incredulous look. "We have existed before all—and—and what in the world are you wearing? I cannot tell if I love it, and if it's an assault upon my eyes. I mean," She swept up the helm of Belle's dress, fingers glossy over the blue pattern. "How can you hope to draw the eyes of men when you are so covered? It's scandalous."

Belle flushed—she never imagined talking to god would be so similar to being sided like those fillies in the village that had chased Gaston around. Made in their image, indeed. She crossed her arms over her chest, attempting to hold herself together. "I'm from a time too difficult to truly explain right now. But, let me just say, that it is clear our cultures value different things in women."

"I don't need a thing from mortal society," Persephone returned. But she seemed amused at Belle's ire. "But…I find myself curious by you. What was your name?"

"Belle."

"Belle." She held the word softly in her mouth. "Belle. You must leave this place. Whatever he promised you. Whatever you think is here. It's not." She grasped her hands over Belle's, a sincere gesture to come from one that held such a grim expression. "Please. Take it from me."

Her hands were so cold that they made Belle's ache, but she refused to pull away—part from not wanting to give offense to one so powerful—and the other…because she looked so miserable.

"It doesn't concern you, why I am here. But…" Belle could not help but find herself full of questions, and not the time to get half of them answered. "You're a goddess. Why don't you leave? Why not leave here, uh…him?"

"Leave?" Persephone gasped, shrinking away. She pulled herself back upon her glittering ore, her face in her hands. "Leave," She whispered. She closed her eyes. "I cannot leave, little Belle."

Belle shook her head, amazed. "Why ever not?"

At this, Persephone looked at Belle in such a way that, for a moment, her heart seemed to still.

"I'm married to him."

Suddenly, a new voice called, startling the two.

"Persephone! Are you done with your latest pity-party? I couldn't help but to take notice when your sobbing stopped battering my ears…"
Persephone leapt up, fixing her hair haphazardly, before she ushered Belle back in the opposite direction. "Oh, no, not now! Of course she'd just show up right when—you have to hide!"

Belle stumbled back, afraid. "From what?" Her eyes took in the forlorn cavern. "Where?"

"Anywhere!" The goddess hissed.

But it was too late.

Before Belle, a new figure had emerged.

She had long, auburn hair that swirled, held up in a heavy pony's tail. Her angular face looked removed, as if long bored, and merely awaiting the worse of it. She had a slender frame, but notable curves, accented by the gossamer of her dress, dripping off of her shoulders. She crossed her own arms over her chest.

"Well then. This is…new."

"Megara!" Persephone strode in front of Belle, her eyes a light. "Must you ruin any notion of humanity I find down here?"

The woman, this Megara, flickered her eyes drily between Belle and the fuming goodness. She then reached up to touch her own nose, sighing into her fingers. "I listen to you cry for hours every day, every week, every time he brings you down here. This happens every year, Perse'. Don't act like you think I enjoy this."

"You certainly never protest being his personal warden." Persephone snapped, throwing her hair dramatically with one long, toned arm.

"...And for all your power, you sit here and cry like some helpless little girl."

"At least I can feel regret over my decisions! You don't feel anything! You don't care for anyone but yourself!"

"Please, Persephone. I care. I care so much that I'd cut off a finger if it meant you would stop screaming for five minutes a day."

Persephone coiled her fingers, shouldering back to stand tall. "You...you credulous lapdog to that heartless man."

Megara rolled her eyes, still decidedly uncaring towards the mortal, shivering, behind Persephone. "Yeah. As if I have a single choice in the matter."

"Just leave! You abandoned me for weeks now you decide to come! Keep that nose of yours out of what isn't your business."

"Your business is his business is my business, Persephone. I don't want to do this but..." She clicked her eyes to Belle, her languid eyes a beautiful, purple shade that only intensified in the dim. "You can't be here."

Belle shuddered away, her heart beating like the wings of a hunted bird, mid-flight. "Please. Please, wait. I made the choice to come here. I must speak with him."

"Yeah." Megara clucked her tongue condescendingly. "I don't think so."

For all her protesting, Persephone merely growled, her teeth brilliantly white and perfect, as Megara
strode forward. Belle was careful to notice that, unlike Persephone, this woman walked along the floor, the same as her.

With a quick jab of her hand, Megara snatched Belle's arm and gave a single pull. It wasn't exactly hard, nothing aggressive, more...annoyed.

Belle wanted to turn to Persephone, alarmed, terrified, desperate to demand help from someone that so obviously had real power in this hellish maze, but she found herself staring into a new empty cavern.

Alone with just Megara.

Who still refused to let go of her arm as they walked.

They moved in silence while Belle attempted to collect her thoughts, saving what she felt was important to remember. Persephone was a goddess. She was powerful and resentful.

She was married to Hades.

And Megara, apparently, was some type of….slave?

Belle had to ask. She gazed at Megara, who faced away, quick and forceful. "You...you aren't like her?"

"Like what?" Megara drawled. "A spoiled bitch?"

"...A goddess."

"Ha!" Megara threw back her head in a loud, delighted laugh. "No. No, I'm a lot like you, princess."

"Princess?" Belle snipped, jolted by the tone of this woman's sneer.

At this, Megara looked over her shoulder to spy Belle. "You're young, pretty, not-dead, and totally willing to risk your soul for some man, am I right?"

"How...how do you..." Belle stumbled, her mind turning.

"You don't seem like the kind of woman that makes mistakes, hm?" Megara suggested, bitterness lingering through her tone. "So, if it's not your mistake, then it's someone else's. Must we always clean up after men?"

"...My love for my husband is not a mistake." Belle gritted out spitefully, her voice venomous.

"So I am right," Megara smirked. "Look, I don't care who you really are. I don't care what you're here for. But you misunderstand. Persephone isn't some damsel in distress. She came here willingly. And she isn't going to move a finger to help you. You're obviously not from around here, given your, uh, look, but Greek gods don't give a shit, pardon my tongue, but, despite how much I hate my life, I don't wish for bad things to happen to other people, especially other women."

Belle tried to pull away, but she felt weak. "While I don't appreciate you assuming why I am here, I'm not asking for help—not from you, and not from Persephone. And, I'm sorry, it's clear I've stumbled upon something I have no place in understanding, but I must keep going."

Megara narrowed her eyes. "He isn't worth it. Nothing is ever worth it, and you're brave and all, to want to try, but gods are only out for themselves. I learned that the hard way. He'll offer up some deal, and it'll be hard to refuse...believe me."
Like the look of utter despair in Persephone's eyes, Belle could see the contempt within this woman, her iron will in her hands to not let Belle go. "I do believe you, Megara. But he is worth it. And I don't care the risks."

With this, Belle summoned all her strength to rip her arm away, winded at how hard it seemed to try. It was as if this place was tapping into her will to think, to breathe.

But Megara was unmoved. "I'm sure your pretty little speeches are beloved wherever the hell you're from, but I don't care what you want. I tried to be nice. But I don't have time for this. Hades isn't a man to trifle with. And neither am I. And I'm only going to say this once, princess—get out!"

She gripped Belle's arm, and, with a snap of her fingers, Belle felt herself falling, her dress rising from the rush of air—and—

She was back in the library. Her arm out in front of her to block the blow of the fall. A small band of red was wrapped from the strength of Megara's grip over her. Belle leaned forward, her body heavy, as she fought for air.

It was like a weight that had been pressing over her chest had suddenly been lifted.

She ripped the tome closed. Wrapped her arms around herself.

It was all in a book. It was all history, or, legend, or dreams, or, maybe, it was nothing at all. But Belle understood only one thing for certain. Megara and Persephone in her way or not.

She would have to go back.

As Belle entered the bedroom, she spent no time at all crawling into bed beside her husband. She spoke no words, she just curled into him, desperate for his warmth, his arms.

Adam jumped, suddenly awoken, surprised to be touched. "God, Belle, you're freezing."

"Oh," Belle said simply, pulling away, but Adam held her close to him, minding his hands.

"No, no, it feels wonderful. I don't mean for you to go away."

Belle allowed herself to be held, pressed against Adam's chest. "...How are you doing?"

Adam considered this slowly. "...I'm not yet a Beast. One thing at a time, I imagine."

He was still burning hot against her. She wondered what it meant. If he was in more pain than he let on. Belle swallowed drily, unable to fully convey all that had occurred. It seemed like no time at all had passed since she had used The Enchantress's book...yet, the sun still lowered in the sky. How long was she gone? It was hard to say, too suspicious to ask as Adam had slept through her descent...

"There's something I need to tell you," She began. But Adam did as well.

They had spoken the phrase at the exact same time.

"Ah—" Adam mused. "Please. Go ahead."

"No—you." Belle insisted, her heart thumping wildly.

"Alright," Adam continued. He tighten his hold around his wife. "I...used The Enchantress's mirror.
In an attempt to show her to me. I had thought, if I could just find her, I might ask her what she wants of me. If...if my dreams do mean something."

Belle untangled herself from his arms, turning to face him. "The mirror still works, then?"

"Yes," Adam confirmed, his voice low. "...but it showed me something else."

"What did it show you?"

"...Eric and Ariel's castle. I think...I think there is going to be a raid upon it, out from the sea."

Her nerves steeled. "It showed you that? Pirates?"

"Yes. What's more, I know the man leading the raid. He called himself a "Captain". I hardly believe it, but, this mirror...it doesn't lie."

Belle quieted, her dark eyes serious. "Eric seemed quite paranoid. Perhaps, he's already prepared."

She would play the defensive. There was no way he could be suggesting...

"I have little doubt that Eric is ready. But...I feel like this might mean something. For me."

At this, Adam pulled himself up, allowing himself to meet his wife eye to eye. Belle reached out to brush the length of his hair away from his face. However, his jaw was squared, eyes tight, as if he had long made a decision and only now had to come out with it.

No! Belle thought.

"I believe I must go. I must go back to Denmark. I have to help. He even requested this of me. And there isn't time to debate this, Belle. If this mirror is, indeed, still enchanted. If it showed me this. It has to mean something. I don't mean to get involved in a fool's errand, or some epic heroism. But...we must leave."

'We', Belle felt her heart tighten. A thousand excused sprang to her mind: You can't, you can't, I won't let you! And, then others, what about our staff? What about the villages? What about your health? And if you change?

Adam's scowl softened to look at Belle's face—a thousand emotions lingering over her lips, in her eyes. "I had a feeling you would look at me that way." He merely leaned over to kiss her—and was surprised at the passion at which she returned the affection.

She carefully grabbed at his wrist, pulling away. "What of your injuries? How could you be expected to—"

"—There is travel yet to get to Denmark. They will heal."

"You don't know that." Belle averred, feeling cheated for time, feeling stupid for selfishly prolonging what she could not prevent.

...For understanding that she was caught within a conspiracy for The Enchantress, too.

"...We hardly know anything at all for what will happen." Adam consented. With a shaking hand, he reached for the mirror, its handle, and presented it to Belle. "Look for yourself at the danger. I cannot sit here, Belle. Eric may have little love for me, and I for him, but I..."

He could not bring himself to confess of Sparrow's plans. The horrible night that may have been the trigger to ruin his body forever. "...have made up my mind."
Belle closed her eyes. She couldn't bear to confess her findings now. Now with Adam, set off to possibly get himself killed. Not with that bloody mirror, with answers evading them at every turn. With the proof of that terrible Underworld, with the magic still very alive inside that book…

With Megara's hands, wrung so tightly they had nearly bruised her skin, Belle could not deny there was a real danger to her plans as well. A danger so surreal and uncertain, she had little idea how to explain. With battle with petty goddesses and gods…to attain for how it connected to their lives, their present history…it was overwhelming to say the least.

You have every right to know, Belle thought, but I cannot let you worry about me.

"…I cannot go with you, Adam." Belle confessed, her heart breaking. At this, she turned away, unable to look at him further.

"I had a feeling you might say that." He rumbled, his voice sadden. "I…I feel a fool. I have taken these brief weeks to learn as quickly as I can…but I cannot read the length and sophistication of your letters. But I know you; the frequency at which you write. With those gears I can feel spinning in your mind, I know you have matters to attend to here—and while I wish to understand, to know this...theory…you are after, I must chase what I can see before me. There is so little time, Belle."

Belle shuddered at his words. It was so easy to slip through his fingers. Too easy. It was not fair that he led his confession and she not offer hers. It was not fair. Her secrecy would eat her alive…

"And, if I may be perfectly honest, Belle," Adam continued, his words slow and distraught. "As badly as I want you beside me, I am glad you will be here." He collected her cheek in a bandaged hand, to turn her back towards him. "So you will be safe. It will be one less thing I must consider. Even at a distance, there is nothing I would wish more. To know you are so far from this, I may rest easier. Even if I can hardly sleep without you."

Belle felt tears in her eyes, at his words, at her inability to be so breathlessly honest. She was caught between desire and deceit. That Megara woman knew nothing of her.

Belle fully understood her consequences, her actions. Her mistakes. "I love you."

"I love you." Adam said, his eyes drinking in her face. He reached to pull her hair behind her ear, loose strands sliding out with every attempt, but it made him smile for the first time in what seemed like weeks. He had bottled everything inside, but, Belle, Belle believed in him, in this, to that dream, Adam felt himself clinging with all his might. "...And I promise, we will write to one another. And you can tease me all you like when I return, of how I might behave myself."

"You will tear those men to bits," Belle teased, willing her mood to lighten, if only for his sake. "And I don't just mean your strength. Can you possibly mind your tongue without me around to snip it for you?"

"I will think of the most crossed face you have ever given me…and laugh." Adam humored.

"You are awful, Adam. Eric will run you out before the pirates have a chance to arrive."

"Then, let us hope they never have the chance to land."

"Yes," Belle agreed, her heart squeezing, breathless in her chest. "I hope with everything I have. Will you tell Ariel I am so sorry that I cannot come? She will be so frightened…"

"I will, but she is very fierce. I will leave my letters for you to look over, of our conversations. I had trouble with some of her phrasing, but perhaps you may see something I missed. About our theory,
her connection to the sea…"

"I will," Belle continued. "I had nearly forgotten…" Belle trailed off.

The world seemed, with every moment, so much bigger than she could have imagined, with people too powerful to understand…she felt both so alive, and so afraid.

Adam did not feel the need for their words to continue. He simply moved closer to kiss her further, and Belle, without a word, considered the kisses the only thing need to be said.

The weeks at sea went smoothly and unabated. For all the omen of the mirror, which Adam had brought along, for guidance, for the use of proof if Eric dared to argue against him, Adam never thought he would so grateful to make port. The sky was clear and blue, the beaches ever the same, particularly since he had last seen them, with sand in his mouth and salt to sting his eyes…

Against his better word, he found himself at a losing battle for his staff. At the mention of pirates, the usual crew that helped to heed his ship feared for family and friends, and sought to make due elsewhere in the castle. Adam did not bother to force anyone to travel along. He understood. He was not a cruel king, not like how his father would have responded. But he ordered in new crew, and, without warning, he found himself sailing to Denmark with his maître’d, Lumière, who had stopped at no length to be alongside him for the journey, despite little want for fight nor swordsmanship.

While Adam felt his heart quicken to bring one of his dearest friends into the means of what might be a bloody battle, he felt himself more comforted as the days went on.

It meant, perhaps, that he was not as alone as he thought, caught between princes and princesses and their shiny kingdoms, so far from his woods and quiet gardens…

Upon the docks, where new staff and Lumière himself oversaw the hauling of traded goods and menial items for their Master, Adam found himself along the docking pier once more, staring out over what seemed to be a good number of others servants and staff—ships, far larger than his own.

Stopping to admire a particularly large galleon, Adam found himself paused, ever so shortly, as he wanted to make his way as quickly as he could to gain an audience with Eric. His proof of a pirate onslaught, would, no doubt, cause quite the alarm in public.

"Excuse me, my friend, but could I ask for a hand with this?"

A friendly voice called out to Adam, tearing Adam's eyes away from ship and towards the working hand of a young man. He was shirtless, muscular, with dark wavy hair, pooled with sweat in the midday sun, some sort of dock worker. Sweat dotted his dark skin, causing his teeth to nearly sparkle from their cleanliness. Adam quickly followed, rather unsure, but deciding to not start off his journey again in rudeness. He grasped the other end of the equipment—a rather heavy looking half of an iron bulwark.

The younger man looked surprised as the weight lifted so easily from his struggles before.

"Ashidanza!" His smiled brighten, making him appear even friendlier, much to Adam's dismay. "You, my friend, are very strong for someone that seems so unfit!"

"Unfit?" Adam returned, forcing the comment to slide.

The man gave a hearty laugh, deeply amused. "Ah, I do not mean offense! I am sorry! It is just—Aladdin and Eric and I, we are having a competition, no? About who can move the most of the
defense shipment." He gave a sly glance. "You will not blow my cover, will you?"

Adam raised a brow. "That depends. Are you using me to cheat?"

Again, the man laughed. He seemed inclined to do so, and often. He spoke quickly, and with a strange, heavy accent that Adam had not heard before. "Nothing gets by you! Listen, listen, if you do not tell, I will gladly pay you for the help. And, ah, you can buy yourself some better clothes, yes?"

Adam blinked, certain he had misunderstood. Had he just been insulted twice in less than a minute? "My clothes? I assure you, I don't need your money, sir. And my clothes are fine."

"Nonsense, nonsense. I mean, that shirt—those pants. The colors!" The younger man made quite the face. "I have an eye for these things. I would be happy to help!"

"Please, don't." Adam deadpanned. He now regretted aiding this man more than ever.

"NAVEEN! YOU CHEAT!" A voice called, excited and breathless. From around a large bulk of fishery-netting, another young man approached, equally shirtless. His skin was tanned, his eyes dark, and his hair sticking every which way as he sprang forward. "I knew it! I knew! Eric said you wouldn't—he swore by it! But, look'it you, cheating! This is why I won't play cards with you, you know!"

Naveen grinned guilty, his eyes to Adam and then back to the man. "Ah…so close."

"'So close' nothing, you lousy fraud! I don't care what Eric says, I'm the winner. I moved all of my own shipment, plus Jasmine's things—do you even know how much stuff Jasmine has to bring with her? Everywhere we go?"

"It is not my fault Tiana packs so minimally!"

"It's literally our entire palace—including Rajah!"

"The tiger? No! You did not bring the tiger!"

"Yup, he's here!"

"Oh, I do love Rajah. His coat is divine!"

At this, the opposing man turned to Adam, scrubbing the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "...And who is this? More recruits help in your schemes?"

"He is just some dockhand, I'm sure," Naveen nodded. He gave Adam a smile. "But, he is very strong. I wouldn't put it past that he is even stronger than you, Aladdin."

At this, the other man, Aladdin, rolled his eyes. "Please, Don't even try to weasel out of this. He's just doing his job! A job you can't even be bothered to do, apparently!"

Adam sighed, the weight in his hands less trouble than the two before him. Why did he stop? Where was Eric? There were important matters to be discussed.

"Mon Dieu," Adam muttered, voicing his thoughts.

"Oh! You speak French?" Naveen, against everything Adam wanted, only looked more pleased. "What a treat! So do I! So do I!"

Damn Enchantress, hath casted me to this hell. Not to die by pirates, but at the hands of fools.
Adam would not stand for this any longer, these two young men, their voices noisy and senseless. "...Excuse me, gentlemen." And, with that, Adam dropped his half of the bulwark, causing Naveen to buckle under the sudden weight, twisting it down, banging the equipment loudly over the dock.

"Ow," Naveen said, his smile soured.

"Serves you right." The other man asserted. He caught Adam's arm easily. "Wait, wait. I'm sorry. I didn't get your name? Don't let Naveen be his usual self. If he offended you, say something."

Adam looked at the younger man, who so naturally reached out to grab him, as if he had some inkling of who he was.

...And, as he looked from man to man, it became clear that, obviously, they didn't.

"My name is Adam. I am searching for Eric. I assume you two know of him?"

"Adam," Aladdin, his smile charming, his eyes bright, nodded in understand. He caught Adam's hand, shaking it strongly. "My name is Aladdin, and, well, this is Naveen. He's an idiot. Don't listen a word he says."

"'Allo," Naveen returned, still struggling from his spot along the pier.

"Charmed," Adam said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I don't imagine you two boys might know where Eric is?"

"Boys?" Aladdin raised two dark eyebrows at this. "Wait—who are you, exactly? What do you need with Eric?"

Adam gave his best attempt at a smile, but he felt as if he had grown fangs all over again. Thankfully, his expression came across cordially. "I have important business to discuss. I have traveled from France. I—"

"Whoa," Aladdin gasped, he took a step back in disbelief. "Wait—you're—you're that Adam? A king, right? Over in Fran—oh, oh, no." He turned on his bare heel to glare at Naveen. "Naveen, you idiot! Did you have any idea who you were talking to?! This whole time?"

"I've never met this fellow in my life!" Naveen defended, dropping the weight he had been holding to straighten himself. "How am I know to him from—Heh—Adam, so to speak?"

"Ugh," Aladdin sighed, long and exasperated. "Adam, I am sorry. We had no idea who you were. Eric didn't really tell us too much about you at all. In fact, uh, he didn't think you would...come?"

Aladdin admitted this as if, he, too, felt ashamed.

Adam did not mind. It was to be expected, really. "Well, I have ominous tidings to bring in my wake, and I must speak with Eric. Alone. Although, I am glad to find he sought help in other ways. May your stay here be... a safe one."

And with that, Adam turned away, grateful to get away from the pair of eyes staring at the back of his head, but, even more so, to seek Eric. Sparrow might be hours away, if not already here, biding his time, and he had no time to spend on the like of spirited princes who thought their ships playthings.

"Ah...we will speak again later!" Naveen called, undeterred by Adam's cold exit.
At his side, Aladdin stared onward, curious, before he turned away, picked up the other side of the bulwark, and called for Naveen to help him carry it—soon, their voices turned to wind in the distance. And Adam, Adam moved forward—without a moment more to waste.

**AN:** Hehehe! Thank you all for enjoying. I cannot wait to give you more, soon. C: Lemme know your thoughts! (And yes, to answer any questions, the myth that Belle flipped to is one that "takes place" "before" the Disney Hercules' canon. I hope that helps. C: )
AN: Hey guys! Thank you so very much for the support, kudos, reviews, and comments! They seriously brighten my day. Sorry for the delay in updates. I hope to return to that every other day format. My car died and my job decided to twist around my life more, so, I had to take some time to sort that out (I got a new car! Yay! But now I've got even more bills to spontaneously combust about, yayyyyyyy.). But I'm back! Enjoy! : D

The Prince of Denmark's castle was *nothing* like Adam's own.

It was too open, too airy, and contained far too much light. It crafted reflections everywhere. Along the heated polish of the wood carvings in the walls. There was even a glistening along the flooring. Adam felt that even the windows seemed to glow more internally than from the light of the slowly setting sun. And, of course, there was the ever present sea. The sea seemed to follow him with every quickening step, reflected in the large plate glass windows that echoed one another along the castle's first floor. In front of him was a grand staircase that lead into the second floor—the floor where Eric's personal office seemed to be hidden away.

Or, at the very least, that is what a young evening maid had told Adam, her expression nervous. Undoubtedly, Eric must have told his staff of what was coming. She then turned quickly to escape into the nearest adjacent room—and Adam found himself alone once more.

And so he continued on.

He was taking the steps two at a time when, suddenly, he sped to a halt. Footsteps, close by—but heavy. Extremely heavy. Adam peered into a narrow hall—some type of servant corridor. And a large shadow stood in the open doorway.

Adam froze, his nose suddenly filled with the scent of an animal. One he had never smelled before. Two bright eyes flickered, and, from the doorway, something large and beautiful moved. Its coat was as orange as a torch light, its shoulders broad and muscular. Its head was huge, with two black ears sitting close to the top that followed Adam, tracking his heart rate with ease. From its open jaws, four large, yellow fangs dripped with foam. A low warning of a snarl rolled from the back of the feline's throat.

Adam felt his heartrate triple as his legs faltered backwards in fear.

He had never seen a predator so massive before—the beast alone was *four* of his forest's wolves put together. Without thinking, Adam curled his fists and forced himself to stand still, even as the feline padded closer with its yellow eyes narrowed into two fine points. It growled again. Adam felt the sound reverberating through his spine, a shiver climbing up his back. The beast twitched its tail.

It tested its yellow eyes over Adam's body and hissed again, a throaty roar of a sound from an animal so large. Then, it backed up, just a little...Adam held his breath, bracing, for he knew he could never outrun the animal. But yet, with his heart shuddering so quickly in his chest he felt sick, Adam met its eyes with instant understanding. It was smart. It had cunning. It knew.

*How?* Adam thought, his jaw locked in place. *How do animals always see through me so quickly? Is there nothing I can do?*
Even nature seemed repulsed by him.

The wolves of the black forest edged nearer to the day, watching, waiting, roaming in large packs just beyond the hedges of his garden walls. That damn horse that had panicked, lost all sense of control from its master's calls during the Festival of Fools...And now...now, without his Beastly body, Adam felt the horrible eyes of a creature that only wanted its teeth deep into his neck.

But he could not move. He could not risk the hum of adrenaline that seeped through his veins.

He knew what it was to stalk prey. Finally—an encounter that seemed, for all the insanity of meeting such a beast within Eric's home, perfectly rational to Adam's brain. For it was no longer fear that clouded his mind—but a power play. Territory. His nose breathed in the feline's scent—clean, pampered—and he watched with careful attention at the length it pushed out its claws, scratching them along the flooring. He maintained eye contact and focused. He deepened his breathing. He broadened his shoulders, curving back to feign some sense of power and willed this fight to be over. He smothered that tiny, pathetic human part of his brain that demanded he run and dropped his voice.

He answered the predator's snarl with one of his own—long and low, the hair on his neck rising up as he allowed the sound to grip through him. He felt his hands curl up expectantly as he bared his teeth—he took a step forward, just as the creature steeled, its own back arched up, threatening to meet him mid-step when—

"Rajah?" A woman's voice called, ripe with concern.

The beast turned suddenly, its yellow eyes burning into Adam, before it backed up into the corridor, its long tail a straight rigid line. And, just like that, it was over.

"Rajah?" The call of a human voice hacked into Adam's mind. It felt muddled, disorientating, as if this voice was the true reason to be afraid; the strangeness of the call turned over his thoughts like a royal flush of playing cards—the light of the castle, the pace of primal breath, the fine adjustment of sound—all their reasoning flooding away from him.

In their place, Adam only felt the shivering of his legs, so close to death, his face locked hesitantly, somewhere between wanting to run, and wanting to rush after that animal, to dig his own teeth into its hide...

A woman was before him now. Young, distractingly pretty, her thin eyebrows narrowed at him, her lips drawn tightly. She was draped in a fine blue cloth that wrapped lightly over one shoulder, draping down over her back. Her hips offered much to the eye, her skirt pooling long over the floor, regal and sea blue, as if she had stepped from the ocean. Her midriff was distinctly exposed, stomach toned, with a small jewel resting at her navel, as if a treasure to be found if one stared too long.

And, Adam did find himself staring, too slow to straighten himself up.

The pretty young woman gave Adam quite the perturbed look. "...Were you growling at Rajah?"

Adam had to fight to articulate his words. He had not a single reason for how ridiculous he must have looked to her. "...It growled first."

The woman laced a hand to her hip. "Rajah is my pet. And he's protective, yes, but, never so aggressive." She raised a thin black eyebrow, tossing the long braid of her dark, curling hair over her exposed shoulder. "You must be a dangerous man." She gave a low laugh, glancing behind her. "I suppose Rajah only knows. If only animals could talk, right?"

She said this quite drily, clearly most amused by Adam's reasoning.
"I—didn't mean to startle your pet." Adam continued, composing himself with a clear of his throat. "Startle Rajah?" The women returned lightly. "It looks more like he startled you." She motioned straight to Adam's hands, the steady shaking of his fingers. While the weeks at sea had healed most of the damage he had inflicted upon himself, Lumière had still insisted upon the odd bandage here and there to cover dark green bruises that lingered to his wrist. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Adam tore his hands away from her sight, sliding them behind his back. "No—absolutely not. But, yes, you're right. I…didn't expect to find such a beast in Eric's castle."

"Rajah is a tiger—my most beloved treasure." The seriousness in her voice backed away, replaced with that of gentle curiosity. "You have seen a tiger before, haven't you?"

Adam gave a slow shake of his head. "Perhaps in books but…no, I have not. I—I don't believe they are common in my country…"

"Oh—well then, no wonder he frightened you! I promise, he looks very threatening but he's a spoiled little kitten at heart. He must have heard you coming and thought I was in trouble." At this, the young woman swung on her heel, swishing back through the shadow of the door. "Rajah! Where did you go, you silly cat? Come here!"

"Please," Adam asked after her hurriedly, "I don't wish to meet it again."

The young woman turned, peering through the shadows with dark, watchful eyes. "He." She corrected shortly. "And do you not care for animals?"

"…They don't care for me," Adam returned. A flicker of her dark eyes. Her lips upturned faintly. "…Who are you?"

"My name is Adam. I have arrived from France with news for Eric—I imagine you know him. We are, um, of mutual standing for our trading between our kingdoms."

The woman moved forward again, a new light shining from her eyes. "You're from France? You aren't…" She picked at her lip with a manicured finger in her wonder. "You wouldn't happen to know Belle…?"

Adam forced himself to appear calm, all while his heart still squeezed painfully in his chest, the fight or flight response not quite done with him yet. "She is my wife."

"Oh! Oh!" The woman clasped her hands together in delight. "You are Adam! You are Belle's husband?" She roamed her eyes over Adam once more, her mouth opened in delight, but her expression shortly fell. "…What are you doing here? Ariel didn't mention you would be here…"

Adam adjusted his coat, wiping the sweat from his palms discreetly over the fabric. "I have come alone. Belle had other business to attend. I'm sure she sends best wishes to you and your husband…" He stopped, suddenly aware that he had spent so much time talking to this woman without even knowing her name.

"Jasmine." The woman responded instantly, her eyes proud and stunning as her figure. She seemed just as cunning as her pet; she read Adam's face as easily as if he had publicly announced his own rudeness. "That's my name."

Jasmine, Adam thought, but he found himself instantly reminiscing of the flower. The delicate, hard to capture pearls of white that wilted so easily, even within his attentive care. They required much
work to grow in France, with the lust for their ability to be made into a fine tea, the soil had to be perfectly moistened—Jasmine could take only so much sun, so much shade, a challenging balance of care and stubborn dedication…And she was still staring at him, expectantly, her brows tight once more.

"Ah, Adam." Adam said, gutted by his own lack of tact. How he longed to be back in his garden, away from here.

"I'm aware." Jasmine studied him fully, her eyes scrutinizing.

"Oleaceae," Adam tossed, his smile small and mocking to himself. He allowed the word to fall into the awkward space between them without explanation.

She looked at him, taken back. "...Was that French?"

Adam allowed a dry, short laugh at her confusion. "It is the family of the flower you are named after."

The woman, Jasmine, looked intrigued. "You know flowers?"

"L'espèce de plantes. That is the one of the latest entries I have gotten a hold of for the specification of plants and their many species. I haven't memorized them all, but, yes—I have a garden of mine that I care for." He dropped his eyes, nervous by her staring, but he continued on. "I suppose it isn't terribly exciting to discuss. I apologise."

"No, no, I asked you." Jasmine insisted. She now looked at Adam with her smile lingering into a smirk, as if impressed. "Maybe I've been too sheltered but... I've never met a man that had such a domestic hobby…Aladdin is too restless for his own good."

Adam could not help but blush, his face burning. This was just perfect; a checklist meant for Adam alone. Adam could hear Lumière's jest: growl at her pet, do not ask her name, ramble about your imprudent hobby…

"I, um …it is a pastime of mine." Adam concluded. "I take great pride in my gardens."

"I bet they're beautiful."

"Yes," Adam nodded appreciatively, feeling as if this woman were giving him a moment of reprieve. "They are."

"I have a barbarican in my palace. It overlooks my entire city. There is a gazebo and a menagerie of birds. I suppose I can relate in that way. There is a gigantic fountain and all the birds are fantastic with their feathers of different colors." She reflected on this fondly. "...I always have to let them go by the summers' end. But, often, they return to me. I bet like your flowers, you cannot wait for them to bloom once more."

Adam looked at her in surprise. "Yes...that is entirely what it feels like. I agree completely."

At this, Jasmine smiled, looking much like her namesake in how she managed to relate so steadily, however, unlike Eugene, unlike Ariel's boundless ability to reach out for him, Jasmine remained at a distance, reserved. "What were you doing out here? Wondering the halls, hunting more strange creatures?"

Adam snapped back to his goal, distracted by the turn of pleasant conversation, and the shock of running into Rajah. He tentatively reached for The Enchantress's mirror, snug inside his coat's
"I must speak with Eric. It is very important." Adam glanced around the long hall of doors once more, attempting to not be dazed over the three floors to the castle. "I am sorry if I am rude, but I really must find him."

Jasmine raised a sharp brow once more.

"Eric, you say? Well, he's been shut in for the majority of the day. He looked a little…upset." She glanced, as if not prone to gossip, but allowed Adam in. "I overheard Ariel and Eric in some sort of fight earlier today…and, well, I haven't seen him since. But I have seen Ariel. Shall I fetch her?" A clandestine look passed over Jasmine's face. "She's talked quite a lot about this mysterious pen pal. One that, I was so certain, wouldn't be joining us…"

*My letters, Adam felt himself sweat under his clothing, uncomfortable again at the idea of his words being shared amongst strangers. "Am I so easily unmasked?"

"Ariel isn't exactly shy." Jasmine allowed but she softened. "But she may have mentioned you a few times by name. And, well…" She rested over her next word, purring it like her own tiger, a little smugly, a detective by her own hand. "She did mention you were a little standoffish."

"Oh, is that all she said about me? Just a little?"

"Well, you are standoffish. I agree with her."

"It is nice to know I could be so effortlessly found in a crowded room."

"Don't worry. Your secrets are safe, I'm sure."

"I assure you, there is little interesting about me." Adam willed his tone to convey this to be true.

"Hm," Jasmine gave a little scoff from the back of her throat. Adam felt much like some plaything between her dark stare. "Have you always been a part of royalty?"

Adam's face must have said it all. "Whatever do you mean?"

"What I mean is that Aladdin, my husband, married into my family, and into his position. I was just wondering, that's all." She lowered her voice into a stage whisper, as if giving advice. "Like Ariel, this is me, trying to get to know you."

"Oh," Adam replied, feeling quite restrained. *Aladdin, that man he had met on the docks below…married into royalty? How interesting... "Ah. Yes."*

"Yes?" Jasmine purred.

"Yes, my whole life. My father. He." Adam kept his tone nimble, disallowing that drip of anger, of fear, to rise so smoothly to his tongue when the subject was approached. He was in new company, after all. "He ruled for nearly twenty years. And now I take his stead."

"And your mother?"

"She is dead." Adam said. He felt little when a small look of compassion crossed Jasmine's face. "She died when I was still a boy. My father died alongside her." He wanted the topic dropped as soon as possible, and, a short lie, wouldn't harm that desire. "Please, there is no need to look so sad. It was a very long time ago."
Jasmine looked uncomfortable, her eyes distant. "...I was just thinking how lucky I am that my father is still in good health."

"I hope he is good to you," Adam returned, his tone low.

"Wow." Jasmine gave a respectful nod. "Twenty years. No pressure, right?"

Adam gave a clipped smile. "The thought never crosses my mind, now that you bring it up."

Jasmine gave a dry laugh. "You're very droll. Do you know that?"

"Hardly." Adam allowed. But he felt the sweat collecting at the back of his neck. "I plan on ruling my kingdom in a vastly superior way, truth be told. I seek no competition with my past."

Jasmine gave a short smile herself. "Noble of you."

"I really must be going," Adam said, attempting his best to not turn tail and leave her waiting.

"Wait—just one more question. Have you met Aladdin?"

Adam hoped his face appeared agreeable to speak of those two spirited princes. "Yes, along the docks when I arrived. He was helping another young man with stock. Another young man that claimed to also be... a prince?"

"Naveen?" Jasmine quipped. "Naveen, doing hard work?"

"I don't know them well. I cannot speak to their nature." Adam thought best to leave out the slander of Naveen's cheating... for now.

Jasmine gave a roll of her dark eyes. "Tiana will never believe it..."

"Tiana?"

"Prince Naveen's incredible wife," Jasmine said pointedly. "You'll never meet two entirely different people that are so in love." Jasmine gave a little wink at this. "I'm sure you'll meet her soon. If you will be joining us. After Eric, of course."

"Of course," Adam echoed. More people. More friendly people. How large was this castle? How many more surprises lay inside to horrify him?

"Well, I won't keep you any longer," Jasmine gave a small, graceful wave as she turned, quite sure of the conversations end, without the need to save face further. She slid back into the shadow of the corridor, gliding her hand over the back of that enormous tiger, who stared at Adam, fixated, through the doorway, its yellow eyes unblinking.

"It was a pleasure to meet you both," Adam replied, a bit delayed, as he bowed quickly. He then made his way along the hall, grateful to not need a reason to look back.

"Adam?" Eric was seated when the king had stormed into his office, some upwards place central of the grand stairwell, at the direction of two guardsmen who had noticed that Adam looked particularly lost. He quickly stood, his dark hair still somehow perfect, but his eyes like the sea—darker than blue, nearly black. "What are you doing here?"

His utter shock told Adam everything he had suspected: he wasn't meant to be here.
He was no worldly prince to come running at the first sign of trouble. He was all he presented himself to be: Distrustful, angry, and severe. In Eric's voice, there was no guilt, no shame in him not, too, being summoned. The word friends, flashed in Adam's mind, and then disappeared, like smoke, alongside Eugene's heartfelt comments of what that word truly meant. And how little Adam could offer to grasp it.

Adam stirred back, breathless to so suddenly be caught in a small space. A hand flew to his coat pocket—at The Enchantress's mirror inside. "I—I've been told I wasn't expected."

At this, Eric seemed sallow, he tilted his head, curious. "No. I—that is." Eric paused, chewing his own lip. "I don't mean to come away as callous."

"That isn't what you meant." Adam cut into the heart of Eric's sociability.

Here, Eric laughed, a small chuckle from the back of his throat. It was a flourish of noise, alike to that of rapier unsheathing; words, indivisible weapons, preened for endless dueling, the true battle meant for royal tongue.

"Fine. I'll skip what is customary. What are you doing here, Adam? You seemed so…distant before. I just felt that calling upon you would be a sort of strain. When we last saw one another—has it been nearly two months now?—you looked…unwell. I imagine Belle is with you?"

"No."

Another lapse of astonishment. "She isn't here?"

"She had an urgent matter to attend. One I could not help her with."

"I see. And of your illness. Were you truly ill? I couldn't tell—and Ariel is quick to dismiss my inquiries after you—between her letters, and your own."

"I was." Adam returned tersely.

"And you're better, then?"

"I will be."

"Well, I am sorry for whatever it was that got to you. I know illness these days are dangerous. I try to take precaution where I can—but it often feels like it is never enough." Eric brought a hand up to his mouth, indignantly biting a nail, as if in thought. "Yes. I find myself thinking that more and more lately…"

His stormy eyes moved away, clearly taken with some new thought. Adam allowed himself a moment to consider his tone. He attempted a more amiable question. "Have you received word of an attack so soon?"

"…To be honest, I've heard nothing. But words are wind, you know. It is more…feeling."

"A feeling?" Adam replied, his own surprise tightening the scrutiny in his voice.

Eric raised a brow. "Is there something the matter?" The Prince of Denmark gestured to Adam's arm, the rate at which his fingers shook.

Adam quickly shoved one hand into his pocket, fingers tight over the handle of the mirror. He had never showed anyone else, beyond Belle, the mirror before—and, perhaps he was just nervous. But
something seemed off about Eric. It could been many a thing. A change of the room, or without Ariel by his side. But Adam felt suddenly cautious. His own ears swirled, blood rushing through him, like a warning.

"Those two men—outside, along the docks." Adam sought for the more urgent topic between them —Eric's question be damned.

"Naveen and Aladdin? Did you meet them?"

"They're pulling out iron bulwarks—your harbor is staggered in ships the like I've never seen. You've mentioned pirates—but what is this? All of this, recruitment, equipment, for 'a feeling'?"

Eric gritted his teeth into a smile. "It's a bit over-kill. I'm aware." Eric moved around his desk to lean against the front of it, attempting to lighten judgement over his methods. "Ariel teases me. Called me paranoid." Eric looked away, towards the window. "I like to think I'm thorough. They don't seem to mind. They're jokesters but they're hard working men. Good friends of mine."

"You've certainly called upon more kingdoms than I expected." Adam laid his observation coolly between them. "I wouldn't call it paranoia. Not entirely. I'd say more you were expecting something… more."

Eric looked struck, his blue eyes wide. He glanced around his office, as if looking for something more, something so easy to return back to the gentleman before him, but he only looked, for all his calm confidence, exposed in pale, fading sunlight. *En garde.* "So you've noticed."

"You've never kept your love of hunting down some pirate fleet well hidden."

Eric eyed him steadily. "I could say that same thing about you—in a way." Eric flashed a cold smile. "As much as your wife disagreed with me."

*Riposte.* Adam straighten. "Please, let us leave Belle out of this—Ariel as well. I only mean to assist you. If you'll have me."

"Ariel…" Eric began, his countenance restless. At the mention of his wife's name, Eric lowered his guard. His pleasant expression now dragging. He closed his eyes briefly. "Yes…to be certain, she has her opinions as well. Over how I'm…handling this."

"She objects to your plans?"

Eric knitted his dark brows. The youth seemed drained from his face. "She doesn't understand. She's too far removed from what it means to feel so helpless. In the face of—of all this madness!"

'Madness'? Adam thought, startled at the anger in the word.

He studied Eric's face sternly—the rate he seemed to swing from charm to that strange, passionate gleam—the very one he had noticed so keenly before—God, it felt so long ago now—when he spoke of sports, of fishing, of hanging a pirate by the throat. Was this the remnant of some fight with Ariel, as Jasmine had hinted?...

Running a hand along the desk behind him, Eric moved away once more. He stood to stare out his window, his mouth a harsh line, carved into skin.

"Adam….might I ask you something? It's…it's not easily expressed." Eric turned, his eyes bleak. "But I hope you might understand. You are a king, after all. And, we're not so light hearted like the others. You and I, we're men of responsibility. We don't just have our little lives to protect, but
hundreds, thousands of people that look to us for support. And this world…it's so impossible." At this, Eric clenched his hands, knuckles whitened, like the edge of the moon, peering out over the sinking sun, suspended over the rise and fall of the dusky ocean waves outside.

Adam took a step forward. "Impossible, you say?"

"For us. People like us." Eric continued. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Adam could only give a minimal shake his head, his eyes weary. "…Eric?"

"I don't know about your kingdom, but, I've traveled this world, this huge, ridiculous world, and it is full of magic. Unexplainable, powerful people. Indescribable places—nearly other worldly. And we're just…so impossibly human. We're just—men. I—Ariel is my life, my dream, and yet I feel like I can't give her what she deserves. What my people deserve. How can I possibly dare to compete? To seek out what I don't know? How can I be the promise of a country's protection?"

Eric turned back to the window. "I know I might be delusional. I'm not—I'm not some monster in search of power. I just want—what I've always wanted—is to feel unafraid. For my people, for my wife—for everything I lack as merely some prince. Ariel has to know that!"

"How can—"

"How can someone like me be afraid?" Eric snapped, his voice echoing around the small chamber. "Is that what you were going to say? I took you for being judgmental, but are you seriously so conceited?"

Adam swallowed thinly, drinking down his own rebuttal, his original question lost to the sound of blood deafening in his ears. The man before him now was nothing like he had acted, and, for a heartbeat, Adam felt himself feel justified for all his previous assumptions, his shallow fight with Belle, so meaningless now, so long ago—but his heart thundered in disquiet. This face that Eric was making, this side he was daring to show…

The mirror inside of his pocket…The smell of smoke…The Enchantress, her Death's head…

It reminded Adam of his nightmare. Of being able to kill everything, everyone…

…except Eric.

Adam chose his words carefully. "…I am not here to cause you more stress. You have a right to feel overwhelmed. And to act on that feeling, even if overzealous, is not wrong."

While his smile was still terse, Eric seemed to approve. "Then, you do understand?" He gave a small sigh, his face reassured, defined by the sweat along his temples. "…Incredible. I couldn't think of how to propose it to Aladdin and you just walked in—and—perhaps it is I that misjudged you, Adam."

"I don't believe I have agreed to anything." Adam reminded brusquely.

"No, no, no. Of course. I didn't mean to propose—" Eric staggered, as if pulled from thought to thought, his nerves clear and frantic across his once noble disposition. His eyes searched desperately to know this to be the truth. "—But you are here. You have come to me. Then…you will help?"

"I will do what I can." Adam permitted, but he shielded away. He took in a single breath as he started his next sentence. "And I have something more that might affirm your feelings of unease."
"You do? What—how—What is it?"

Adam set his jaw, willing his hands to move accordingly. He pulled the mirror from his coat, the last of the sun catching its edges, shimmering the smooth, empty glass. "...I can offer you a glimpse at what is coming."

Eric looked dumbstruck. He doubled back to view the mirror, hesitant to reach out. "A mirror?"

Adam sucked in a breath. "It is an enchanted mirror. It reveals whatever you wish."

Eric looked amazed, his eyes wide and pale inside his skull. "I don't...understand...How did you come by this?"

Adam had little to cover for what Eric suggested. What to say? How to move forward from this razor's edge, Eric's turnabout selective to each word. Confess to knowing of magic? Of curses? Confess to madness? The insanity of his own dreams, of that demon, Hades? What would keep Belle the most secure? To lie?

Adam swallowed without relief, his heart thrumming, and a new kind of threat looming before him, without the foresight to fight the consequence. His mouth seemed to move without his saying so.

"It is a family heirloom. Passed from my grandfather, to my father, to me. It is very limited in what it can do, but, of what it can do, it is never wrong. This mirror can offer you some insight into your greatest fear. And, to this end, I have come to tell you: it has shown me pirates, lingering ever closer. Coming for your kingdom."

Eric stared, a man stuck, unhearing of Adam's words. He only had eyes for the glass.

"May I...?"

Adam carefully handed it over, making sure his hands did not touch the prince's. Eric held the weight in his hands, fingers curled around the handle. His face conveyed his astonishment in every muscle, frozen upon his face, to spy just himself in the mirror's surface.

"...I only see myself." Eric said after a moment, his eyes tightening in frustration.

"You must ask something of it. Whatever you wish, but, I find that being honest hones the greatest image."

"What did you ask of it?" Eric asked suddenly, his voice awed.

"I..." He trembled to find a better answer than the truth. He dare not say that now. Not to Eric. Perhaps not to anyone. "I asked it to find me a path of righteousness."

"Hah," Eric gave a small, humorless chuckle. "And it showed you pirates, did it? What honor is there in that? They are more vermin than people."

"I do not know," Adam confessed, having thought a similar woe. "But the mirror is never wrong."

Eric ran a finger over the surface, marveling at how cold the glass felt under his skin. "Incredible...I've never held such an artifact before. I..."

And, then, without warning, the mirror changed.

Reflected in the glass, Adam saw nothing of pirates or ships, or even the sea.
Inside the glass, Adam spied a world he could not name. The image looked almost watery, blurred and submerged. A city sprawled out before him. The buildings looked foreign and unique, twisted into spirals—with sand lingering over rooftops…and…fish…swimming in the air…

No…in the sea.

*A city at the bottom of the sea…*

Eric sucked in a pained breath, a hand grasping to the collar of his shirt. He pulled the mirror away from Adam's line of sight, grasping it to his face, the brilliancy of the light from the city lining Eric's face in its glow…exposing the raw look of want resting there, the blue of his eyes filling with desire…

"*Atlantica*…" Eric gasped, his voice hoarse. He ran a finger over the glass, as if he expected to force his way through it. "I've never seen it…we're not meant to see it…but, my God…"

Adam steadied himself, the muscles of his shoulders and back tightening anxiously. He did not understand. Why did the mirror not show Eric the pirates? Why did it react so expectantly to show him something new without question?

What did Eric truly desire from this call to action?

"Eric," Adam began, his voice low in his throat, more order than name. He reached out to grasp the man's arm, to pull him away from the seduction of staring, endlessly, at what was just out of reach. "*Eric!*"

This snapped the Prince of Denmark out of his trace. His face fell, at first in sadness, and then, in horror. He twisted away, his grip over the mirror lost, and Adam staggered to grab the mirror before it fell to the floor—with more gentleness than Adam had sought to find in years over The Enchantress's pitiless items, Adam held the mirror in his hands, breathless that it might have so easily been lost.

"…Why did you show me that?" Eric demanded. His face tightened, jaw locked. "Was that *real*? Was *any* of that *real*?"

"It is real." Adam said simply.

Eric looked like a man guilty of murder. Adam struggled to comprehend the valiant dread across Eric's face. "...Then, you saw it, too…?"

"...I do not know what I saw," Adam replied ominously, his tone hardened.

At this, Eric turned back, his face stripped of all its charm, its pride. His voice was a meager whisper. "...Please. Don't tell anyone...of what the mirror showed to me. Please." He looked at the mirror in Adam's grasp, his eyes wide and disturbed. He stepped away, as if to rid himself of the temptation of reaching for it again. "...Take it away from me."

Adam gripped the mirror tightly. He had come so far. He had struggled to bring himself to the beginning of a path he felt endless to walk.

He could not let Eric take this from him...no matter the cost.

"This mirror is mine and mine alone. And if you do not wish to use it, I understand. But I must show you what I saw. You must understand that this threat is more than feeling. It is real. It is coming for you—for Ariel. Your people."
Eric only shook his head. "Ariel…" His blue eyes looked miserable. "She can't know." He looked at Adam, his face condemned. "Fine. Show me what this—this thing showed you. But promise me. Promise me you will not tell Ariel—not tell anyone—of what happened here."

"I promise," Adam replied, alarmed by the look in Eric's eyes, his head spinning from so much Eric could not explain. Adam could only return to stare at himself in the mirror. The word friends whispering through his mind…to find compassion where others would be afraid…

And with this, Adam brought the mirror up again, dragging forth the image held in its glass of that pirate he had beaten in Corona, Jack Sparrow, and his crew, filthy, ruthless men, resting just below the ocean lining of some mountains…Eric peered at the image ruefully, as if he pained him to be so close. "…I recognize the pass. That is just off the eastern beach."

"These men are the pirates I speak of. And of their captain. Sparrow, he calls himself."

Eric could not seem to regain his usual manner. He only looked more distressed. "You know of him?"

"And of his plan—senseless as it sounds. He says there is a magic here. Within your kingdom. Something to do with an old wives' tales…about mermaids."

Eric froze, his expression shocked. "…Mermaids?"

"Yes," Adam continued. "He seemed quite mad, to be certain. But I feel that I must tell you everything I know. I met him in a bar in Corona." Adam studied the curl of his fingers, patient and bruised, over the old handle. "…I beat him within an inch of his life."

"…I do not blame you." Eric said, his tone venomous. "I would have done the same."

Adam looked to Eric, his heart heavy at the grief he had brought. "…I promise I will not speak of what we have seen—but you must know that I have come very far to deliver this news. I have been honest with you. I hope you can return that favor to me, Eric." He dared to follow through, his words rushed. "What was that place in the mirror? What is under the water?"

Eric closed his eyes, his face darkened. "…I believe you, Adam. And I will tell you. Soon. But not now…I…" he opened his eyes, still overcome. "I need time to think of what you have showed me…and that…mirror…"

Adam slipped the mirror into his coat again, his heart slowing down at the deed being done. "…I will trust in your word. I won't say anything. And, I hope, you won't speak of the mirror again."

Eric's blue eyes considered Adam, huge and pale in the new moonlight.

"…I don't understand. My father spoke of your family, of what had happened to your mother—it was a blow that echoed through many of the kingdoms. I heard that your mother and the former Queen of Arendelle were very close. But…after her death, all news seemed to stop." He looked at Adam, his eyes ashamed. "My father had told me that your father, and you, had died not long after. But, here you are…one mystery after another…"

Adam nodded, this shadowy lie, their forgotten namesake, a lie many understood as he emerged back into the human world. "…My father did die alongside my mother."

"…But not you?" Eric's eyes flashed. "Whatever happened? What does this mirror mean to you?"

Adam felt Eric's words, sharpened, finely crafted, and painful. "You misunderstand. It is not
something I treasure. It is not something I wish to have. Soon, I will be rid of it."

"Why?" Eric snapped, his voice full of conviction. "How could you give up something so powerful?"

"I do not seek power." Adam answered coldly. "Of what I know of magic, it is horrible, a curse. I would not wish it upon anyone."

"….To think, this whole time…you are of just one more kingdom that has a new piece of what I can never grasp…" Eric dropped his eyes away. "I thought we were the same."

"We are the same, Eric," Adam urged. "I have come to your aid. I wish to help. I want—" He struggled to find the right words, the words Belle could so easily find. "—to be—an alliance."

At this, Eric looked up at Adam. And, for all the tension held between them, Adam's words, for once in his wretched life, seemed to give comfort.

"…Thank you. I…" Eric brushed away the sweat, the hair sticking to forehead, curling around the back of his ears. "…You've been very understanding to my…irrationality. I…don't mean to not be myself; I am myself. But this part of me—this terrified part of me—feels that I'm not good enough for my kingdom."

"…Fear is not a force. It cannot control you." Adam responded. "…Your wife has been a teacher of that, for me."

The mention of Ariel seemed to brighten Eric's disheveled demeanor. "Ah, yes. From your 'talk' that day, along the beach?"

"She is…persuasive."

Eric gave a laugh at this. He knew what Adam was getting at. "She is inexhaustible."

"That as well." Adam allowed, his tone lighter.

Eric inhaled deeply, fixing himself quickly, checking buttons and the sleeves of his coat, his undershirt, to be most aligned with his causal, calm persona, as if nothing were ever wrong. "Okay. How do I look? Seriously, do I look as if I haven't been suffering from a nervous breakdown for the last hour?"

"…Passingly." Adam returned, but he kept his expression open to show he did not mean his jest.

"….Ah, Jasmine will see right through it anyway. Perhaps we should sneak out the back to talk to Aladdin and Naveen first. They're usually bantering so much, they don't notice."

Adam made a face. "…Perhaps you may go. I don't wish to be a part of their act."

"Really?" Eric replied, his face taking on its normal, chipper moxie. "I dunno. If you don't like them, you cannot possibly handle Eugene when he gets here. However did you survive him the first time around?"

Adam felt his heart drop suddenly. "….Eugene…is coming here?"

Eric raised a brow. "Well, I mean…he replied back to the letter. Rapunzel as well."

Then, Adam's heart stopped entirely.
"...I...must get back to my staff, unloading at the docks."

Now, it was Eric's turn to look at Adam in concern. "Are you alright? Adam?"

"...I must return the mirror to its case and—and—and—" And Adam did not even bother to cover for the rest of his panic. The means to make rational words by his tongue shred on his teeth, an endless loop of 'and'. He bid Eric goodbye and turned as quickly as he could, escaping back to his ship's cabin, avoiding any and all eyes. Lumière. He must speak with Lumière.

Corona. The symbolic city, rising, flowing over the ocean...only to end up here.

Rapunzel would be seeing him again...her promise still kept, but Adam found he could not breathe. It all made good sense...why shouldn't Eric call for a close kingdom...and yet...and yet...

With Rapunzel's ship, who knows how far away, Adam felt trapped. Now, he had even less time than he could have possibly imagined.

AN: Holla ya cha girl for that Game of Thrones, "A Song of Ice and Fire" reference, haha! I couldn't help myself. 'When you play the Disney game of Thrones, you win or you....' Anyhow, not to worry, lovelies, Prince Eric is going to stay charming and sweet to his friends and his beloved. But, I like to add depth and intrigue where I can, and Eric is allowed to human, too. Heh. Poor Adam. He is too precious for this big, plotting world.
AN: I could lowkey write Belle and Adam writing letters to each other forever, ugh, my heart, it's so cuuteeeeee.

"Belle? It's Cogsworth. I'm coming in with the latest post from Villeneuve. Are you busy in there?"

A soft voice called to her from beyond the heavy door of the library.

Belle was seated at one of the many refined desks, polished most recently, the oaken wood allowing a cunning gleam to shine around the assorted gears, locks, and pulleys she had organized in a neat pile before her. She quickly rushed to clear the tiny assortment—a few gears into her coat sleeve, another landing in her lap. What she was truly racing to bury was a small, sharp, chopping knife she had nicked from the kitchen galley. She had been fiddling with an idea all morning; one that would allow a small knife to be carried discreetly by a lady. A knife which might be tugged away into a tight chamber, where a sort of energy might be harnessed from the pressure of a thumb, to force the gears to turn, and the knife to pop out—the motion as effortless and as secret as a stolen kiss.

A demure weapon that no one might ever see coming from the look of her…it was so close to being ready for field testing.

She pulled the knife behind an open book. Her foot had been steadily tapping the floor in an informal bounce for the last hour. She smoothed her skirts and pulled stray hair behind her ears, attempting to look…well, whatever a lady of the hour might seem to look like. Belle really had no idea, the whole show of it. For she found, more often than not, herself staring into space, her attention lolling towards her wrist, pale, slender, unblemished in the dull morning light. She imagined Megara's strength locked around her.

She was truly an idiot to walk into The Underworld unarmed. What was she possibly thinking?

Cogsworth was well on his way to her side, the step in his stride loud and boisterous. "Good morning, my Queen. I thought I might deliver onto you several items of importance." Under the crook of his arm laid a thick parcel of letters, neatly wrapped, and stamped from over the seas.

"Good morning to you as well, Cogsworth. Thank you—it's gotten so late into the morning, I hadn't even thought to saddle Philippe yet. You are truly the real master of this house hold."

Cogsworth glowed a little at her praise, peering at her steadily through his eyepiece. "You flatter me, Belle. It is only my finest duty to serve."

Belle flexed her fingers, stiff from how they had curled and tossed with the small pieces hidden away. "I do not think this morning's post will hold much mystery?"

Cogsworth laid the postage out before Belle, over the neat clean space along the desk. "Well, no news is good news, oui, Madame?" Cogsworth chuckled at his little joke, picking up a letter to present it to Belle.

"Adam, once more?" Belle asked faintly, her lips pressed together in short worry. She picked up the letter, smoothing over the wax that sealed her husband's words—the closest she could manage to touch of him in what felt like an eternity.
"Ah, yes, The Master has written to you—about seven different letters to be precise."

"Seven?" Belle asked incredulously, her eyes wide. "He has only just gone! What in the world—"

"Not to worry, not to worry," Cogsworth intervened. "There is nothing particularly urgent about them. Ah, that is. Of what I have seen. Which has been. Very little." The Majordomo gave a most diverting look. "That is to say….he misses you. And, well, need I say more about The Master and strangers?"

Belle shared the look. "Oh, Cogsworth, what am I ever going to do with him?" She tore open the parchment in her hands, peeking through the harshly scribbled pages. "Seven letters….does he expect a different answer for each?"

"The more you write to him, the better, I would think." Cogsworth did his ceremonious duty, as per his usual routine, of reaching to supply fresh ink and paper between them both. He sat himself stiffly down in a plump armchair none too far away from where Belle sat, giving a sigh of content.

Belle gave a delicate laugh. She picked up the nearest quill, dashed the tip with her tongue, applied the ink, and wrote very quickly across a blank sheet of parchment. Then, she plunked up the sheet and held it to Cogsworth. "Here. Please, send this one first."

Cogsworth glanced over the page, a white brow rising over his monocle. "But it is only a single word?"

"Exactly."

"Breathe?"

"Yes. To breathe. I do often feel as if he forgets to do that."

Cogsworth laughed quietly. "Yes, this will be the first one to go, indeed."

"Have you sorted to find the oldest letter? I suppose I'll start backwards and move on from there."

"Here you are, Belle," Cogsworth amply shifted the letters, handing off the most dated of the set.

"Thank you," Belle agreed briskly, one hand set to twist lightly at her hair, a nervous habit, having spent more than a single night pouring over her father's own letters—dues and dates and his habit of getting lost and sending post from the next town over.

Adam's letter went as followed:

'ma chérie d'amour,

I am sure that this letter will arrive long after my penning it, along with several others, but I must talk to you. Forgive any mistakes as I have not long to send this, and Lumière, standing over my shoulder, makes me more uncomfortable by the minute. I miss you. That is obvious but I feel it is the first thing I must say. I keep thinking of how differently things might be if you were here. You alone could save me from my inability to socialize. I am now certain that these princes and their wives have known one other for years, and here I am, a stranger, a fool, merely myself, a strange stag amongst a tryst of wolves. I hear your voice in my head but the moment my mouth opens everything falls apart. However did I charm those ladies decades ago? However did I charm you, for that matter? Please, do not answer. Lumière's snickering is prompt enough."

Here, there was a stain of ink. Belle traced the pattern carefully, imaging what might have caused it.
Perhaps Adam, accidently knocking the tip of the quill, as he turned to shoo Lumière away.

'I have listed what I think most pressing for you to know.

On Prince Eric.

He is, indeed, preparing for a raid; it appears that I have arrived just in time. However, I find myself with more questions than answers. I know only what the mirror has told me. I asked it again, of what I am seeking here, and, again, it has shown me pirates. They appear docked off the mountainous pass along the beaches here, biding their time. Waiting. There is much of that here. Here, you might find yourself smiling, as among gossip of what is to come, I find myself somehow vying entrance into Eric's mind. Perhaps the mirror offers more than we could have ever thought. I never thought to push its powers forward, only to ask, but I have shown it to Eric. Please, Belle, do not be worried. He has been most earnest, almost to a complete fault. He was very….upset when I approached him, but I seek compromise; He promises to not mention the mirror nor its power. And I keep his secret as well. It reminds me too soon of Rapunzel's own promise to us. With that thought, I am left…restless.

The mirror reacted on its own, Belle, and revealed a place I have never seen. Eric hid it away as quickly as it arrived, but it appeared to be…a city under water. Perhaps I am seeing things once more. But…I am certain I saw fish. I cannot help but wonder further of what it means—of what this mirror might hold for others outside of myself. Eric was beside himself with a strange, unfathomable look and you will know that his easy charm had been stripped from him. No, I will not revel of what I could see from the beginning, of knowing he is in disguise—all this needless talk of fraternizing will lead me to my early grave. I might think: Could this add to our theory, my dear? MM. Ariel is connected to the sea...so is Eric? I will not press the issue again until he approaches me. I know too well how it might feel to be forced to speak of what one cannot explain.

He mentioned the kingdom of Arendelle. Of my mother. The deceased king and queen were once dear friends of hers. I am unsure what to feel in knowing this. After her death, my father cut ties to all kingdoms surrounding us. Did my mother…reach out to someone, before her passing? Eric has little to report on the country itself. It still remains within the royal family, as MM. Anna and her sister, the eldest of the siblings, now resides as queen of Arendelle, as I have been informed. Finally, my love, a person in this endless circle that is no prince or princess. I pray she has an ounce of dignity in her rulings, as yet to be seen. Have you received any post from them at all? I never thought I'd get such a chance to speak of my mother, her history, to find who she was. Father was as short of word as he was in temper on the subject. That is all I can say for now.

On Prince Naveen and his Wife, Tiana— Naveen is as air-headed as he is chatty. He speaks many languages and often wishes to converse with me in French, as if in some sort of code. I have no earthly idea what he wants with me but I do wish he would stop. I have yet to meet his wife. Jasmine informs me she is a logical and grounded woman. I find myself pitying her.

On Prince Aladdin and his wife, Jasmine— Jasmine is a curious sort of person. She owns a tiger. Did you know that they are as large as the bears in our forest? Hers nearly tried to take my head off. Please, don't give me that look. I know you are doing it. I did not start a fight with her beast. You know how animals hate me. It was all I could do to not take my boot and shove it promptly into my own mouth when I spoke with Jasmine. I think she thinks I'm a bit mad. I do not blame her. Her husband has few words to say to me yet. Perhaps for the best? He seems far more rational and levelheaded than Naveen. I can hear their banter long after the sun has set over the docks.

On The Worst of It—I must also tell you, with deepest fear, that Eric has summoned Corona. Rapunzel and Eugene are well on their way. I shove my irrational thoughts away, further and further, but like this endless ocean around me, they flow back in, like riptide—so strong and so vast I fear my
apprehension will swallow me long before they land. It would appear she kept her promise—if I…
change…will she do it again? Change me back? To what end, what consequence? What will she
expect from me? How am I to act? What am I to say?...Rapunzel...I never thought I'd live to see
myself on knees before someone like her, so small, so young, and yet she holds such dominion over
me. She must think me terrible and dangerous. Perhaps I am, Belle? What am I to do if I cannot
break the spell, alone before these people and their easy lives? They will think all friendship made a
betrayal once they know what I am...

Beyond Eugene, whose friendship grants me endless migraines.

...Speaking of which, Lumière is informing me that I have spent time enough away from them. I...
must go, I suppose. I will write again. I have no doubt that I will be relentless with my postage to
you. You will do well to dismiss most of my ramblings. Often times, I feel as if there is so much in
my head, I must place it somewhere, or else I will start screaming at everyone…and never stop.
Particularly Naveen.

Forgive your wayward husband—he owns nothing but the growing regret of attempting to rise to a
noble cause.

...Why must I do these things, Belle? Living as a Cursed man sounds sweeter by the hour.

Yours, if you dare to still have me,

Adam'

Belle began at once to her reply.

'Adam, mon petit cœur,

My dear, I can feel your hands shaking with every stroke. I understand you are nervous but what you
have decided to do is most pertinent and most honorable, both to what we are trying to solve and to
who you are—you play coy and hide behind your misgivings, but I know you, Adam. You wish to
be there, and I will hear not of your grumbling about it. There is a part of you that you often have
trouble seeing, and it is a very caring one, for all your growling and dismissing….

However, I feel equally as lost without you. Hearing of your distress absolutely haunts me. Your
regret in leaving matches mine in staying. But I am close, my dear. So close. But I will not risk
disclosing it here—because, truth be told, it would be far easier to show you than attempt reason. I
am certain, once I find what I might, I will travel to you, soon. Keep that in mind. Use that as your
shield. And, if you can, try to talk to Lumière more of what you are feeling. He fought to travel with
you for a reason, my love.

So, Rapunzel is sailing to Denmark after all. I was worried this might happen. Eric has no reason to
not use Rapunzel's guidance. I am sorry I am not there to help you weather it. I am sorry I cannot
comfort you over Rapunzel, or Naveen, but Rapunzel, despite how she has hurt me, is not a vengeful
person, and she has little reason to hurt you so far from her kingdom. I am certain she is there for the
same cause as you. She has come for Eric. If you happen to be there, she must respect what Eric
wishes. And, on Eric, I find myself most intrigued by what you mention of him. The mirror…acting
on its own? You told me once that it gives into what we desire most in our hearts, beyond what we
might request. For me, I saw my father—then you. Gaston, the murderous dog, saw our castle. For
Eric….a city of water?

I must admit, I haven't the faintest. Ariel, her delightful letters, so pleased to hear that you were due
to arrive in her palace, granted me no insight into how she might be feeling over this raid. Noting
that, I must say, you are so adorable. You have noted every person around you as if you are calculating their worth. I must give a little laugh at the way at which your organize your thoughts—very militarized of you. Tell me, do you plan on staging a coup upon Eric's castle? The sword, finally yours to swing? And I dare not to think it down over the crowns of those around you. Have you spoken more than ten words to any of them? Adam, my dear, I know you carry great doubt in your heart, but you can be very charismatic. I'm certain awaiting those ruffians' leaves no one in a good mood, but you will do well to be the first to lighten the tension. It seems you have helped Eric from what you mentioned. Try smiling a smidgen more. Try to relax, or ask them about their interest. There is common ground just waiting to be unearthed. I have a funny feeling you might enjoy Tiana's company—the real pity here is that you have not met her. You know that Naveen is only trying to get to know you, devasting as the act might be. Give him a chance. I hear he is a much practiced musician. Try asking him about that.

I will return to your question for postage from Arendelle. I am as shocked as you are. I find myself both elated and unsure. A queen at last? I shall write to her at once.

You have given me six other letters to ponder over and so I will move on from this one. But I shall be sending you this secondly. The first letter, one I imagine you have already opened and read, says what I will be whispering to you, pretending you are laying here beside me at night: Breathe.

I love you. Breathe.

Breathe, my dear.

I shall have to have you forever—little do you know, it is I that has captured you.

Belle'

Megara stood before Belle, her eyes alight, her mouth twisted in fury.

"….I thought I threw you out."

"You, um, did." Belle returned. She stood before Megara, hands tight to her sides.

She had decided to enter this time using everything she could think to use. Her 'spring knife'—an experiment in process—locked about her right forearm. Her hiking boots—weathered from farm work, but absolutely necessarily for walking the rough grounds of the endless, gloomy caverns. She had changed from her more leisurely dressing into her battered, patchwork dress from her days working Papa's farm. She figured, with a little luck, any damaged that it might receive would be looked over as common wear, often by Mrs. Potts, who took great pleasure in helping Belle excel in her less-than-refined stitching.

Although Belle had prepared, the woman before her, Hades' personal assistant, or slave, continued to look unimpressed.

"You do realize I can just do that again... right? You don't look stupid, so…"

"Please," Belle began immediately, "I am not ashamed to beg you. Please. Listen to me."

Megara gave a laborious sigh, staring at her through half-lidded eyes. "…Please, don't. I get enough sniveling from Persephone as is. I really don't want more." She sighed again, tossed her pony's tail behind her, and stashed a hand to her hip. "…What do you want, princess? And what will make you leave?"
"…I heard you the last time. Is Persephone here? Can I speak to her, if not, Him?"

"No." Megara drawled, her voice monotone. "You can't speak to her."

"Why? Are you going to stop me like last time?"

"No. It's because you're talking to me. Persephone doesn't like people that acknowledge me. For, you know, existing."

Belle looked around, anxious to see if the goddess might be watching her, but she saw nothing but the dark, empty cavern, dripping with a dark, foul smelling water. "Is she…here right now?"

Megara rolled her eyes obnoxiously. "You seriously have no idea what you're walking into, do you?"

Belle stiffened, sucking in air through her nose to hoist her head up higher. "I am quick to learn. If I can find anyone that might help me."

Megara crossed her arms, her thin brows pushed tightly together, scowling. "…What are you?"

"Belle. My name. It's Belle. And I'm human. And…. you're human, too. S-so." Belle stammered under the question, finding herself beginning to panic under the woman's glare but she steeled her will. "So what are you doing here?"

"Yes. I'm human." Megara continued, ignoring Belle's own inquiry. "But what I mean is…where are you coming from?" At this, Megara took a grand look around, her head swiveling to find some hint of entrance or mystical aura. "…I don't get it. Seriously."

"I—I can't tell you. I won't." Belle explained, her expression grim. "You haven't helped me in the slightest, so I won't be helping you." And, with that, Belle turned on the heel of her boot and picked a direction. She kept her eyes focused in front of her. She had an idea to what might happen next. And if Megara was a human as she looked…

Megara was stunned into place. "What? What?! I'll just throw you back out!"

"And I promise you, I'll keep coming back!" Belle shouted, echoing back through the chamber she stepped through.

"Ugh—you—" Megara began, but their voices collided and Belle found she couldn't make out the rest of what Megara had yelled at her. Suddenly, Megara was beside her, pacing quickly and rapidly, her own chest heaving. "…You're walking into a huge doorway guarded by a three headed dog."

This…stopped Belle. She looked at Megara with huge eyes.

"You do have dogs…whenever you're from, right?" Megara asked, misunderstanding Belle's bewilderment.

"Yes, of course…I just…"

"…Are way in over your head, princess?" Megara ushered, deeply unconvinced.

Belle shuddered, feeling the cold springs of the tiny machined, tethered far too tightly, to her arm.

"Okay…alright." Megara allowed, her voice reaching somewhere beyond her disinterested tone. She grabbed Belle's arm expectantly, pulling her away from the chamber leading to…the dog. "You have my attention. What do you want?"
"…I have to speak with…Him."

Megara sighed. "Yeah. That's what they all say."

'All say'? Belle thought quickly, her heart pounding against her ribs. *Those before me…the legends in the book itself…those that don't come back.*

Belle shook her head, pushing away her thoughts.

If Adam could face his fears, so could she.

*For you,* Belle thought, flashing his face in her mind's eye.

"I know you're here for someone." Megara answered. She let go of Belle's arm, assuming her arms to collect over her chest once more. "…Did…He…make a deal with—" Megara waved her hand in front of her face, the gesture dismissive. "Whatever his name is?"

"My husband. His name…" Belle felt herself begin to tremble. *His name…*soon lost, perhaps forever, if he returned back into his animalistic body. He would refuse to use it. He would refuse *everything.* Was this an ounce of what Adam felt all the time? A pressure, so heavy on his chest, he might collapse?

"…Look, I really don't care." Megara added quickly, her face unperturbed by Belle's attempts hold herself together. "I just need to know the basics."

"No," Belle managed, her voice small in her throat. "It would seem that…He—wants something from my husband. Something He cannot have." Her fists tightened, fury constricting her words. "I won't allow it."

Megara gave an airy laugh, a single chuckle deep from her chest. "…Aren't you feisty."

"Stop it." Belle jerked away, her dark eyes large and aggravated. "Stop talking to me as if you understand. You don't understand."

Megara glance away, her eyes darting to the far side of the room, before, slowly, they wondered back to Belle. Her lips twitched in annoyance. "…I hate women like you. You're so…'good'. You remind me of—*argh!*" She dashed her own eyes to Belle, flickered her eyelids briefly, as if pained to say the words aloud. "And this whole journey—this crusade you think you're undertaking? It's a joke."

"I don't care what you do, or say, or think. I love him. And you can't stop me." Belle answered. "Whatever," Megara snapped, jaded.

"I don't know what it is you want me to say." Belle confessed. She closed her eyes as if to block out her fear of what she couldn't understand. The danger of what saying it out loud might mean. "I don't know what else to do." Her voice trembled. She hated it. "This—this is all I have, Megara." She looked at the woman before her, reaching up a hand to wipe the traitorous tears from her eyes. "Don't you get that?"

Megara stared at Belle, her purplesque eyes heated, but she dimmed. She uncoiled her arms, dropping them to her sides. "If I show you what's down here—what's really down here—if I can scare you so badly, you'll run away screaming, never to return…would you promise me you'll actually leave? Please. Please."
"You obviously don't have to do what you're doing," Belle retorted, alert, her eyes picking up on everything she could see around her—everything she could do protect herself from this miserable place. "Why do you care so much about what happens to me?"

"...I don't care." Megara growled, her eyes narrowed into slits. "I just hate watching this happen—again and again. Why doesn't anyone listen to me?"

"Why?!" Belle countered, her voice rising with anger. "Why should I? You won't help me—you mock me—you're just as bad as Persephone! She disappeared the moment I thought I might—"


"Then why the hell are you here?" Belle cried, her eyes dotted with ears of rage, as if the pulleys and gears of her brain were seething together, smoke rising from her nostrils in ire.

"Because I was just like you, you miserable little brat!" Megara yelled. "I came down here—to save the life—of the man I loved—I made the deal you're after—and he ruined me. He. Left. Me. To. Die. To Die." Megara's neutral expression fully shattered—the pieces of her dignity long forgotten—she looked as exposed as Belle, her hair coming undone in passion, her eyes wide, and mouth open in rage. "So don't you dare tell me I don't understand. I get it. I get it. And I'm damned for it. I can't even die here!"

Belle pulled herself away, her lips tightened thinly. "...I knew it. I knew it."

"Knew what?!" Megara hissed.

"...I knew you actually had a heart. I knew that you cared. That's why you got me out of here as quickly as you did." Belle focused on her breathing, following her own advice. She tried to vent the heat that felt so desperately trapped within her skull, clouding her ability to think. "...You don't want me to end up like you."

You're trapped, too. Belle thought, her rage softening. How could someone do that to you?

Megara looked raw, practically ripped open in her confession, with her mouth hanging opened, spittle lining her teeth, without an ounce of her imperturbable defense to return to. At this, she turned on her sandal, arms tight around herself again. She bowed her head. "...What are you?"

Belle sighed out, regaining her head. "...Fine. That's fair. I'll tell you. I'll tell you but..." She trailed off. While Megara refused to turn around, she lifted her head, ever so slightly, to show she was listening.

"Okay, how do I put this? I want to. Say this right so you, um, don't get upset."

"I feed a three headed monster dog every day of my life, sister. I think I'll be unfazed." Megara said.

"Well, I think I'm from a place that doesn't exist...yet."

"...Yet?"

"Like...a future. A glimpse into a future."

"And what makes you think that?"

Belle felt herself cringe say it to the woman before her. "Because, where I'm from, you're...inside a book."
"A what?"

"You're words. A legend. Apart of His legend."

Megara looked at Belle as if she had told her she was actually a goddess.

"So...I don't exist, where you're from. I'm not...real? I'm a story?"

No, no, no, you are undeniably real!" Belle rushed to cover herself, to not lose Megara, perhaps her only attempt to negotiate a way to Hades, as well as to convey all she meant. The pain this woman's voice. Her ability to understand Hades' lair. Her anger over all she had loss.

How could that not be as real as Paris?

"Huh. Well." Megara considered this fondly. She stepped back to Belle slowly, her expression thoughtful. And...not nearly as disturbed as Belle might have thought she would be.

"This just fits in perfectly." Megara purred the word, and then, with a jolt of depreciation, she began: 'Hey, Meg? Yes, Meg?' 'Turns out your whole miserable life isn't even real. This whole time. Isn't that just peachy? 'Why, Meg, you mean to say that frou-frou princess is here to invalidate your whole life?' 'Why, yes, Meg, absolutely.' 'Well, Meg, you drive a hard bargain, but I find myself uncannily alright with this news'."

Belle blinked at Megara, the look on her face somewhere between charmed and horrified.

"I—I am so sorry to be the one to tell you that." Belle offered sincerely, her breathing hitched.

"I sold my soul to Hades." Megara said with finality, a hand reaching to brush at her face, to hold her forehead along her fingertips, disconcerted. "That's just as good as not existing, Belle. If anything, that just makes me understand myself more."

Belle nodded, ever so slightly, her nerves looping around her lungs, her breathing erratic as two rabbits in a set-trap. She had to offer more. "You know how Hades—He is an all-powerful being that can make things and be places and you...can't? Well, it's still just like that where I'm from. Where I'm from, I'm like you. Very much like you. I don't have any powers. I'm just using everything I can to travel here. I'm fact, I don't even know for how long this will last. But it's all I have. I'm...I'm fighting against a curse, too."

Megara dropped a hand. She continued to stare at Belle, long and sadden. Her sharp expression dulled.

"Megara...I know you don't want to do this, but I need you. Please. I know you've been through hell, but I'm trying my best to save the person I love. Please. Help me free my husband, I'll free you. I swear to you, I swear by my heart and mind, I will find a way to free you. I know you might not believe me when I say this, but, I know what it's like it is like to be a prisoner, too."

Megara looked at Belle, for all her confidence, all her control, and could offered a single, sad, smile.

"I don't know, Belle. You have no idea what you're asking for. I can't promise you anything, even if I wanted to do all of this. Hades is dangerous and unforgiving. He can make me that way. I have so little say in what I do—it's...terrifying. And I've seen other heroes come down here, so pure hearted and kind, and they don't come back out, Belle. They...they end up—just 'words'—too."

"That is because they didn't have you on their side. They didn't have you as a friend." Belle argued.
"A friend?" Megara was shocked by the word. Is...that what you think this is? I'm trying to scare you away from here, you pretty little fool!"

"Please, Megara. I want to help you. I need your help, too...can we be friends?"

"Well...it's not like my punishment could get any worse...and, I guess—I guess everyone deserves their own choice in their death. And it is your stupid death wish." Megara sighed, then looked down, then up at Belle. From beneath dark lashes, Megara appeared to pinken, as if ever so slightly embarrassed. ".And I've always wanted my friends to call me 'Meg'."

"...May I call you that? 'Meg'?"

Megara pushed her own hair from her face. "Fine. Fine. Just. Don't wear it out, okay?"

Belle felt herself smiling, nearly radiant. It had worked. *Her plan had worked.*

"I want to make a promise with you. Help me solve what is happening to my husband. How this place is connected to it."

"Alright." But Meg flickered her eyes to Belle's once more, all aloofness gone. Replaced within them, Belle thought she saw a shred of fear. "He better be worth it."

Belle hoped to ease Meg's discomfort. "For as often as you tear my husband apart, you act very much alike. Though I'd let you know."

"Hah," Meg laughed smugly. "Please, I pride myself on my cynicism. And there's no way, not even in the thousands of years or...whatever, wherever you're from, that anyone could ever beat that record."

"He'll drive a hard, bitter challenge for your drachmas."

"Heh. Well. If you insist. Right. And maybe, if this actually works by some *wretched* miracle, I'll be able to test that myself."

Belle smiled ever so slightly. "I think that would be one conversation he would take pleasure in."

"Just the one? What? He isn't all rainbows and sunshine, like you, princess?"

"You have to stop calling me that, Meg," Belle buffeted, her own cheeks red. "But yes. He's...different. And I'm not—perfect—either."

At this, Meg sullened, her humor gone.

"The way you talk about him, so...openly. Gods. It's like...it's like, like you actually believe there can be love for people like us—'bad' people—people that are selfish and petty and narcissistic." At this, Meg gave a lonely laugh. "I mean, don't get me wrong, *I loathe* Hades with what little I have left to feel—but, there are moments where...even I feel bad for him. It's not his fault he fell in love with someone that can't accept him for who he is." Meg began honestly, her mask broken. As she looked towards Belle's face, the pity resting in those dark eyes, she recoiled back in horror. "...I'm sorry. I don't know where that came from. I've spent way too long down here..."

>You can even feel sorrow for that demon, that man that enslaved you, that creature that is ripping my husband apart? Belle thought, half stunned, half hurt...half awed. And Persephone...did she truly once love Hades? As humanly and deeply as I feel for Adam?
"Meg...who hurt you? What was his name...?"

"I hurt myself, Belle. No one hurt me. I don't allow people to hurt me. You keep yourself guarded up like that and no one ever will." Meg snapped. Her arms returned to hold herself, a protective gesture she relied on often—perhaps the only affection she had felt in years...

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry." Belle offered softly.

"I know, pr—Belle. I know."

"Meg?"

"Yeah?"

"You mentioned showing me around. Could you do that...still? I don't have long to stay but I wish to look."

Meg lifted her head. Her purple eyes seemed almost pleased—as if she actually could handle some company by her side, the endless walk in the circles that was The Underworld. "Sure. If you think you can handle it."

Belle rolled her shoulders, still well aware of the spring knife by her side. "...I promise I won't scream." Her heart picked up. This was it. This was all she needed. One step closer. One moment closer to bringing this nightmare to an end.

"I wouldn't hold my breath over that," Meg added. Her lips perked up expectantly, amused. "Follow me."

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**AN:** Thank you so very much for continuing to enjoy! This story continues to be a blast to write, and much of that is due to getting to hear your thoughts and entertaining you all!

Another quick Q&A because, whoa, you guys have a lot 'em!

**Q: WHERE THE SEX SCENES AT?**

**A:** UM EXCUSE ME WHAT *Covers Belle and Adam's ears* DON'T GIVE THEM IDEAS, YOU!

**Q:** I don't like (example represented here as the variable 'x') 'X', 'plot x', or character 'x'. STOP DOING 'X'.

**A:** Ya'all be salty as Meg up in here, I swear. No. You stop it. Youuuuu stopppp iitttt.

**Q:** But (such characters) aren't in (such timelines!) Why do you do this to mee?

**A:** I totally get what you're saying and, I'm sorry, but, if you guys sincerely want a painfully detailed story where I line up dates and facts and I run around in circles daily making sure every last thing works...I actually have a story like that already! *(INCOMING SHAMELESS PLUG INCOMING)*...IN my Captain America story which I spent nearly four years writing! It's called *No Day But Today*-- It's located on my profile page and it is over a thousand pages of romances, psychological breakdown, and the rest of the Avengers WITH SUPER INTENSE CORRECT DATES AND HISTORICAL DETAIL. so. Basically, I'm going to do my best but you won't find that to be my major thing here in this story. This is for fun and characterization...and fun.
Funnnn! FUN I SAY. SO, BACK. BACK YOU AMAZING, HUNGRY READERS. BACK INTO THE FANDOM WITH YOU. (but don't leave meeeeee)

ANNND I'M OFF, see you soon! Thank you and goodnight!
AN: Hi everyone! Thanks again for enjoying! This chapter as a blast to write. I get to start dropping some fun plot twists and nods to further chapters, and chapters past. Heh. See you soon. Also, thank you to everyone that has reviewed! I am SUPER pumped for the next chapter as we move into Part TTHREEEEE. Your reviews, they really keep me going and mean, seriously, so very much to me. Thank you again for all your thoughts and enjoyment!

And, for not a moment more, could Aladdin stand it.

"What do you think of him?" Aladdin asked. He motioned slightly to the door across the way of the large, studious room—Eric's office. It had been closed and locked for hours with Eric and Adam inside. No voices could be discerned, no sudden passion set to rise. Just the silence rhythmically broken by Naveen tapping his feet along the floor to some drum solo that resided inside his head alone. His dark eyes bore into Naveen, who was sat opposite of him in Eric's lounge, with great interest.

Naveen pried his eyes away from the cards before him reluctantly. His brow quirked. "As of these past few days?" He picked at his bottom lip, feinting a measure of deep thought. "Secretive, uncertain, and just a bit paranoid." He relaxed again, chortling at Aladdin, as he pulled a card from his hand and slid it to rest over the top of his knee from under the table. "But, Eric has always mystified me. Last year, he was frantic, too. He is rather like the sea, no? His mood is a force of nature."

"...I was referring to the wolfish king among us."

Ah, the truth at last, Naveen thought, feeling his previous answer comic. "Adam, then?"

"Naveen, I'm serious."

"Oh, I am aware of how you are taking this." Naveen gave a shrug at his friend. "Perhaps the same." He grinned once more. "I do believe he hates me."

Aladdin rolled his eyes, flexed his fingers, and snatched the card that Naveen had attempted to steal, flicking it off of Naveen's knee and tossing the card back over the top of the table. "You can be abrasive."

Naveen scowled at having been found out so quickly. Aladdin had acted so distracted. There was no better time than to pull one over on him. Again. "Do not turn this around on me, Aladdin."

"I'm not turning anything around on you, Naveen. I'm just curious. The guy just blows outta nowhere and now Eric's talking to him in private like it's all according to plan?"

Naveen sighed. This conversation had been long coming. He looped an arm over the back of the lounge chair. He had been leaning on the chair's back legs for some time, minding a careful balance to alleviate how slow of a turn this day had taken. This was their third round of Quadrille. Once more, it was due to end in Naveen's favor. At this, Naveen glanced at his cards, turned them lithely between fingers, and finally laid his hand out over the table for Aladdin to see.

But, consequently, the prince of Agrabah remained distracted.
"Does Eric seem to you like a man with a plan? Granted, Eric has a way of turning about face to be composed when pressed…maybe he does." Naveen flashed a knowing smile at his friend’s dismay. "I cannot say. I am not one for plans."

"…They have been talking for a long time." Aladdin admitted faintly.

Naveen chuckled. "Yes. Long enough for me to beat you at Quadrille three times."

"What can they be talkin' about?"

"Perhaps it is something important."

"So important that Eric couldn't tell me?"

"Is that a note of jealousy I hear, Aladdin?" Naveen asked, cupping a hand playfully to his ear.

Aladdin gave a brisk roll of his eyes again. "Eric and I—and you for that matter—have been friends for years. Don't you find it a little weird that this guy—I mean, who even is he? I don't remember hearing his name once—"

"I may be abrasive, my friend," Naveen cut in snidely. "But at least I am not possessive."

"Possessive?" Aladdin sputtered the word. "Where in the world would you—and stop cheatin'! You've only beat me twice!"

In frustration, Aladdin swept the bulk of the cards between them, swirling their order into madness.

"….And a sore loser," Naveen added.

"At least I care enough to want to know what is going on," Aladdin said.

"Not every matter requires my opinion."

"And you just don't want to deal with it."

Naveen gave a loud laugh. "Hah, sad but true."

Naveen dropped the weight of the chair forward, a harsh clamor in the still of the study. The sudden noise cracked Aladdin's brooding attention with finality. "Aladdin. Eric will tell us when he is ready. I am sure of this."

The sigh Aladdin gave tossed the dark fringe along his forehead. "…I know. Sorry. I just hate waiting for things, ya know? This waiting game. The pirates. Now Adam. He stresses me out."

Naveen flicked two cards into his friend's face, causing the prince to flinch back. "In that, you are two of a kind. He looks just as nervous. That is no crime, my notorious friend; I would think you would know what accounts for underhanded these days." Slowly, a small smirk tugged at the corner of Naveen's mouth. "You know, all of this has given me a brilliant idea. We shall concoct a plan by which to get to know him better! Yes! It will be lovely!"

"Do I even want to know, Naveen?"

"It will be fun!"

"Will it be outside?" Aladdin brightened at the idea.
The mountains surrounding Eric's kingdom had been calling his name ever since he arrived, begging Aladdin to dig his hands into the rough earth, to get as high as he could. He couldn't wait to go hiking and climbing the sights. Agrabah was so flat, so slithery between finger and toes. Surely, he came to support Eric first and foremost, to fight a pirate in breathless abandon—but where Aladdin longed to go was off trail.

With The Sultan still fit to rule, Aladdin had spent much of his time scouting the lands around his kingdom. He had found quicksand, menacing slave smugglers, and, occasionally, a vivid mirage of The Cave of Wonders. He wasn't sure why he continued to see it. He seldom itched to steal the way he once did—in fact, the last remnants from those long days a common street rat had been thoroughly quenched by exploration alone. Why surmount a city with his fingertips when he now had the entire world see? As far and as high as he could manage, Aladdin, with his beautiful wife by his side, had expanded his dreams from the small mindedness of a simpler man to think beyond his city, beyond his country.

Still, the past set him to wonder…

The Cave of Wonders would remain a mystery for all time. Like much of this new realm before him, Aladdin understood magic to its haunting and corrupt end. But he did not lust for The Cavern for any sort of power; he wanted to map it to its very heart. He only had a handful of heartbeats to assess the place before him, Carpet, and Abu were forced into screaming-for-their-lives flight. He lacked so few mementos from the cavern, too. Beyond Genie's now defunct lamp, all which remained of the adventure was a single coin that did not melt into sand like the rest of the buried treasure. Abu claimed to not have taken it at all, that it had fallen into his open mouth during their escape—but Aladdin was never sure how exactly he had come about it. It was real gold, for sure, not long offered to him by the monkey as a wedding gift; a greedy symbol that once haunted Aladdin's hungry dreams. He lacked nothing for money, now. He instead offered it to Jasmine. A token of how he had changed. A token of what he no longer lusted for. He could not help but wonder if Jasmine kept it. She, too, had her habits. She often found the patterns of their journeys to reflect in her clothing—constantly changing and eclectic in her collecting. She was amused by the darker things in other cultures—ghost stories that made her shriek and giggle and hold Aladdin tightly. There was something she loved in particular over the last treasure from the Cave of Wonder. Deeply carved into the gold, a kind of face, perhaps a daemon, or skull…

…Naveen was still talking. Aladdin had snapped away from his thoughts, perking himself up as if he had not stopped listening.

"And, it will be—Ariel! Ma belle coquille!" Thankfully, Naveen had been shortly intervened.

For, indeed, Ariel was suddenly before them, her eyes prodding around the room as if she expected someone else. She padded quickly into the study, gaining both of the princes' attention.

Naveen and Aladdin stood, each giving a short bow, to which Ariel giggled.

"You two tease me," Ariel said, her cheeks faintly pink. "Since when do you bow, Aladdin?"

Ariel's mood seemed equally on the upswing since the day before. Her fine red hair had been pulled back and plaited into a long, loose braid that fell down her back. Every tied cross-section of hair had been adorned with a silk ribbon as green as morning sea foam. She smiled, too, and it matched the light in her eyes.

"Jasmine has rubbed off on me yet," Aladdin replied, holding his bow a little longer to rub in the absurd etiquette.
Ariel made a face. "But Jasmine hates when people bow."

Aladdin grinned mischievously. "Exactly."

"Whatever are you doing here, Ariel?" Naveen inquired, his dark brows knitted. "This is an endlessly boring side of the castle. I think I may have died here and no one has yet to tell me. Are you a vision of an angel?"

"Naveen," Ariel grinned, blushing, giving in to her girlish side at his sly, playful flattery.

She was not alone. While Tiana pushed and ignored him, Naveen knew how to make all the women feel attended. Once, Aurora had asked if Tiana minded his wondering eye, but Tiana only laughed. Naveen was madly in love with her alone. He could be timid around her, shy, he would take to stumbling as if on a dance floor, as if he did not know what to do with himself—even once married. Tiana stirred something within him that broke down his flare, his charm. Tiana replied that the day Naveen stopped saying something unbelievably stupid to her as a compliment each morning would be the day she would start to worry.

"Will you stop?" She finally bubbled, her annoyance swayed by his eagerness to make her smile.

He offered a roughish apology, his smile waning. "Only when you drop your wings."

"Allah Khayr, Naveen." Aladdin brought a palm to his forehead. "Like any afterlife would take you."

Naveen mocked injury. "I repent; I only call it as I see it. The Lord will forgive me."

"Yeah, I won't though," Aladdin returned, his dark eyes rolling once more.

Ariel stared at the bickering princes, her slippers tapping excitably along the flooring. Her little bows bounced along her shoulders. "So, you have seen him?"

"Who? Eric?" Aladdin asked lightly, his true discern masked across his face.

"Mhm!" Ariel nodded. Her eyes were bright. "He has responded to every letter I have sent—far more frequently than anyone I usually write to." She blushed at this, as if her slip might give offense, but neither Naveen nor Aladdin seemed to give notice. The looks across their faces seem...surprised. She felt her throat go a little dry, as if her excitement seemed confusing. "Adam and his wife, Belle, visited us not too long ago. He's teaching me French, you know."
Naveen looked hurt. "He is?"

"Oui," Ariel said happily. "And, unlike my other tutors, he is very patient with me. And witty. I would think you all would get along well."

A sense of humor? Naveen thought, hoping his lack of belief did not spill across his face.

"He seems...ah...shy," Naveen began. "I have tried talking to him a few times since his arrival. He is quick to run off to someplace else."

Ariel's smile fell just a little. Naveen felt himself internally chided to be the one to bring Ariel's pout back again. "Well—he can be...difficult." She picked the word carefully. "I—I hope to speak to him soon."

"Well, we've been sitting here with little luck, so I wouldn't waste your t—" Aladdin warned—and then he stopped.

A soft clear of a throat captured their attention. They all turned.

The closed door that had split Eric's office from the main chamber was opened. From it, both men emerged like shadows, fit to shrink away from the last remains of the light of day.

Eric looked just as groomed he had that morning—but over his shoulder, Adam appeared. His blue eyes roamed the room, the ceiling—anywhere but at the eyes of the princes, and princess, staring back at them. He moved from the doorframe quickly, standing a little ways back and away from Eric.

Eric was the first to break the silence.

"Have we kept you all waiting?"

"Only all of the afternoon," Aladdin muttered, but, thankfully, Naveen covered up his comment by greeting them both loudly.

"Eric, Adam, good evening to you both!" Naveen cheered from his seat. He glanced at Ariel from the corner of his vision, and, like a strike of lightning, Ariel dashed to Adam's side.

To hug him.

Naveen could not stop his mouth from hanging open.

"Adam!" Ariel could not hold herself back any longer. She wrapped her arms tight around Adam's waist—such a little girl over his towering presence. "Adam! You're here! I can't believe you're here!"

Adam, too, felt the shock of the men around him. He attempted to step away from Ariel only to have her squeeze tighter. His hands were up as if to give surrender to their prying eyes. His own face flushed, blue eyes wide in surprise. With Ariel's back to them all, Adam was left alone to stare at the sea of faces, much to the dismay and concern of the two men at their table, playing cards dashed all around to convey their disarray. Eric could only laugh at the look on their faces—particularly at Adam.

Naveen was the fastest to save face. He did the only thing he thought to do.

"He gets a hug?" Naveen began quickly, the joke fast on his tongue. He expanded his jest—two hands to cover his mouth, his brow pulled tight over his usually relaxed forehead. "He gets a hug? I
do not get a hug. *He* gets a hug? Ariel—I am betrayed.*

"Ugh, Naveen," Ariel flustered. She let go of Adam in a spin to face the prince of Maldonia—but her eyes merely flashed to Eric's. Adam stayed in place, still stunned, but the look of utter relief to have Ariel let go of him flashed roughly over his features—Naveen could not help but give a chuckle.

Eric returned her gaze expectantly, an eyebrow flexed upwards. "...Yes?"

"It is my turn to steal our newest guest."

Eric's mouth slid into a charmed smile. "Steal? From me? Do you suggest parley, miss?"

It would seem Eric's mood, too, had returned to normal.

"No, sir. I parley with only the captain. And I see no captain here." Ariel teased.

She gave a kiss to Eric's cheek and danced away, back to Adam's side, and pulled at his arm. She posed a mock dance, sliding under his arm and back again, tugging for him to follow her. While her body was all grace, Adam jotted behind her, hunched and unsure, his eyes once to Eric and then away.

Ariel stuck out her tongue at the men, a tiny pink pearl over her teeth, before she was out of the doorway with Adam in tow. "Come, monsieur! I must speak with you!"

"Uh—goodbye!" Adam called, the first and last word he could manage to the rest of the men. He was out of the room as quickly as he had been released from Eric's side—Ariel's footfall racing down the hall in due haste.

"Abinazal!" Naveen called after them, giving a most delighted wave. Aladdin merely grunted, his eyes to the door and then towards Eric. "That poor man! Ariel will eat him alive, yes? Too bad we cannot see it, eh, Aladdin?"

"What the hell was that about?" Aladdin asked, his tone annoyed.

Eric merely gave a shrug at his two friends. "Ariel gets what she wants. You think I'm gonna stand in the way of that? That's crazy."

"Someone is going to have to stand up for that fellow," Naveen purred, his voice full of laughter.

"He'll be fine," Aladdin snapped. "I meant—what is going on? Are you going to talk to us, too?"

"Of course, Aladdin," Eric continued, his tone apologetic. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I have much to explain and not a lot of time to do so. The last piece is Corona. I have hopes they will arrive by the end of today."

"Eugene and Rapunzel?" Naveen smiled. "Lovely. I will add them to the guest list."

"The...guest list?" Eric blinked at Naveen. "To...to what?"

"A party. " Naveen glowed, clearly set on the plans he had yet to formally announce. "It will be a blast for all!"

"Hello? Pirates? Ring a bell?" Aladdin cut in, unperturbed at Naveen's enthusiasm.

"Pfft," Naveen dismissed, "We have sat all day and wasted our time. A party cannot be stalled for
what might happen. Parties are for what will happen. If you will, think of it as pre-celebration. I have an idea, my friends."

Eric shook his head. "Call it what you will, but I have a task for us to do as well. Come on—" He motioned for the two men to return with him to his office once more. "We have much to discuss."

"Cerberus?" Belle asked. She stayed pinned to Meg's side as they walked the long, winding, rocky paths of the Underworld. "He's a soul eating dog? A dog?"

Meg waved one dismissive hand. "He's not as bad as I may have threatened. Just be sure to always have some type of meat on you when you go see 'em."

"How long have you been doing this? All for Ha—Him? Whatever He wants?"

"You're prying. Again."

"Sorry," Belle lamented, feeling chided. Her hand twisted nervously at her hair. "Is there any real geography to this place? An east? A west?"

"The River Styx flows from south to north. Does that answer your question?"

_Not at all_, Belle thought grimly, but allowed the following silence to be her answer. She looked around but rarely recognized anything, not one rock, not one stalactite. The cavern was long, low, and _continuous_. Light didn't seem to filter through, as limestone, or forest canopy. It just, somehow, existed.

It existed. Outside of history or reason or laws of nature….

Belle could not shake the feeling of how incredibly small being here made her feel. And fragile.

The sheer scope alone rivaled any impossible, fictional place she had read about before.

And, while seemingly impossible, Belle tried to use her logic. For this netherworld clearly had limits and rules. Rules that Meg, while guiding, seemed reluctant to share. But that was fine with Belle. She deemed herself lucky enough to get this far. She never needed encouragement from another person to begin on her own theories. There was much she didn't know about _this_ world. However, she had other insights.

Like how it affected her own. Her list, while short, was all she had gathered thus far:

1. The Underworld was absolutely real. The souls within it were once just as live as her. So was Hades, and Persephone, and all the other Greek deities of ore. Pain was also real. Pain like the tightness of her chest as she walked. This place was taking its toll, slowly, but hungrily. She would have to be quicker about her visits. Like her reality, Belle had come to accept that this piece of history that she was walking into was just as real as anything after it…

2. Her world was not stopped just because she entered here. The Enchantress's book was many things, but not a clock. If anything, despite the disorientation Belle felt upon return, she only felt as if her absence was being irrevocably noticed. If not by the staff, then by something else, an unshakable presence at her back. Did time somehow move faster in her world while she was in the Underworld?

3. Hades. He had entered in Adam's dreams. He had caused sickness and hallucination. Or so Belle
thought. Of these things, she had no proof but her husband's word, but she clung to it. What did Hades want in the 'real' world? What did he strive to get from Adam? Soul? Body? Mind? The Beast?

And if that was the case, what undertaking could she really hope to achieve against Him?

What was she supposed to be doing here…

"What is it, Belle?" Meg asked quietly. She was a yard away now, having come to a stop only when she noticed Belle's eyes studying the senseless pathways they had walked.

"So…you've showed me what you have so far…to scare me." But I need to know what else you're hiding. "But I must confess to you, I feel I need to hurry. I know you won't take me to Him. But I need to find something, anything, to help me. Please."

Meg gave a shake of her head, her hair tussling behind her. "More questions? Gods. I'm doing my best here. Please, don't mistake that. This is The Underworld, Belle. There isn't a lot here to begin with, besides the obvious."

"Really?" Belle felt her heart give a painful skip. "Are you sure? Is that the whole truth?"

Meg stared at her, head on, her frown fixed…until she gave a low sigh. "He might just kill me, but…okay. There is one place. I don't know if that's what you need or whatever, but, it's the one place we definitely won't be found."

"Wh—Ahh!" Belle began, but her words turned into a half-scream as she found herself suddenly thrust forward.

With a snap of Megara's fingers, they had been transported. Belle staggered forward, hands thrown out to brace against the cold floor, but Meg's arm caught her, keeping her leveled.

"Shhh, shhh. You didn't scream then, princess, don't back out on me now." Megara's eyes glittered, as if, for a single moment, she felt a taste of freedom over the invisible collar around her slim neck. "Alright. Look around."

Look, Belle did. They were in the smallest room Belle had yet to find here. The walls reached high as an atrium, filing into sharp peaks at the top. It was very quiet. Belle could hear her and Meg breathing together. It was as if all the vast emptiness of the Underworld was casted away for this small corner of…realism. It looked like a bedroom. A bedroom and…treasure trove.

"Where…are we?"

"Technically? Persephone's 'room'. But she refuses to use it. So, it's more like a room full of sad, sad tokens of affection. Gods. I forgot how lonely this room was. It's sad. Sadder than my social circle, really."

There were old, dust covered artifacts all over the chamber. A beautiful dark throne, polished and sterling, made of hard mineral—like properties similar to that of the ore in the walls, Belle noticed. The same ilk matched the furniture that made up the rest of the room. A chest, a large armoire, a bed (still made of dark stone) and, strikingly enough, a large pile of coins—silver, gold? It was hard to tell in the dull light—taller than Belle herself.

"Persephone…." Belle stepped carefully around the room, a hand reaching out to gently touch the bedframe. "These are for…her?"
"Yeah." Megara said simply, her eyes peering around the room. She crossed her arms over her chest again.

Belle figured Megara knew more but she didn't want to press her further. Her brow furrowed tightly in thought. She lightly trailed her fingertips over the dust, pulling them away layers upon layers of dust from the objects numb, indifferent disuse. Meg wasn't kidding about how little this room had seen a single living soul. Or, perhaps, dead soul was the right word…?

Meg watched her apathetically. "They're each essentially useless. Gods don't need anything like this. At least not in the way that you and I do. I'm no expert but I've spent some time around both Hades and, ugh, Persephone—Well. Hades made all of them."

Belle paused. She delicately traced the dust over the palm of her hand. While impractical and crude in nature, the marksmanship was steady. It must have taken some real effort to carve raw ore.

"Why?"

"Because it's what he thought she wanted," Meg continued.

Belle turned to study the pile of coins gleaming in the corner when she had to hold back from laughing.

Meg had settled herself quite nicely into the small mountain of gold, having turned the shapeless mess into a mock throne. She nestled in, leaning her head back against the cold coins. She cracked open one eye at Belle, her lips pursed. "What's that look for, princess?"

"It suits you," Belle smirked back at her. "Is there a crown in there?"

"No," Meg pretended to mope. "Persephone took that. A crown wasn't beneath her. Just this stuff."

"Of course she did," Belle laughed softly, nervous at being caught, but feeling, for once, as if she shared in Megara's dark sense of humor. She moved around the pile, stopping to by the small trickle of coins that had fallen near Meg's sandals. Belle gave one of the coins a small kick with the tip of her boot. "I don't understand. If gods have no need for these things—if they are eternal, or—immortal—what would money mean to them? These coins are heavy and…real. They're made of real gold."

"All things Hades did to try to please her," Meg explained from her seat. She pushed her hands through the coins, spilling them down across the floor. They fell like a heavy rain towards Belle's feet. When Belle looked up at Meg, she saw that her eyes had dimmed.

"I never gave it much thought." Meg continued, her voice soft. "But, if the idea of living is that we were made in their image—and we know the gods to be petty and selfish and flawed—then we are inherently flawed." She picked up a coin, held it aloft to her eye, and smoothed it between her fingers. "Hades has a lot of power. Souls, death, but he's fated to do this. He has to take. He isn't a creator. So, all this stuff, it isn't just useless. It's twisted. Just like he is." Meg let the coin fall loosely from her fingers, disinterested once more. "I never really thought about what would happen to this stuff."

_Hades has to take?_ Belle considered Meg's words. "What do you mean?"

"Well…I saw him make these things—which means I saw him fail. He failed to woo Persephone and he failed to really make anything for himself. But Hades is a smart man. He'll find something to do with all of it, I'm sure." Sitting in her pile of gold, Meg curled into herself, arms locked over her knees. The gold moved with her, tinkling to the floor with a sound that was melodic and sad.
"Before I sold my soul to Hades, I never thought about fate. Or destiny. Or...anything, really." She gave a shallow laugh, tinny on the quiet, still air. "But I've just realized...this unwanted gold has more purpose than me."

A wavering pause. Belle felt her stomach drop at the conviction in Meg's voice. She really believed it.

"Belle," Meg asked quietly, her voice empty. "Do you think you can really free me?"

Belle grasped Megara's hands, pulling her from the pile. She squeezed them both with her own. Meg was human, but her body felt so unnaturally cold in this miserable place. Was Meg fading away, too? _Just like—no._ Belle pushed the thought of Adam way, the pain on his face, agony burning through his skin. _Stop it._

"I'm going to try. I'm going to do everything I can. I just—I just need more time."

_Time,_ Belle thought slowly. She let go of Meg's hands, suddenly alarmed at all the emptiness around her. She had to go back. She had to go back very soon. How much time had passed? Did she truly accomplish anything more? And—

The shimmer of the coins along the floor caught her eye once more. They looked silver from one angle, gold from another. And they were certainly coins from the Underworld, there was no mistaking that. Each side of every coin showed a little death's face, carved and displayed proudly.

Belle took another step back, thinking...

A hand tugged unconsciously at her blade, hidden up her sleeve...

_If I can bring something here, like this knife._ Belle felt her heart start to speed up. _Can I bring something back with me?_ Just one something. She couldn't take the chest, or ore, or the rocks—but just one coin. Just one hint of what Hades had offered to his wife. _Could I find something, anything more, an ounce of connection to my world?_ There were so many. Surely, one coin couldn't be missed.

Belle nodded firmly, her decision made. She couldn't keep wandering the labyrinth of the Underworld aimless anymore. She had to experiment. She had to believe in what she could touch, could feel.

She had to believe in what Meg was telling her. _Flaws._ Flaws in Hades. Flaws that Persephone had brought out in him. If a Greek god could be flawed...then he could be faulted. He could be wrong about Adam. He could be wrong about everything.

Belle took a deep breath and bent low, reaching for the nearest coin. She pulled it from the floor, the cold chill of its skin resting over the warmth of her palm. She was right about assuming it to be real. It was heavy in her hand, a small weight, like the strain against her chest, pressing down...

"Meg, I—"

But when Belle arose to her feet, she found herself staring at the worn shelves of her castle's library—the sudden eclipse of Underworld and her present day winding her, causing her to sink to her knees in shock.

"Megara?" Belle swung around frantically—her eyes wide and her breathing frightened.

But she was all alone, back in her home. Her hands shook from cold, curled into tight fists, from the sudden bath of warm and light that told Belle she had spent the entire day walking with Meg. The
sunlight outside the library's windows had sunk low in the sky, casting long shadows over the floor. The sun was so close to disappearing over the horizon, it was a breath away from night fall.

Slowly, Belle looked down. She forced her trembling fist to open.

The coin was still there. It stared up at her ominously. A small piece of death in the center of her hand.

AN: RIP Adam next chapter. It was nice writing you, buddy.
PART THREE: Of Blood and Gold

AN: Alright kiddos! We're entering part THREEE! I ask that everyone keep their hands, legs, arms, feelings, rage, tears, and various body fluids, inside the ride AT ALL times as this fic begins its rise into SUPER STARDOM.

Nah, I mean lots and lots of twists, turns, and violence, cause, if ya haven't noticed, dear readers, this ain't your parents Disney Channel. LOOK ALIVE PEOPLE.

Ariel's preferred beach lay golden around them. The fading light drifted across the length of the horizon, cutting the waves evenly in layers of green and yellow. They shimmered at their white misty crests, then they melted, stolen away, dragged down with each motion back into the heart of the sea. From this bay, the line of the forest that Adam had once peered through looked dusty and far too bleak by comparison. If the heat and warmth of Denmark had preference in nature, it would fall towards the sea.

It was high tide, Adam could not help but to notice, as he trailed slowly behind Ariel's footprints, dainty in the sand. He had taken to studying the way at which the waves ebbed and washed her path away in endless, frivolous jealousy. He had once expected a barrage of questions, of Ariel to pull him recklessly over the edge of the shore, to splash him with the evening waves, but she was long ahead, her hands clasped behind her back, small fingers twirling the length of her red hair, brilliant, and almost blinding, in the final moments of the sun. She was looking out over the ocean, too, all urgently faded with the silence of their time together.

Perhaps it was his weight dragging his steps through the strand, but Ariel's footprints disappeared effortlessly into the drenched shore. Adam found his footing just as risky as he had, even while not under attack from Ariel, safe from shell and rock, the weight of the heavy grasp of the earth encrusted to his boots. He looked to the sea with disquiet. It was not nearly as powerful as it had been that morning where he and the princess of Denmark had fought.

A bird cried out from the distant wood.

Adam turned toward it. He watched it float into the cradle of the sunset, lift itself out over the breeze, and flow into the western sky, a tiny V among the pink and golden glow in the sky. He trailed back to the woods, watching from his distance at the shoreline, and found himself pick up his pace, just a bit, to keep to Ariel's side. A strange bead of nerves settled at the base of his stomach as he gazed into the woods. He knew, with defeat, what it was.

A chill of obsession over his weak ears, his inferior senses, the driftwood and sand and strange, muted noises that had to be there, taunting him. He could not deny the defenselessness woodswalking sought to bring him; the unspeakable sense of loss. He was conflicted in every way. He was exposed, beyond his disposition, needlessly frail and deceptively human and horrifyingly numb to this new world…and safe.

Humanity had ingenuity. Humanity had community. Humanity had friends.

A friend. He settled his eyes over Ariel again. She had slowly untied her bows, one by one, and had dropped them into the sand, leaving them behind her. She seemed, for everything in the world, at peace here. Adam hesitated to leave the green cloths behind. He paused to scoop one, then another, the cloth wet and malleable inside his hands. What could you be thinking?
Perhaps her thoughts were so different from his that they assumed a separate reality. How foolish, to spend years a monster, a hate-filled thing, and have that taste of pain and claw to stir such feelings of frustration? He could not break away from his intrusive thoughts: What had frighten the bird? What else moved, watching and waiting, with him now? Why did he feel like he was being watched miles away from civilization? Could it really be Hades, teeth sharp and eyes burning?

The smooth walk along the edge of the water curled under Ariel's bare feet, polishing her skin with every step. She was clean and graceful, as she would had looked if she had chosen to remain at the palace. Adam could not bring himself to think of what he would look like upon their return. The breeze of salt stung at the minute cuts along his fingertips. The quiet lolling of the ocean seemed labored. His hair was a terrible mess at his shoulders. He could only give a quiet sigh in his listlessness.

And Ariel had yet to tell him anything of their journey here.

"It will be dark soon." Adam intoned.

He kept the haste from his voice. He had no true reason to usher their return. To be greeted with grins and smiles and further questions. His time locked with Eric was enough. The man was a tyrant of battle plans and the explanation of weaponry; it was no secret he took great pride in his swords, his guns, and, his prized ships. It all made Adam's head spin with frets of one so uninitiated. It only made him reflect harder on himself. He had no weapons at his palace. He had nothing to protect himself from those villagers that had arrived to stop his heart, to mount his head to some pub wall. That was all his servants. Shall he fail not only at providing Belle protection but his people as well?

Ariel slowly strode to a stop, her frame light and unsinkable over the sand. The waves wept at her toes, grasping but unable to maintain their hold, as the water slid back into the mouth of sea.

"I thought you liked it outside." Ariel did not turn to face him. It was no question.

Adam balled the cloth inside his fingers to squeeze out the water. "I do."

"Does the dark bother you?" This, a simple tease. Ariel's hair had unspun itself from their woven pattern, silken flames that framed her face. In the dulling light, she almost looked other worldly. However, her smile remained faint over her face. Perhaps, Ariel was still Ariel after all.

"I do not like what I cannot see. It's annoying." Adam said. "And I do not know these grounds well. And there are pirates about."

Ariel continued to stare out at the sea. Her mouth was a thin frown. "Don't tell me you believe him."

A question about Eric. Adam fixed his expression firmly, hoping to be mindful to both persons in his reasoning. "Eric is not wrong about the danger that lurks here, Ariel." Adam gave a low clear of his throat, forcing himself to not glance over his shoulder, to vex himself endlessly over the dark in the woods. "...I have heard rumor that you disagree."

Ariel tussled her long hair with her fingers, raking through her bangs; her hair a tiny fury over the wind. "Eric always does this. Every year. It's—can he just give it a rest?"

Adam faltered back at the anger in her voice. "I don't understand. Eric was—um—personable and friendly all those months ago. What has changed?"

"Nothing!—Nothing is different. That's what I'm trying to tell him. He just—" At this, Ariel stomped the ground, turned herself around in a circle, her hands holding tightly to her face. She blew out the air from her fingers as she fretting them to her lips. "...I promise I didn't drag you out here to criticize
Eric. I just…Tiana and Jasmine, they don't get it. Aladdin and Naveen, they don't act the way Eric does. They stay consistent—but Eric—he hides it well. I love him to death. But he drives me crazy when he gets this way—and that's what worries me. He's consistently inconsistent. And he doesn't see it. That's why I wanted it to just be you and me. You understand me.”

A small burst of warmth flickered in Adam's chest but he chose to ignore it. Had Ariel really meant that? Certainly, he was a war asset. He was needed for his provenance and so Eric, and his corresponding relationships around him, were practical. But Ariel. She sought nothing he could provide—just…him.

"…You suggest me a confidant?"

Ariel laughed at him, the tightness around her eyes softening. "You are so odd."

"I mean my question."

"Well, I mean my answer. You're strange. Stop pretending we aren't friends." She gave another laugh. "Was my hug that awful?"

Adam swallowed weakly. "You took me by surprise."

"I told you six times that I was going to hug you as soon as I saw you!"

"Yes…I recall. I did not think it literal."

"And I'm told I'm air-headed."

Adam looked at her decisively. "Whoever has said that about you?"

Ariel rolled her eyes, the motion caught at its peak, to show her grandeur. "I'm well aware of who I am, you know." She set her eyes to the ocean before him, the gleam of the sun, sinking into the water, like a drowning titan. "I…wonder if Eric doesn't like me for who I am." She glanced at Adam, embarrassed, her cheeks pink, as if she had instead said something profane. "…Not all the time. Just sometimes."

"Ridiculous." Adam said at once. "Everything Eric does. Everything he is looking for these last few weeks, have been for you."

"But he locks himself away from me. Every damn time." Ariel closed her eyes, her amber eyebrows tight along her face. She swept her hands over her dress, a simple thing, and nervously pulled at her fingers. "And when he finally returns to me, it's like—it's like he's looking at me as if I'm a different person."

Adam looked from Ariel's pained face, out towards the sea, giving her space. "Tell me about the times before."

"…I've told you a little bit about my life before Eric." Ariel answered, her tone low. "My dad is protective—and my mom, she died—"

"No, no," Adam cut in softly. "You do not have to talk about that if you do not wish. I meant Eric. These temperaments. Do they happen at random?"

Ariel breathed in deep. "…He's not a bad person. I don't think he can help it. I don't know what it is."
Adam furrowed his brow. There was a way in which Ariel said this, that stirred a familiar memory in the back of his mind. It did not sound like a couples’ domestic. It did not sound frightful, either. It sounded as if it was noticed and buried before—like a rapid decline of mental health—that bounced back again, so spontaneous and anew, it was as if the change had never occurred. It pricked at Adam’s thoughts—but was set to be lost in the pause between them both. A sort of mood swing—if not in anger, then in mania? An obsession? A resentment? These words were key. Belle had taught Adam to be vigilant of that, for all his unrefined mannerisms. The context of Eric and young Ariel’s relationship was much discussed and gossiped and judged—so it was not about the politics of a marriage or a war to be fought.

Then, this was interpersonal. A secret that Ariel was allowing Adam to hear. Him, entirely alone.

"...You speak of this as if it is a condition." Adam said, his voice low in his throat. He was nervous to suggest his conclusion, but it was all he had. "A sort of illness."

"...I love him." Ariel said, the words confident, but her voice cracked. She pressed a hand over her eyes to shield away her tears. "Don't look at me like that, Adam. I'm not sad. I'm—I'm angry. This isn't just about pirates! This is—it's—it's—I—I don't know what it is! But it keeps happening, and he won't talk to me about it!"

With all this talk of hugging and teasing, Adam felt more the fool to not return her affection. Angry or not, Adam could not stand to see a woman crying before him. It twisted his nerves around—how many more women must he make cry before his life was done?

"You don't have to know, Ariel," Adam began quickly. His breathing felt caught in his throat. Ariel dropped her hand, but the tears still drizzled down her face, open and frantic. "In fact, over matters of mind and body, I feel as if there is much we do not know." He took a step towards her, unsure, and finally moved his hands to rest over the tops of her shoulders. She was so small, even in bone structure. His hand was trice her own. "Shall I work with you to find a more suitable doctor?"

Ariel looked at him with vehemence, her blue eyes gleaming in rage. "No. Absolutely not. Hire some terrible mask-wearing fool that will strap Eric to a chair, cover him in leeches, and talk about humors of the blood? Do not suggest that again. I'm not an idiot; I know what my husband has isn't common. Who will believe me? Adam, I can hardly find the words myself to make it real to others. I only asked you because..."

Ariel gazed up at Adam with the full force of her wide eyes. Her mouth twitched, first to grit her teeth, then to give a terribly feeble smile. "...You take me seriously."

Adam found his repose weakening. He offered his best smirk back at her. "...You are not going to beat me with sand again, are you?"

Ariel laughed, pushing her hands against Adam's chest to break his hold of her. "No. Not this time."

"I believe you, Ariel." Adam returned. His heart ached to see her confess her discomfort at being so easily dismissed. "I will always believe you. You have given me not reason to doubt—and while it is easy for me to doubt often, I am attempting to do more than return to what is familiar. If Eric has a disorder of the mind, of mood, then I do not deny it. While I do not know him well, I will say this. He is passionately smitten by you and I do not think this frenzy a source of denial. He does not know how this makes you feel, correct?"

Ariel looked away. "...We don't fight, not often, but I wish I knew how to make him understand. He doesn't have to try so hard. It doesn't matter what Daddy says. And I don't care if there are pirates, or no pirates, or if maybe he's just a little crazy. I love him. I've loved him since the moment I saw him."
Adam found himself anxious to give Ariel a sense of reasoning, to help her see that Eric was not wrong, at least in this moment, to know the threat was very real. But the mirror was not with him. It was stored by on his ship, safe with Lumière, far away from their isolated beach.

After Ariel's confession, undeniable in her words, in their warmth, in growing starlight, there seemed to be nothing more to say.

The pair stared out over the water in pleasant silence. The sea was drinking in the last strains of light, casting a halo to reflect over the water, over the faces of the two friends. The shadows unfurled from along the beach, misting the sand from gold to silver. The forest line merged with dusk, shambling off into some distant peace in the unfurling night.

"I hate the sunset." Ariel murmured. She moved close to Adam, feeling the cold of the night rising over the bay. For once, he did not move away. "Hey—do you know any stars off the top of your head? Like the way Belle does?"

She pointed up and into the sky—the small eyes of the stars peering down over them, dots and diamonds, seamless in the blue. The night was nearly here. Adam could only stare, fixated at the remains of the sun, until, suddenly, the sea before him hissed—a sound of ocean salt and spray filled the air, the pitch sharp, a dagger into his ears—

If Ariel was still speaking to him, Adam could not hear her.

He could hardly move to look at her. His head felt trapped, caged between night air and the metallic taste of the breeze in his open mouth—and the ocean, the ocean—it moved before him, thick and cold, reaching out—with a voice that rumbled like a thunder storm. It was not human. It had no language.

It could not be blocked out.

Adam struggled to bring his hands to his ears, to shove the palms of his hands as tightly as he could over his skull, but it was no use. He felt sweat, hot, sticky, slid out from every inch of his body. His chest heaved, legs dropping out from under him. He pressed his hands harder over his ears, causing his arms shake as badly as his fingers. He could not move. He felt his jaw crack. He felt a figure stoop down beside him, her mouth open in horror. She was speaking to him but he could not hear. How? How could she not hear it, too? It was more than words—it was a command that was taking his skull to pieces.

Adam tried to speak. He knew his mouth was opened. His could feel his tongue like a worm, scrabbling against his teeth, useless and heavy. And the figure—Ariel. Ariel was here. He wasn't alone. He wasn't alone. But why? What was happening? His thoughts beat against his will to not scream. He would not. He would not scream. He would not—

He could not hear her, but Ariel was beside him. Her hair had fallen fully down her shoulders. Her petite features frozen in unspeakable fear.

"What's happening?! Are you hurt?! What's wrong?! Adam?!

Ariel asked, each question coming faster than the last, until Adam's name became less than a whimper, but it played silently before Adam's eyes. Ariel had no voice. Just teeth and tongue and her desperation, tiny hands grabbing at his body.

Adam thrashed against the pain—his fingers clawing down his face to grip something, anything around him, but all he felt was sand. He clenched the earth, ripping open tiny cuts that stung, poured the pain over like boiling water, hellish over his skin. The sound. It flew into Adam as if a great call
had been screamed over the entity of the water; the sky swirled rapidly, anchoring him to the shore. The water, once so calm, twisted at his ankles. He found himself on his knees, drenched up to his waist.

Ariel moved away, her face horrified, and Adam saw himself, helpless, voiceless, in that moment of her flight—she would run. She would call for help. They would find him. They would find him and —

A force that felt like the edge of a blade coiled upwards—splitting the side of his head into two.

Adam screamed.

He screamed and screamed, his vision dotted with black spots like burning cloth twining to ashes—Water.

His face found the water, pooling into his nose and open mouth. Sand and grit filled his lungs. He could not control himself, for it was all he could do to not smash his head into the earth. For it was his head that was rendering—the night and sea and sound and the call of birds—shattered between his breathless, endless agony. His nerves were burning matches, interconnected to every inch of him, with his blood set to a fever pitch that roared in the shell of his ear, but that was not enough to stop that inhuman, awful noise that rattled his teeth. The sound! The sound!

Another blade pierced his skull—he felt his hair being ripped from his scalp. He was thrusted upwards, away from the ocean, and back into the shore. It was a huge, violent act that winded him, spine dug deep into the compacted sand—and for a moment, he felt numbed. He blinked through the pain to see something slender and green coiling past him—and hands gripping at his shirt—before he was dragged, scarcely breathing, back into the raging maw of the sea…

Pain. It lingered through the blackness. He felt as if he were underwater. A pressure was building at the base of his neck. Anger. Fear. Was he drowning? Could he drown? Was this death? Had he been shot?

He was being dragged, held fast by some rapidly propelled force that pulled him deeper. He could not breathe. He felt the weight of the ocean tingling his vision, beckoning unconsciousness. Without the sun, there was no light, no sense of up or down.

A harsh, brutal pop crashed into his ears as he broke the surface of the sea.

And into silence.

Beautiful, empty silence.

That sound. That sound that moved the ocean. Fragmented his skull. It was gone.

"No—nononononono—" A distance voice was demanding of him, striking him hard in the chest, forcing open his mouth. "Don't—youdare—passout—"

He wrenched forward. His hands and knees found purchase in the sand. He was soaked to the very bone. Sea and sand burst from his mouth, choking him.

"Okay—good, good." The voice—Ariel, it had to be—she was still here?

"A—" Her name was fire inside his mouth. His teeth felt bent. His entire body shivered, exhausted, terrified, his heart papluating so hard it was difficult to breathe.
Hands tugged at his face, dragging Adam's forward still, away from the ocean. Ariel. Her hands cupped his jaw, bracing him. She pulled his hair haphazardly, struggling to give Adam a clear view of her.

Adam watched her in careful detail. Her breathing was ragged, too, as if she had ran at a great distance, so fast and for so long, that her body was now dripping with sweat. Could she have run? Were others coming? Adam could not bear to watch what would happen now. He closed his eyes. It was all too soon. All too late.

He did not need to look upon himself to know he had changed.

A dull ache moved, from neck to the sides of his skull. While the pain was not as crushing as before, and the night air was crisp and very real across his flesh, he found it difficult to hold his head up without Ariel's assistance.

"Adam." Ariel urged, her voice stern. "Look at me."

"Look at me," Adam jerked away at words, a grimace lingering over his face. Those words had been spoken before.

"Please," Ariel dropped her voice into a fraught whisper. "Please, please, please, please."

"Ngh," Adam hissed at her, giving a pained shake of his head, attempting to pull away from her hands, but she was steadfast against him.

"Stop—you're only making it worse!"

With a shudder, Adam sucked in a breath. He willed his eyes to open.

Ariel was face of face with him. She stared at him very seriously. Her face was flushed with cold and struggle. Her eyes held no fear. Not like Rapunzel. Not like Eugene or his staff. She was absolutely determined. "I'm going to tell you something. And you're going to keep looking at me. And you're going to keep breathing. Okay?"


"You're bleeding. Really, really badly." She spoke these words matter-of-factly. Her lips paled. "From the sides of your head. I—I—just need to see—" She moved a hand from his face, reached upwards, tracing her fingertips faintly along the crown of his hair until she touched something solid—until Adam wrenched away. That single touch, no matter how gentle, caused acid to rise in Adam's stomach. He threw himself away from her, desperate to get away, before the swelling in his throat over took him.

Ariel watched him vomit into the sand, hair tangled along his mouth.

Sand covering his hands, Adam wiped at his mouth. His tongue was blistered. He swept the bitter taste away, spitting into the sand, and moved over his teeth. Teeth…

No fangs.

He jerked, staring at the hand close to his mouth. His hand. His human hand.

Adam forced the movement of air into his lungs. He felt hollow.

He was still human.
And yet.

Slowly, his fingers shaking with fatigue, Adam touched at the back of his neck. He rose his fingers through the locks of his hair, hesitant, and finally, he moved to where Ariel had placed her hand.

What he gripped was stolid, heavy, and tall. The sensation of touching bone outside of his body made him feel lightheaded. He brought his other hand to grip at the opposite side of his head and felt the same curl, the same crown of bone rising from his skull.

_Horns._

He dropped his hands lifelessly.

From a little ways away, Ariel was seated before him. Her lower half of her body still drifted in the sea, her legs impossible to make out by the gentle tugging of the tide. She stared at him with that same determined expression. She moved a hand, gesturing him to return to her.

So he did. Adam was not sure why he did not run. He could disappear into the forest. He could collect Lumière and they could leave as easily as thieves in the thin night air.

But yet, Adam dragged himself, hands over knees, back to Ariel's side.

Ariel took no time in going back to work. She grabbed his wrists, pushed them back into his lap, and carefully moved his hair away from his cheeks, collecting it behind his ears. She reached up a hand, firstly in front of Adam's face to show him what she was doing, and then, once more, she traced along his hairline…but she did not touch again at his wounds. For she pulled her hand away, bringing her hand tight to her face in the moonlight. Blood wetted her fingernails. Dark red, nearly black.

"I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have touched them—but I had to see if what I could smell was true. You're bleeding. Those—those—things—I saw them…" She dropped her voice, curled her fingers, and punched the sand. "I saw them rip their way out of you."

Numb. Perhaps, too numb for his own good, Adam touched at his left horn. He could feel the wet, naked wound that pulsed like a migraine, piercing through his skin. It was true. He was really bleeding. He brought his hand away to stare at his fingertips.

"…You saw…" Adam began, his voice raw.

"Yes…you just—started convulsing. I thought you were dying."

_I felt like I was_, Adam thought hazily.

"I bet. You tried to drown yourself."

Adam looked at her in great delay. He did not remember his mouth to move but he had spoken anyway. He swallowed thinly, preparing to turn in case he felt sick once more. Unlike before, there was no disconnect between mind and body. He could feel everything. The weight resting over his head. The twitch of his nose, newly minted, the smell of animals and water. Of Ariel so close to him. But it would seem he had no control over his words. What good would they do for him now?

He stumbled backwards, gaining a hint of distance between them.
He traced his eyes over her again. The droplets over body was not sweat, but sea.

The answer was so clear. He was such a fool.

"Did you save me, Ariel?"

Ariel gazed at him with wide blue eyes. Her hair was soaked to her face. She moved a strain away from her cheek. "Of course I did."

Adam felt the air leave his lungs in one breath. "You were not afraid?"

"No." The word was strong in the quiet.

Adam blinked at her, half expecting the barrel of a gun to already be at his back. "Where are the others?"

"What others?"

"You ran…to get them…" Adam continued, unable to grasp the logic that had once been so obvious before. "No one…is coming?"

"Why…what?"

"Because." Adam dragged in a pained breath, his breathing shallow. "Because the princess of Denmark has saved a monster."

At this, Ariel scowled—she walked—no dragged herself forward, fists digging into the sand, until she was at Adam's throat. "Are you blind, Adam!?"

"Whatever do you—"

"Adam." Ariel snapped. Her voice was ice. "Look at me."

Adam did.

In the moonlight, he could no longer see Ariel before him—but a woman with legs intertwined at the waist. Her legs had become one—and they glinted a green aura along the flesh, and polished, in the moonlight. No. Not skin. Scales. Her legs had become one long beautiful tail, like that of a fish.

Adam blinked heavily. He felt himself sway backwards. The world was a brilliant flourish that circled around him, curling his stomach once more. Ariel reached forward, grasping his arm, to hold him up.

"I am not just the princess of Denmark," Ariel explained. Her voice was soft and low on the wind. "I'm also a mermaid. My home is a place called Atlantica. My father's name is Triton. I'm royalty there, too."

"M—m—" Adam shivered through numb lips.

"Not magic." Ariel cut in. She gave his arm a squeeze to try and center him. "Breathe, okay? We can talk about this. I'm not afraid you. Please, don't be afraid of me."

Adam managed a breath at her order. "Ariel…mermaids…they're real…"

Her blush was silver in the moonlight. "'course we're real…real as anything else.."
Mermaids. Mermaids. Adam felt his stomach tightened again, acid burning up his throat. He padded at his ripped shirt, his pockets—but mirror—the mirror—and that Sparrow man—and mermaids.

Ariel.

"You're in danger." Adam whispered. He attempted to rise but his legs would not obey him. He merely shivered in the sand, bleeding, his eyes blown wide, his pupil dilated.

"I…see you're taking this well." Ariel allowed her small joke.

"You—you've got to…"

He stopped. He stared at the sand, his vision spinning. His head throbbed horribly. His balance was ruined. It was hard to keep one thought from fading into another.

"Hey—don't. Don't. Just give me a moment. Don't try to walk. I'm going to help you."

"With—with what?" Adam felt himself gave way to unstable laughter. His horns. Her tail. It was too much.

He had to be hallucinating.

"With my legs, you idiot!" Ariel snapped—but her tone suggested faint amusement. As if, she too, found the situation to be perfectly matched—and that to watch her friend, so composed and stoic, giddy with laughter, too rich to not enjoy.

"You have control over such things," Adam murmured thickly. He focused on her alone. Keeping his eyes over one thing at a time seemed to help. He felt sick once more. He coughed roughly, a hand gripping the sand for support.

"Not exactly. It's more instinct. And timing."

"You're…not human?"

"I'm as human as you!" Ariel growled. Her eyes were lit with a deep, anxious worry.

A pause.

"I'm cursed." Adam said simply.

Cursed. Cursed and ruinous. And deadly. I could have killed you, Adam thought, his mind falling back over the destroyed study, the horrified looks of his staff…

"You wouldn't hurt me," Ariel argued. She gripped at his arm again. "Do you really think so lowly of yourself?"

Adam looked at her in utter shock. "Can you read my mind?"

"Do you not know you're speaking?!" Ariel demanded. Her blue eyes seemed to grow larger.

Adam brought a hand to his mouth to bite down over the back of his hand. He tasted blood. He felt the reality of the pain. Ariel cried in frustration to rip it away from him.

Adam stared at his hands. His mind blank. "…I think I'm going mad…"

"No, you're just—going into shock. It's going to be okay."
"I have no control over this, Ariel." Adam rumbled, the words deep in his chest. "Do you think I had a say in what just occurred?" He reached to touch his horns but his stomach lurched. He pulled away from her. "Do you think I wished for this?"

Something caused Ariel to glare at Adam, hard. "I'm trying to help you, Adam. Please."

"I have dreams, Ariel," Adam told her, his words a breathless pant. "Dreams where I am hunted. And I am killed. But I never die. Why don't I ever die?"

"Adam, you aren't going to die. Please. Let me help you."

Adam looked away. At the sand. At the sea. At the stars. "What if I am meant to die?"

Ariel's face fell in despair. "How could you say such a thing?"

"...And if I want to die?"

At this, Ariel threw herself forward; she rose up her hand and brought down firmly across Adam's cheek. Adam felt his head snap the opposing direction.

Slowly, he looked back at her.

Her hand was still up, as if she thought to do it again.

"I'm not sorry! You're talking utter nonsense." Her tiny nose flared. Her eyes were icy and as round as the moon above. "And If Belle were to hear you say that." She turned away, her red mane a flare in the night, fiery and alive. "Don't disgust me with your talk of self-remorse! You have people that love you! You have a life! You have Belle! You have me!"

Adam could not find the words. There were none.

Ariel dropped her hand back into the sand. She flared her tiny nose, red with anger. "Look, I understand. I really, really do. I get that you're afraid. I was afraid, too. And, yeah, so, maybe being born a mermaid and being cursed—or whatever you are—they're not the same. But you have control. You have to find that kind of control."

Ariel, with more poise than Adam thought could be possible, lifted her tail—shimmering with water, and curled it beside her, resting her fins like a lady's skirts.

"I know what this feels like. When I was first human, my feet bled for three months." She moved her hand over her tail gingerly, sweetly...sadly. As if saying goodbye to an old friend. "Eric was so good to me. He never seemed to care. But it felt like the kingdom looked at me like I was..."

"A freak?"

"Yes."

"Does anyone else know?"

"No. Just Eric. And now you."

Adam sighed. "Ariel..."

"How long has this been happening to you? Is..." She picked at a loose ribbon in her hair, one that she had not tossed away. "Is that what you meant...all that time before."
"Yes."

Ariel swallowed thickly. "Is it... painful?"

Adam could not bring himself to touch at his horns. It was too agonizing move, anyhow. "Not... always."

"But now it is?"

He closed his eyes. "My head... it's like a ringing in my skull. I could hear this terrible voice..." He stopped, unable to explain. He went back to what he could reason with. "It feels like my entire life had been leading me to this... body."

"Wait—there's... more?"

At this, Adam snickered at the astonishment in her voice. "Much more. Think hairier."

Ariel giggled softly. "...There's the Adam I've gotten to know."

Adam brought his eyes to hers. That warmth flashed through him again, strange and frightening and, somehow, comforting. Now, he could not hide from it. He smiled at her, the effect lopsided on his face. "... Terrifying, isn't it?"

Ariel threw back her head to laugh. "Getting to know you?"

"Getting to know others," Adam corrected. "You're lucky you're so bubbly and endearing. It's... so hard to talk to others. My thoughts are always racing to correct myself. Let alone not sprout horns."

"So, the horns aren't common place?" Ariel lightly teased. "Hmm. I don't know if I buy that..."

Adam's smile fell. "The curse was meant to be the rest of my life."

"Well clearly it isn't meant to be that way!" Ariel suggested.

"You sound so much like her. I came to terms with my fate years ago."

"But..." Ariel encouraged with a small hum.

"But," Adam regarded Ariel's intrigue, "Belle, she changed my mind."

"She loves you." Ariel declared simply. "And I doubt she cares if you're cursed or not. It's like Eric and me, you know? It doesn't matter. It shouldn't matter."

His face darkened. "That is what scares me. Belle has compromised enough. I need to—I must—I have to break this curse for myself."

Ariel gazed back out over the ocean, her eyes bright. "I want to help you. I'll find a way to help you. And, uhm, we'll talk about—you know—me more—later but—we've been out too long—and we have to get going, okay?"

"... I am sorry to hear of your troubles with Eric." Adam answered, feeling their former conversation ended with little help from him. "I did not mean to suggest a mental hospital. Eric means well for you. For his friends."

At this, Ariel appeared overwhelmed. She placed a hand over Adam's arm. Her mouth opened. Closed. Then opened again. "... Eric..." She closed her eyes, willing herself not to cry once more.
"He…he won’t be able to handle this…"

An icy finger dragged up Adam's spine. The world tilted slightly, heart erratic and pulsing, at the very idea of Eric’s reaction—or any of the others. If it were to be anything like his nightmares…

"No." Adam agreed coldly. "He will not."

Ariel brought her hands to cover her mouth and nose, attempting to breathe through her realization. She willed herself to steel. She eased back into the surf, seemingly calmed by the ocean around her.

"You can’t give into this. Things will be okay. You have to fight it." She made a small circle in the surf. "Give me a minute to calm down. I'll be human again soon."

Adam shook his head halfheartedly. To fight this? He could hardly stand. His head throbbed, occasionally so badly that it blacked the edges of his vision. He could not risk the vertigo of attempting to stand. And, with Ariel's frame, not too much smaller than that of Rapunzel's, he knew he could not get far, even with her help.

"What do you mean 'no'?" Ariel glared at him, annoyed.

"You may have control over yourself, Ariel. But I don't know how to make this go away. I don't even know if it will, or if I will just keep my transformation going. I can't risk it. And I won't risk you. I will get blood on you. There will be…suspicion. Even if I could will this horror away…"

"That…” Her expression fell, hurt. "That isn't fair. I—I can't leave you here."

"I cannot return with you."

"I'm not leaving you!"

"This isn't a discussion, Ariel—this is—"

Suddenly, Adam stopped. He turned his head, ever so slightly. He could hear breathing. Running. The quick pacing of legs up the southern edge of the beach. It was headed straight for them. Adam released a slow breath. He turned to Ariel, his face startled. "Someone is here."

"What?"

"Someone has heard us! Ariel, you have to go."

"Wait—But I'm not—I'm not—" Ariel looked completely panicked. She craned her neck to stare out over the sand—the over the ocean. She was already half submerged. There was no time. There would be no time. "I—I can't—Eric doesn't want—I don't want people to know—Adam—wait—"

"Go!" Adam hissed. "Now!"

"Adam, I—"

"LEAVE!" Adam bellowed, striking at the sand. This caused Ariel to shrink under—and soon, she was no more than ripples over the waves.

He coughed once more, rough and painful. Now, even the task of yelling was sapping him of his strength. He forced his breathing to slow. He laid along the sand, willing the world away. Perhaps it was too dark. Human eyesight was pathetic at night. Perhaps he would not so easily noticed…

"…Adam?" A voice called.
He felt his heart give a skip.

"Are…you out there?" The voice continued. "Please so be out here. I really don't wanna be talking to myself."

Adam hardly could believe his ears. He could smell the man, too. Easily as he did if they were standing a foot apart, and not yards down the beach. Leather, liquor, and, of all things, the smell of a horse.

"Eugene?" Adam murmured. He pulled himself upright, sand dusting his entire body.

Eugene was more slender shadow in the dark. Adam could hear his boots stomping left, right—and tripping, over the dunes. "What the flying hell? I can't see worth a damn. What are you doing out here?"

"How did you find me?" Adam called. He pushed himself onto his knees, swaying back, before he caught himself. "What are you doing out here?"

"Don't take offence, but I heard you yelling. And like, nobody can yell like you, man. Unmistakable." Eugene's voice sounded closer now. "Your turn. What are you doing out heeerrrr—"

"Whoa," Eugene whispered. His dark eyes were huge and white.

Slowly, his hands out in front of him in the dark, Eugene moved forward. He glanced at Adam, sand covered and dripping wet—and the moved to trace the outline of his horns in the light of the moon. "I know you probably don't wanna hear this right now but—wow, you look badass."

Eugene, Adam felt his heart shudder. It wasn't Eric or a band of murderous pirates or another bloody soul to hunt him down. He didn't have to run. Adam, once again, found himself closer to hysteria than to fear.

"…Rapunzel?" Adam rasped. He could feel himself give into the shaking of his own body.

"At the palace. I told her I wanted to check out the tides for seashells. She has like this—ah, never mind. It's an art thing—and what are you doing here? You—you're… bleeding." Eugene reached out, a hand patting at Adam's shoulder, the trail of dried blood along his neck, then his fingers to graze the side of head. His hands came away wet and red. "You're bleeding. Did you know you're bleeding?"

Adam flinched away. "Hurts."

"Yeah." Eugene nodded slowly, as if he had some inkling of what it might be like to feel bones crack through the sides of one's skull. "Yeah. You weren't attacked, right?" Eugene flickered his dark eyes around the beach. He couldn't see much of anything. The outline of the forest. The yellow eyes of owls shining in the shadows. The moon, large and low, hanging above them. "This is from…"

He moved a finger to point nervously at Adam's horns. "…Those."

Adam felt the acid boil again in his stomach. "Please, don't touch them."

"No problem," Eugene said, perhaps a little too quickly. "Can—can you stand?"

Adam ducked his head. "I don't know."
Eugene clasped a hand behind his own neck. "When did this happen?"

How long had they been gone? How deep was this night? Was Ariel already safe?

"...I don't know."

"Shit, man. You don't know?" Eugene grasped Adam's hand, looping an arm around his friend to hold him up. "I guess growing horns is the same thing as getting hit really hard with something." Eugene seemed to consider the idea...before he shook his head, uncaring. "Okay. We gotta get you outta here. Come on. Up."

Adam closed his eyes, forcing his nausea down. His footing felt too loose over the sand. He tried to dig in his heels. He couldn't go back to the palace. He couldn't go anywhere. He was trapped.

"I can't go back. Please. I can't go back there."

Eugene struggled to hold him steady, fingers digging into his wrists. "Relax. Relax. You think I'd do that to you? I'm working on a plan, okay?"

Adam labored his breathing. The world swirled while standing still. He furrowed his brow. Why was Eugene here? How did he find him?

Eugene pulled them forward, staggered along the stand. His eyes looked anxiously at Adam, then away, then back again. He gave a low whistle. "That looks really painful."

"...Yeah." Adam offered the word for everything he had left.

Eugene grunted, pulling Adam's weight with the rest of his strength. He was heavier than he looked. How Belle ever managed this, he'd never know.

"Okay. I've got an idea. It's gonna work. But you're not gonna like it."

Adam drifted open his eyes. "...I trust you."

Those words, while curt, were well meant. It was no longer from a lack of choice.

Eugene was a better man then he was. Better than all those princes, back at the castle.

"Oh," Eugene managed. He couldn't help but give a small, unexpected smile. "Well...good. I'm glad. Man. What a night to find some excitement, huh? Why don't I just follow you around everywhere?"

Adam gave a single low snarl beside him.

Eugene gave a dark laugh. "Yeah, buddy. I missed you, too."

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**AN:**

Eugene and Adam are my bropt. I WILL HEAR NO DISPUTES FOR THIS. F8TE ME, FANDOM.
AN: A brief announcement before we enter into this chapter.

Yes, I am aware that the 'Greek' canon I present within this story is incorrect. I am aware that true Greek mythos actually involves the Titan Kronos. He swallowed five of his six children out of fear of their power overtaking his own. This caused Zeus, once fully grown, and originally the youngest of his siblings, to rescue them from their father's body. Thusly, as the godly children were returned to form, they re-claimed a new birth order, in which Zeus (or so what I have researched) claimed himself the "eldest". This 'new' order is usually the way many Greek legends are presented and is why it seems as common knowledge for the modern world to think of Zeus as the 'eldest'.

For propriety's sake, here is the original birth order as followed:

Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, Poseidon and finally Zeus.

The Disney movie, as you all are aware, does not give a crap about actual Greek lore (Hell, they made HERA a LOVING mother, har!).

As such, I have crafted a little twist of my own that I believe fits into the Disney canon.

Thank you for your understanding of these changes and please enjoy the ride. C:

The Lord of the Dead could not cry.

Mainly, this was because it was physically impossible for him—fire and water never really mixed well for Hades; this was also because the eons had eroded him. A river splitting a mountain, the sea sheering away the continents, to wither away possibility with indifference, expectation into despair, and any trace of sadness relished as a dark, momentous anger.

Anger was the element of passion. Fury was the element of heat and destruction and change.

It was meant to be the element that crafted the earth. Core, energy, power, violence, magnitude; the earth that he, and his brethren, had now claimed as their own. His eldest brother, Zeus, took the sky, the stratosphere that wrapped the world in a thick blanket of blue. Poseidon, the second eldest, dove deep into the ocean below, spurring the water to his will—equally wondrous and blue.

But Hades, the third brother, did not understand the rewards of this new planet. He felt transcended. He was forced out to seek his own territory, a place that was not blue. His brothers, possessive and jealous, never would dare to share their findings. Hades found he did not care. He did not want the clear, brilliant blue of the earth; he enjoyed the riches found deep beneath its crust. He touched soot and pitch and rich minerals. A surreal, forbidden temptation to claim this obscure discovery as his own.

Unlike his family who followed suit to climb the mountains to Olympus, Hades found himself beyond his kin, drawn to the night, the cold of space and stars—perhaps, he was not of natural origin. Often, he felt like the moon above, for if he be Death—then he was unwanted since the moment of creation, unknown and discomforted beyond all he could see.

In mortal tongue, where time turned to age and had meaning, Hades would have considered himself
naïve in the beginning. His kin did not know the rules of the universe but this cold kingdom was meant for him alone. Sacrifices and offers need not be made to him as his brothers—mortals crept willingly into his domain—and that meant their souls would soon follow—a gift his brothers did not want. Pale, untouchable, curious, Hades explored the innards of the earth and simply looked to the moon above for comfort; it was black and shapeless as he—a new moon for a new world.

Hades settled nicely into his charmed life. If, indeed, the humanoid like embodiments of nature and power could be thought of as 'alive'. Hades seemed to grasp this idea tentatively. He and his immortal family, they certainly did not shy away from the pleasures of living that joined easily alongside the lives of the fragile mortals below them. Mortals that Hades found fascinating and alluring.

Mortals that his brothers thought lesser than their holy bodies.

Zeus, thunder and pride, thought the earth his plaything. He took the form of animals and other humans and created as he see fit. Poseidon, adventurous and boisterous, abandoned humans for a species of his own making. Hephaestus, Aphrodite, Dionysus, the rest—they feasted and drank and celebrated—while Hades, who now frequented the final acts of mortals, grew unsure if there was a true difference that made them 'greater'. The mortals lusted, went to war, and made merry. However, the first age of Zeus's rain echoed arrogantly above the earth in ridicule of Hades' questions—for his brothers could hardly care to question anything. The earthly plane had embraced his dearest family.

They had dismissed Hades. When he arose to Mount Olympus, a brief break from the new densely populated mounting of the dead, his brothers looked at him in scandal. While they glowed and had remained impervious to the hundreds of thousands of moons that had floated through an endless night sky, their brother had changed.

Hades was thinner. Hades was prying and loquacious and laughably unaware of his own shameless, mortal-obsession. He was also weaker than his kin. The lingering pressure of his kingdom under the earth clung to him like the scent of mortal sickness, causing most to wrinkle their nose in disgust whenever he was not looking. At first, Hades' feigned ignorance. He knew, however, what was distant and unspoken in the air between him and his brothers. He had little freedom and time to be outside the realm of the dead. The way the mortals complained of a painful, breath-taking force inside of his caves that threatened to stop their hearts, Hades could comprehend a similar feeling.

The earth and Olympus—exerting himself in the act of residing with his family had begun to hurt him.

**Pain.** True pain. The way mortals felt…

There was much whispering and little understanding. Zeus thought it a fun game, to so easily push his brother around, back into his terrible, lonely lair—away from making a fool of himself at his lavish parties. The rest laughed at the abuse; Hades as well. First in jest and then in realization:

Fear, disease, mortality, weakness…his brothers did not understand—and what was worse, they continued to refuse to understand. There was no longer a physical distance—sky, sea, earth—that separated Hades from his family, but an unspoken emotional one.

Hades oft returned to his kingdom, his bony fists curled to his sides.

*They thought lesser of him.*

Another shifting sphere of the moon, another lingering disquiet where there was once contentment. His kingdom, once new and untamed, became his purpose for eons, buried beneath the earth. As
Hades' establishment grew stronger, his underworld became smaller. It was a cage. A cycle that he was meant to embody. Alone. Now, barely any offerings were made to him. Not when his brothers' brought so much life and happiness to the earth above.

There were even fewer beings to talk to.

New feelings replaced his curiously.

He resented Zeus's ignorance. Zeus ruled the earth so carelessly while Hades slaved to control the restless souls teeming below. He was bitter towards Poseidon's freedom. The water that encompassed the earth was endless compared to his small, darkened world. The more Hades became aware of what he had become compared to his family, the more he felt irreversibly changed. There was a dark, foul humor that unfurled inside of Hades. A large pit inside of his soul that whispered that *he was right*. His kin, his brothers, they were foolhardy to ignore him.

He saw the beloved gods for exactly who they were.

And they pretended to never see him.

It was not as if they, too, did not grow in power. Hephaestus learned the power of creation. Aphrodite could court whomever and whatever she chose. Hades could not gain such joyous abilities—but he certainly learned to master his own. He mocked the sanctity of life, studied the locked away Titans and begged his extended family to lend him the failures of their creations—hellish, demonic, half-dead things to fill his empty halls. He had grown to understand mortals so well that now they bored him. It brought more amusement to manipulate and watch their struggle to survive—or more commonly—struggle to let go of a soul that already belonged to him, than to ask questions of their quest, their families, their shallow, quick lives.

Hades aged further—cunning and talkative from the years of solitude—and a touch cruel. Cruelty, it would seem, ran in his family's blood, and there was no denying that it was a part of his nature that connected him back to the beings he loathed.

However, the eons had taught him well.

His brothers thought him weak, so Hades would find more power.

Isolation had made him desperate, so he would find his own company.

This world had foraged his being and forced a change in him too perverse to hide.

The gods would know him, power and fury and vengeance. They would know of why the mortals trembled in his wake; they would know fear and isolation.

They would know Death.

"Don't you ever wish for anything different?" She had asked him.

Her hair was plaited in gold ringlets, rings of false-ivy and earth. Her robe, pale as her glowing flesh, hung ever so loosely off of her right shoulder.

Hades, learning against the column in Zeus's magnificently beautiful court yard, leapt his yellow eyes over the stranger beckoning his attention.
The other gods made good time to avoid him. What did this twerp of a goddess possibly want with him?

"The chocolate fountain is that-a-way," Hades said, thumbing a bony finger over his shoulder.

She pressed her lips together, resisting a faint smile. "I'm not asking for directions to the hors d'oeuvres. I'm asking if you want anything different than going stag at every party?"

"Every party?" Hades rose a fiery brow at her observation.

"You didn't notice me but I noticed you; you've been to every baby shower that our family has ever had. Poseidon's next daughter being born doesn't seem to have changed much about how you behave, I see."

Hades scraped his yellow eyes over her. She had to be very 'young' for an immortal, or at the very least, the prettiest wallflower he had met in over a millennium. Which equaled a grand total of none. People didn't exactly talk to him at these kinds of things.

"I like going stag." Hades propped himself a little taller, enjoying the way her eyes stared up at him in an unconscious submission.

"Right. Like it's a choice." The goddess replied. She looked around at the rest of the party as if this confirmed her suspicion. Not one of the other members turned their eyes to even glance their way.

Hades snorted. A small burning tingled his nostrils. "Every decision, even if not preferable, is still a personal choice."

"Is that what you tell yourself?"

"I tell myself a lotta things, toots. I'm a master conversationalist."

"At talking to yourself?"

"At talking. Period." Hades allowed a thorny smile.

"Are you excited to see the baby?"

Hades dropped his smile. "I hate kids."

"You do? You don't want any of your own?" She looked genuinely curious.

Hades gestured at himself—chest to feet—with two sharp pointer-fingers. "Not exactly my forte."

She rose a shapely brow. "Then, what is?"

Hades wanted to laugh straight into her face. What was with this kid? He ran a single hand over his head, smoothing the flames. "Hades. Lord of the Dead." He grasped her delicate hand without warning. "Pleasure."

"Lord of the Dead? As in mortal death? Shall I address you by your full title every time?"

"Only if you really wanna get on my good side."

"Does this death have a good side?"

"Ah, a pessimist after my cold, unfeeling heart. You've got moxie, kid. I think I like it."
She smiled radiantly. The courthouse seemed to agree with her. It, too, seemed all the more
gorgeous, just by her standing there alone. "Persephone. I don't have any titles." She met his eye and
held his stare with a fearless gleam. "Yet."

Hades stared at her. Eons of attending this meaningless shindigs, countless drunken assaults of
making an utter fool of himself, the glares and attention like a sauna, wafting of greed, shameless
showboating for those idiots that couldn't be damned to think at all, and here Hades stood, silent. He
snorted again, looked away, and then looked back.

She was still smiling.

He gave a roll of his eyes. "Look...there is this unspoken rule. About me. About my brothers. They
really don't like it when I chat up the locals. You should scoot your cute boot away from me."

"Oh. I'm not out here just to spy on you. I'm here to escape my mother. Demeter. Heard of her?"

"...Perhaps."

"...Well, she's...controlling. I guess she has a right to be. She does make beautiful forests and
pressures the climate and—"

"...I was kidding, kid." Hades cut in. "She's basically mother nature. Believe me. I'm aware of her.
And her entire, large, cunning reach around this entire blue world. It's, hah, hard to ignore her. But I
suppose, you, being mommy's little girl, can't help but begrudge her, hm?"

Persephone looked at him, perturbed at being interrupted. Hades merely smiled back at her, glossy
and wide, showing off the points of his teeth.

What a little princess, you must be.

Silence. A very awkward silence.

Hades gave a small cough between them. "So, Poseidon is having a bratty little girl. What else is
new? He already has one. Nauseating."

"Children are wonderful!" Persephone added distinctly, her head held high. "They're new life! New
everything. A total, fresh start. Like flowers and birds and nature! They change you for the better."

"Uh, no."

She made a rude sound with her mouth, fluttering her eyelids in a petite show of dismissal. "Please!"

"'Please', what?" Hades snapped, his yellow eyes dancing with passion to tear into this little brat.
"Do you think this changes something inside of the people around us? Please. Zeus has about a
thousand kids—then some—where are their celebrations, hey?" Hades flared his nostrils, allowing
the smoke to rise up from his mouth, into his hair, his own little rain cloud on Mount Olympus. "One
day, he's gonna make some little sunspot, and then, hah, then we'll talk about real change...I just
need him to actually care. And these people, they never do."

"And am I to presume you, alone, see everyone here for exactly what they are?" Persephone
exclaimed, her voice loud and threatening to draw attention, but her eyes remained affixed to Hades' 
face, clearly uncaring. "As if you understand what is different—how could you when everything
you've ever known is dead? Do you? Huh? Are you the least bit curious to what it could be like to
be wrong?"

Hades went quiet. She had yelled at him. This little piece of nature itself. She was actually mad.
He actually got a reaction out of her, so concerned with his own lack of caring, like she took it a personal insult to so heavily disagree.

"...You surprise me." Hades said. His voice was very quiet.

In fact, everything had gone very quiet. The party had moved inside. The birds and gentle rumbling of the clouds high in the mountain peaks were gone. It was just them, entirely alone, together.

"My mother cares about me. Very much." While she said this coldly, there was an air about her tone, as if she was both impressed that Demeter could be so powerful, so strong, and equally maddening to under the thumb of such a mother.

Hades lifted up a corner of his mouth into a sharp smirk. "Mothers, am I right? Maybe you should think about leaving the nest sooner than later."

Persephone matched his smirk. "Is that an invitation?"

"To ditch this party?"

"To go with you."

"Ha-ah. Hah. Ha..." Hades' chuckled, the sound awkward and unsure, over his lips. "No. I'd don't do company."

"Will you think about it?"

"Once I'm gone from here, babe, I don't come back much."

"Oh—I think you'll come back. Here."

Then, without warning, she grasped his hand, intervened their fingers, and gave a small, mocking spin, as in a dance. Then, she let go.

"See you, Hades."

Hades looked at his hand, where she had touched him, and resting in the center of his palm was a single flower. It didn't move when he touched it. It didn't shrivel and die like every living thing. It stayed strong, fixed to his bony grip, and clung to him.

He lifted it to his lips, pulled in the sickeningly sweet scent, and, for the first time in eons...

Hades was changed once more.

---

Megara was no longer with Belle. Once seated on a throne of gold, she was lifted in mid-air, suspended by her throat, as if Hades had lifted a single finger, summoning her here without a second thought.

"Meg, Meggy, Meg," Hades crooned at her. "Where have you been?"

Her hands scrambled to find purchase in the air. Hades' strength all but gagged her. He swung her forward, his terrible teeth set into a mocking smile of pleasure.

"Were you aware that we had company today?" Hades prodded further. He lifted her to the side of
his head. The blue flames licked at her cheek, posing Meg as if she was to whisper her answer into his ear…

Meg would do no such thing. She growled and hissed, frothing with rage, squirming inside of his grasp. Perhaps it was too late. Here she was, an inch from Death himself, crushed under his will, and Belle was nowhere to be found. She squeezed her eyes shut, pushing away the images of what was to come next—Belle. If he knew…

A low scoff interrupted the pair.

Persephone stood a hand at her own throat, rubbing the skin there sympathetically, as if she really felt pity for Megara.

"Hades," she pouted. "Must you play with each mortal like a kitten with string?"

Smoke blew in Meg's face from the force of Hades' exhale. She sputtered into his face and turned away, disgusted.

"Would it please my wife that I punish dear, sweet Nutmeg in particular?" Hades purposed. He moved to face his wife, a hand stilled over Megara's throat.

"It would please your wife if you did not take your anxiety out on helpful slaves."

His yellow eyes flickered to Meg, swayed, but careful. His smile tightened. "And here I thought she hated you." He murmured for only Meg to hear.

Gently, Meg felt Hades' grasp over her body fade. She was set over the rocky flooring near Hades' writhing, misty robes. Meg rubbed sorely at her throat, turning to gasp in the thin air swirling around her.

Again, Meg knew Persephone was staring at her. Fully at her. Not through her, as before. The goddess seemed in one of her more forgiving moods today. A rare, fighting form that made Meg wearier than usual.

For all her resentment, Persephone was a match made in hell; if she was willing to play nice, she was after something…

…But what? Hades thought. He swept his way to Persephone's side. Making no move to touch her.

"We have company?" Persephone asked. Her tone was light and brisk. She lifted a finger to run it along Hades' arm.

"Yes." Hades growled. "My brother."

From the floor, Meg faked passivity. Brother? Then, Hades did not mean Belle…

Persephone perked at the news. She shoulders her long hair, pursed her lips; the gloomy picture of disinterest once more. "Whatever for?"

"Nothing for you to be concerned over, my pomegranate."

His wife mused faintly. "Then why summon her?"

Hades was stolen by the restlessness held by her lips. Persephone had been scornfully distant this notable stay within his kingdom. Hades had waged to guess that of their 'together' time this year, Persephone had yet to touch him once. Until now. And she was still so close…
The Lord of the Dead snaked an arm around Persephone's shoulders. He waited for a mortal heartbeat, then relaxed. She did not flinch away.

"Persephone, my heart of darkness, no need to be so paranoid. I only have eyes for you…" He was leading her away from Megara. He rose a free hand to give a snap of thin fingers—

Megara rose. Megara slid her hands into her dress, checking every nook, every dip shamelessly. Her face flashed in hatred at her Master; none of this she performed willingly. When she finally tore her hands away from her own body, she found she had three gold coins slipping from her fists. They must have slipped into her dress while she sat. They clinked along the floor as they fell.

Persephone froze at the sound. She snapped her head upwards to give Hades a cold stare. "Really?"

"'Really', what?" Hades asked. His back was rod straight.

She shrugged out of her husband's grasp. She stormed towards Megara. "What were you doing in my cell?"

"Your bedroom," Hades deadpanned.

"My prison!" Persephone gritted out. She glowered at the coins, her fists two hard rocks at her side. "Can't you stay away from me for once, Megara?"

"Your bedroom." Hades insisted. He tried to wrap his arms around her again but Persephone rose up her arms to shove him back.

"I thought you didn't care about what was in there," Megara reminded her, her voice thick with contempt. 'You never go in there."

"You pretentious little—"

"Ladies!" Hades cut in. His yellow eyes wide. He collected Persephone's hand within his own. "Honey, Persey, where's the fire, babe? I asked Megara to check on some of those dusty old trinkets—I've decided to do some late spring cleaning and make use of them."

"And did you think to ask me first?"

His hands tightened slowly, digging into her wrists, but he remained controlled in his voice as he responded: "I tried. Once before. You spat in my face."

A dark look crossed the goddess's face. She looked at Meg and dropped her eyes to the floor. "You made those…for me."

Hades swallowed thinly, his eyes tight. "Yes. And now they are Poseidon's."

Megara looked to Hades as well. The coins were to be a part of one of Hades' deals? She moved one with a toe of her sandal. To what end?

And what consequence? A small, fearful voice flashed through Persephone's mind, but she willed her question to appear frivolous. "Oh, so that is what he is here for?"

"With some good luck." Hades continued. "But Poseidon can be the worst to bargain with of my siblings."

"And what will you get in return?"
Hades smiled coldly. "Nothing he won't miss."

"Hades!" Poseidon called, with his great voice echoing around the empty cavern. "I haven't seen you since the birth of—"

"Your fifth daughter," Hades finished for him. "I stopped coming after that." The Lord of the Dead folded his arms over one another. He gave a click of his teeth. "You do have so many."

"They are my pride and joy," Poseidon gave a hearty laugh.

Poseidon was a large man—rivaling Zeus in every absurdly masculine way. He had a smooth, flat plain of stomach muscle from guiding the ocean under hand and body. His eyes were wide set, lids heavy with every blink, as if he was used to spurring the sun. His smile, while open, was full of grit. His large face seemed more hair than skin. A thick, magnificent beard coiled down to his waist. Ever set to his person, Poseidon held his instrument of power. A long, golden trident, which pronged in three separate directions. His hair had grown more ginger than brown these days—the eons of baking in the golden glow of the sun, tanning his skin, crinkling the smile lines of his face, and waxing him closer to a human man's appearance than he ever had before.

...Not that Hades would dare to mention that these days...

"How is your lovely Athena holding up these days?" Hades asked briskly, his yellow eyes sizing up his brother.

"Oh, lovely. Just lovely. She says hello to you, Hades." At this, Poseidon gave another jolly laugh. "She said—get this—she said—'tell him to not feel so blue—because we've got seven oceans worth of that!'" Poseidon roared again in laughter, so powerful, Hades felt his own chest rattle from the force. "Do you get it? Because—you're so depressed—and the ocean is so blue!"

"...How charming." Hades allowed. His lips were so tightly pressed together they hardly stood out along his face at all. "I'm sure that one took her a good thousand years to think of."

Poseidon sucked in a great breath to respond in kind. "She is very funny." He then gleamed his eyes along the cavern, as if suddenly struck at its darkness, its tight narrow passages—and the lack of Hades' own wife. "Where is your wife, anyhow? Are you two still, uh...

"...We're just peachy." Hades concluded. Persephone had fled away not long after their prior conversation. "Tell me, is Athena usually so witty?"

"She's as witty as the rest of our girls. They each take after their mother—and." Another happy gleam entered his brother's eyes. "We're expecting another girl, just between you and me and the rest of the dead in here."

"Of course you are," Hades drawled dully. Then, he brightened. "I mean, congratulations! So, let's not waste time getting you back to them. Let's talk shop—and sea."

"Yes...I am curious about those coins you mentioned."

"Yes—yes," Hades crooned. He led Poseidon into the small treasure cove, lingering long skinny fingers over the cold metal of the gold. "Here is the gold. Eight hundred and eighty-two pieces to be precise."
Poseidon studied the gold from where he stood, refusing to touch. "Did you make these? How?"

"I have access to many fine minerals down here. And heat. It wasn't hard. A true labor of love. For
you. From my family—to yours."

The god of the Sea carefully moved a giant hand to push the gold out of the way—the way they
cluded and shivered in the cold light of the caves—their tiny skull-like faces, each with skinless,
minute smiles. "...Beautiful..." Poseidon murmured. He then curled his hand away. "—and cursed."

"Only to the mortals, Poseidon. Only to them. Really." Hades purred, turning around the tall pile of
gold, his smile bright and clean. "You have nothing to fear from me, brother."

Poseidon moved his eyes to Hades, his expression flat. "I see no need why I would use them."

"Oh," Hades puffed the word happily. "I do."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You—and the rest of the family—do not get to see the mortals as I do," Hades narrowed his eyes,
suddenly concerned. "You do not realize how much the humans are advancing in their ways...it is
no longer sticks and stones, brother—but they are building ships."

"Ships?" Poseidon intoned. "Hardly. They are merely canoes upon my waters. I can crush them
without ease. I have nothing to fear from mortals, Hades."

"Not now, perhaps," Hades agreed. "But soon. You blink and they'll be out, roaming the world—
filling in all that we already can see...they shall attempt to control you, those pesky mortals, no
longer chained to the land...their fleets and ships. They grow with every century. Pillaging your
seas."

"I care not to control the humans. Only that they leave me and my people be."

"Yes..." Hades' drawled once more. His eyes burned a hole into his brother. "...But they won't.
Even those that are living have found and entered into my domain, they will seek yours."

Poseidon drifted back, as if unnerved. "They will never find me. Nor my kingdom."

"Mortals are very resourceful, brother."

"You and your fear mongering," Poseidon urged. "I know of your strange fascinating with the
mortals. I ask that you leave me out of it."

"You can say no, of course, of course," Hades continued. "But what of your wife?"

Poseidon looked struck. "...Whatever do you mean?"

"Well, you just mention how friendly and happy she is...surely, she might disagree. What if she
wants to greet these mortals—when they come—what if she doesn't see an issue? After all...she is
not fully immortal. She, too, is only half, clinging to a humanity that you deny..."

Poseidon frowned heavily. "I will see to it that nothing of the sort enters into her mind."

"You cannot control your wife, Poseidon. Surely, I can teach you that much."

His brother swallowed with little relief. "...I do not need your help in my private affairs. I don't even
know what you could possibly want from me—"
"A single ocean." Hades proposed. He kept his eyes light over his brother. His hands coiled along the coins. "Nothing more. Nothing less. A single sea—for me alone." He looked about the cavern, guestering into dark and dim. "Traveling space is tight here. I'm thinking—"

"Never." Poseidon answered. He laid the word calmly between them.

Hades forced the smoke deep into his chest. His eyes gave a little spark of red at the pupil. "…Why?"

"Whatever would you need it for?"

Hades fixed his teeth into a thin row. The smoke eased out between the gaps, spoiling the room. Poseidon gave a deep cough to rid himself of the ruined air. "…Because I need it." Hades fumed again, tightening his grip over the coins. "I am planning something nice for my wife, and I need your help."

"The oceans are mine. Forever. That is agreed by all."

"Do you not trust me, brother?"

"I trust that you have grown mad down here, Hades." Was all the Poseidon said. "You and your conniving with the mortal-kind. We've all heard of your deals. Do not think us hypocrites; when we make deals, usually the morals know they are fated to lose. You tempt them with the unnerving possibility of greatness, of escaping death—the one thing that separates us from them—you are a betrayer just to make these coins—what might they do, Hades? Tell me true—what befouls these coins?"

"I never wish to cast anything ill between us, Poseidon." Hades hissed. "There is no war. You and you wife are so happy—why do you think I summon you and not anyone else?! Because I want what you have, brother. These coins, alike human currency, they can make sure you will maintain control over any who seek you! They are protection! All I simply ask is one, tiny sea!"

"Never!"

"There are seven seas! I'll take any of them! Give me any! The dead sea is fine!"

"Never, Hades. I should have known better than to think your methods noble." Poseidon gave a final look at the gold piled before him, as if he were to spit into it, before he turned his back. "I am leaving."

….The heat from Hades' hands had begun to melt the gold, smelting it down, dripping it, unfathomably hot, between fingers…

From the hall, Hades burning glare caught the curved outline of Persephone, held fast to the door, her eyes staring back at him…

"You know, immortality is a fragile thing in the children of the gods." Hades began. He walked alongside the retreating footsteps of his brother, merely a moment behind.

"Are you to threaten me while my back is turned, Hades?" Poseidon drew himself upwards, towering over his young brother, his great face as daunting as an unforgiving sea.

"I seek to reason with you. Of what my deal represents. Your daughters are only half of what you are—half of what your precious wife hopes they might be—make no mistake, Poseidon, you will watch your daughters die."
Poseidon riled at those words, twisting the trident in his fists as if he meant to snap it into two. "Stop your insolent—!"

"They may be safe now, under Daddy's powerful protection—" Hades eyes stared at the instrument of power in his brother's grasp, the golden trident—"but you cannot hold them back forever. You have the gall to come into my home, tell me about tampering with death—but it is you who is afraid of what will come to pass—once I am right—as I will be—I will find them. The mortals will find them for me, and once they strike—call it an 'accident' but you cannot mask them from me for all time. Unlike your loyal subjects, children are so tricky to control." At this, Hades turned to meet his wife's eyes.

"ENOUGH!" Poseidon thundered—and, with a clap of an impossible, ancient call, like that of a great sea creature, he was gone, effortlessly escaped from the Underworld with the will of his strength.

And, just like that, Hades and his wife were alone once more.

Persephone shook her head, her long hair lifeless at her back. "I overheard everything…"

Hades sneered away, the flames about his head writhing like coals. "Perfect. Then I need not explain what when wrong."

A short pause. One in which Persephone held her husband's brutal glare. "How dare you speak to him about his own children? How could you say that?"

"I only speak the truth that is denied by all." He moved to her, his hands reaching up to cup her chin, to bring her close to his lips. She recoiled away, offering him nothing more but cold outline of her face in the flickering, red light of his hair. "They will always want more than you can ever hope to give them."

AN: I am unsure if perhaps I am not a strong enough writer to convey this, but I'll list this here just in case so I can prevent confusion. I deeply apologise if I did not make this clear in prior chapters. That is very much a fault on my behalf.

Belle: Belle, as she is traveling in the Enchantress's book, is going into 'The Past'. Back into Greek history, where the Hercules Arc has yet to take place. Everything she sees, everything she touches, and everything she learns when she returns to the Present, has 'already happened' or is the start of what 'is going to happen'.

Adam/The Prince: Adam and his fever dreams and interactions with Hades are 'Present Day'. In where, the past in which Belle travels is very much behind Hades and the rest of the cast. I know this is tricky as, Greek gods, what do they need with any sense of 'aging'? I understand that most would argue that gods are 'constantly all seeing'. But not in my fanfiction. Not in this particular story. Hades has events that happened in his past. It is not as if he lives in omnipresent consciousness. He works as any character would – he has a past and he lives in the present.

I hope this makes sense.

Thank you all SO very much for enjoying! Considering this chapter more of a backstory, part …I
can't have all my villain(s) be totally one-dimensional, can? I'm doing my very best! Lots of fun hints were dropped in this chapter. And, all I can say is, if you're thinking one thing or another, you may just be right. Heh!

Back to Belle and Adam next chapter!
"His cruel father took that sweet, innocent lad and twisted him up to be just like him." – Mrs. Potts, "Beauty and The Beast (2017)"

"The secret to every great lie," Eugene said, his voice echoing in a modest reverberation and a good distance away. "Is that there is always an ounce of truth inside of it. The trick is: how much truth to tell?"

…He's talking to me? Adam lingered, touching the words that made that single thought, ever so gingerly.

It hurt to cling to consciousness when the veil of the world felt torn open. His entire skull ached with a fierce, relentless pounding of every tiny thing: each blink, the faint intake of air to fill his lungs, the way Eugene's voice kept ebbing and flowing, a tide of pain, a full conversation of questions and answers that Adam did not wish to engage in. He longed to be in the twilight of somewhere else, anywhere else, that forgotten period between dreaming and being awake. It wouldn't be long, now. It was getting harder to tell the difference anymore. Every second drifted a strange, unfamiliar scent into the air, dodging Adam's ability to use the weakest of his logic. He could hear the sharp, droning movement of running water—The taste of salt and powder, the bitter annoyance of soap scraped over his tongue, the uneasy feeling that the flooring beneath him was smooth, solid, absolutely unyielding under his palm. It was cold, too. He was so cold.

"Hey," Eugene's voice was close again. "So, figured out how to get the tub goin'. Eric might kill me for using most of the hot water, but, like, wounds require the water to be warm, right?" His voice dropped away. A heartbeat of a pause for a single moment, before it returned, a tad uneasy. "This is where you're supposed to reassure me."

Another pause, another quickening of Adam's heart. The pumping of blood trilled through his chest. It seemed to vibrate into ribs, spine, bone, spreading like the ringing of bells; short, measured beats that hummed into the shell of his ears. He swallowed thickly, his mouth filling with saliva that wouldn't stay down, no matter how often he swallowed. Something warm dripped onto his shoulder, then neck, and, without warning, touched at the side of Adam's head, striking the wound.

Adam flinched, his eyes wide, but unseeing. It was all he could do to not panic once more. He slid his hands backwards, jabbing fingers into a low-step, slamming shoulders tight against the stone. He tightened his vision, forcing shape and color to outline Eugene's image into focus. However, Eugene spilt before him as easily as a hand of playing cards, two, three, four likenesses of the thief's image, with his pale face, sallow and disturbed, staring right back at Adam.

"Shit—sorry. I—I'm tryin' to be gentle, okay? It's—Look, I've never cleaned a wound before —'specially not a head wound. And you won't stay still. You're making this harder than it has to be, Adam."

"...Eugene?" Adam asked. His voice shook, disconnected from his body, muffled to his own ears.

"Yup, that's my name. Don't forget me next time, okay?"

Adam gulped down another breath. Eugene had pushed harder to the side of his head and it felt like he was only digging the blades in deeper. "F-forget you?"
Eugene clucked his tongue. The sound echoed in Adam's ears. "...Yeah, uh, pretty sure that isn't your fault though. You've been fading in and out on me for near ten minutes now. Looks like this is one way of keeping you with me." Eugene pulled back, his fist wrapped tight over a fluffy, large cloth, clearly too big for the small, delicate task at hand. "Sorry. I don't want to hurt you, but, I gotta do this. There's—uh, a lotta blood, and it kinda won't stop, and okay, I confess, I'm being selfish, I guess." His dark eyes roamed around Adam's face. Eugene looked like a man that had mistaken dragging through blooded sweat for the pages of a book that offered no ending, searching for a sign that, clearly, Adam wasn't giving him. "And I don't wanna be alone in this." Eugene completed his latest ramble, one of many Adam was sure he had missed previously.

"Where...?" Adam turned slightly, ducking away from that pressure against his head. He could make out walls, a door, and large, rather grumpy looking fish head, staring at him, unmoving and stern. The low hiss of water, as well as the rising of puffy steam, swam from its fishy mouth. Adam opened his mouth slightly, drinking in the scent once more: salt, soap, steam, heat. He flared his nostrils in annoyance. "Don't like that, huh?" Eugene lips twitched in faint amusement. "Never was a fan of hot baths myself." His mouth opened into a halffhearted smile. Adam blinked slowly, pulling the image together. He had seen Eugene smile before. He smiled all the damn time. But something was wrong. This smile was practiced and hard. His eyes didn't move. "The quieter you get, the more freaked out I feel. So, so talk to me. I don't care what it is. I don't care what you say. Just stay awake."

"Quiet?" Adam rumbled, his own voice practically inaudible over the sound of the water. "Yeah. Yeah, you're super, super quiet. It's kind of obnoxious. Get this; When I was stabbed? I moaned and whimpered by bloody face off. But you're so quiet, it's like..." A sound of wetness, like a sharp exhale. The next handful of words came out tightly. "Just, don't act dead, okay?"

"S-stabbed?" Adam repeated. His throat felt tight again. So did his chest. I am dying? The pressure returned—this time to the other side of his skull. Eugene was adding more pressure, a strong movement that scrubbed at the raw, skinless burning deep inside of his head. Adam found the blood rushing from his face, twisting around his insides. He clamped his lips together, swallowing the rush of bile that clawed its way up his throat. He focused his eyes to the fish, freezing and aching, attempting not to squirm like a child.

Eugene matched his thoughts. He squinted one eye, pulled back his hand, and twisted the cloth over the basin of the tub. Red, dark and malicious, dripped into the bowl. "To answer you first question: bathhouse. Did you know Eric had one? It's a beautiful thing—you know, when I'm not filling it with blood."

...A bathhouse. It made sense. Furthermore, it made the fish head make sense. It was quiet, empty, and unmoving.

The world had moved before, sloshing like a ship over open water. Adam felt half-drown, half-hauled somewhere, practically dragged under the grip of someone that forced him forward. It had been dark. Very dark. But the air was fresh with the smell of cherries, spoiled earth, reds and purples, like the birds Adam could sense from the trees drooping above him, unfurling open their wings like a shiver down his spine, their heart beats rattled in surprise. All manner of animal watched the two figures through black, piercing eyes, as Eugene plotted their escape away from the heart of Eric's castle.
"Hold on. Just realized I didn't check somethin'."

Eugene stood, groaning to pull himself from knees to feet, as he paced to the other side of the room.

Adam allowed this moment to crack open his jaw further, to breathe as deeply as he could, but it wasn't enough.

It was unpredictable. The pain, coiled like a snake at the base of his neck, would lash out at him, dragging him into the venerable, open field of consciousness, where there was nowhere to hide, and his hands threatened to rip the hair from his skull if he could only get an ample enough hold.

How long had Eugene been gone now? Seconds? Minutes? Adam opened his eyes blearily. Every blinked felt dull, harder to manage, with a lingering pounding nestled in the back of his neck. The room was distinctly hotter, causing sweat to drip down his back. He squeezed his hands over his face briefly, clawing at thin skin, wiping away sand and salt, while the waft of air that squeezed by his ears to shot a gasp of pain straight into the sides of his head. It was all he could handle but to offer pain ten-fold himself, desperately grasping, with chipped nails and clenched fingers, to dig out the sharp blades that pierced through his skull. The feeling wasn't terribly unlike Gaston's blade, when it had bitten into the folds of his mane, or those gunshots, fitted to sear holes through the center of his back…

Suddenly, Eugene was by his side, having skidded onto his knees to rip Adam's hands away from his head, his face flushed and his voice fit to screaming, "Stop! God, stop! You can't rip them out, you idiot, you're gonna make it worse!"

The words were made of fear. Each and every one of them. Adam had lost the sense of his own heartbeat when, amazingly, he could hear Eugene's. The sputtering of blood that vented throughout his body, the tireless, breathless flash of adrenaline that spiked his heart rate. Adam fixed his eyes over the man before him, his face flushed in a potent fury, eyes wide and scathing, dark and large, much like some frightened, dark eyed doe. Adam felt his body tightened like a vice. His mouth filled again with saliva to hear a heartbeat so close…

Adam's nose twitched faintly, distracting him, and he startled at the swell of blood over his hands—it had covered his entire palms from where he had touched at this…

Horns. God, he had horns!

Another sharp, stab of pain echoed his realization. It shocked his system, quelling the urge to cry out. He let his arms go limp, locked in Eugene's tense grip.

"God," Eugene breathed, letting of his friend's arms. "I can't leave you alone for one second, can I? I mean, what the hell, man? Do you—do you have any idea why this is happening? Why only horns? Shouldn't there be—ya know, more?!"

Adam stared at his hands. They no longer shook. He curled fingers, the black edges of his palm, to cover the blinding brilliance of the red collected inside his hands. "…Yes…but I did not fully change."

Eugene slowly looked to Adam's face, his face ghostly white. "You're saying you…stopped it?"

"I—I cannot remember what caused the change…but I am not yet a Beast. Perhaps…I did?"

The word was more squeak than language from Eugene's mouth. "How?"

Adam felt his heart start to tremble at his omission. "…I don't know."
"Yeah. I got that part. You've...you've said that a lot tonight." Eugene continued to look at Adam in utter exasperation. He let out a slow string of air from between his lips, sucked it back in, and the exhaled once more. "...So, the curse, it's still happening."

Adam closed his eyes briefly. "Yes. And I still haven't the faintest idea why."

"None?" Eugene quipped. His voice felt strangely frantic. "None at all? Because, buddy, you're a bloody mess all over this room—and I'm desperate, desperate, to try and make this right. You have horns, Adam. Horns! And—and I can't keep us hidden here forever. It's a damn miracle I got us here to begin with. You're heavier than you look."

Adam cracked his eyes open again. He met Eugene's stare reluctantly. "I owe you a great deal, Eugene."

"You don't owe me shit." Eugene snapped. He coiled a hand over the bloodied cloth once more and offered it before them. "You know why? Because of this. This, right here? He gave the cloth a shake. "This is scary. Scary as all hell. Scarier than when you were a god damn monster, you got that?"

It was hard to think through the pain, but Adam fought to give Eugene whatever it was he was looking for. "...But it stopped, Eugene. Can you see that? I'm—I think I'm trying to control—"

"You're bleeding, Adam," Eugene interrupted, his voice terse. "This is different than before. You don't understand. You can't see yourself. It's not about the horns—it's about the fact that you're half-conscious, bleeding from your goddamn head. Like, two open wounds, straight through your skull."

Adam could only stare. His mouth felt absurdly dry. "I...I don't understand."

"Exactly. Exactly," Eugene held the word slowly between his teeth. "Neither do I. But you know what I do know? I do know that when you were that—whatever you were—you weren't bleeding! You looked in pain. You looked—scared—but you weren't wounded." At this, Eugene dipped the cloth back into the hot water, pulled it back up, and threatened to scrub once more at Adam's wounds. "Now? Now you're scaring me to death. You may be human and all, but you won't stop bleeding, and frankly, I dunno which is worse..."

Adam furrowed his brow, the muscles tightening, but he struggled to bring to mind the night of his very first change. The full form of The Beast. He remember...screaming. He remembered... pain... his hands...the world blurring into shadow... "That night. When I had fully changed. I can't...I can't recall..." Adam looked at his friend, the look of fear dripping off of Eugene's once-friendly face, and felt his stomach turn to stone.

"...I..." Adam began, but he could speak no further. He noticed his hands once more, red and black, and felt ashamed. "I cannot escape this."

"This is bad, Adam. Real bad. Like...the kind of bad that I don't know if I can hide on my own, kind of bad. I have an idea—I have this—this stupid idea—but none of it will work if you can't stop bleeding. Those horns. They're piercing out of you. You can't heal this way. We've—we've gotta make 'em go away somehow. And if not..."

Adam closed his eyes. "...They'll see me for what I really am." Adam continued what Eugene refused to say. "...The way Rapunzel sees me."

"No, don't say that!" Eugene barked. "Because you're not—this isn't—ARGH!" His eyes shot through Adam with a look of dark, aimless fury, before he smacked the cloth down into the tub.
Eugene pulled himself to his feet, hands clasped over his knees, before he straightened himself to pace the tile of the room. Adam watched him through a pain filled wince. Just Eugene's boots along the flooring rattled his mind.

"This isn't your responsibility, Eugene." Adam edged out. He kept his voice steady, but he only wanted to sink further onto the floor. Beyond the walls of this room, it was over.

"Shut up, Adam. Seriously. I don't wanna hear it."

Adam had so little to offer the man in return. He had little to offer Quasimodo nor Ariel, not even the slightest of comfort for Eric, if just a lie to, a daring chance to say that, he understood. That they truly could be…equals. Pride, stubbornness, judgment. All the occurrences against struggle to become anything other than all he felt: inadequate. His whole life. Never enough. Never good enough. Just like his father had told him…

And, here they were, a singular handful of people that cared…perhaps friends…and all he could do was sit on his knees and hope for the pain to be over, and over soon?

Pathetic.

"I'm sorry. If I put my burden on your shoulders, then I trust you to do what is right, if you hurry to leave me, if you pretend that when you see me, that you don't understand, I won't reveal you…and I don't wish to bring anyone else into this further."

Eugene swung around to face him in bitter indignation. "When are you gonna get it? My God, Adam, if you weren't already bleeding, holy shit, I'd just about clock you! Y'think I'd do this for just anyone? Break into a private bathing room, scramble around for absolutely anything useful to help you, hide you from my own wife? So you just sit there, shut the hell up and let me think, dammit!"

Eugene's scream of anguish caused Adam to flinch away but the man did not seem to care. Eugene pulled in another breath. He sighed through his nose. His lips twitched again. Adam watched him soundlessly, his breathing shallow and labored through his mouth. Eugene paced the entire room. It was a wide, circular chamber connected in the northern courtyard, none too far off from Ariel's beach. Wide set windows made up the center of every wall as they showed off the gardens and walkway. The walkway itself was rather lovely this time of year—cherry trees littered the pathway, dropping handfuls of ripe, red fruit into the awaiting palms of staff and royal alike that meander its direction.

Adam carefully shifted a little closer to the water. He dipped his hands into the tub, wearily scrubbing at his hands, mindfully aware of just how hard it seemed to get the stain of blood from his hands…

"…Hey, is it hot in here or is it just me?" A cool voice purred, close to his ear.

Alarmed, Adam jerked away, his eyes wide and frozen in acute fear.

_Hades. Hades. Hades._ The word thumped against his chest, into his brain, and, like a whisper of some unspoken curse, The God of the Dead was before Adam. His stoic face unveiled his sharp, shark-like smile over Adam gleefully. Hades was submerged in the bathtub up to his waist, treating the thing like a sauna, his grey-tone skinned made rosier by the bloodied water. His blue hair flickered in the dark shadows of the night. The wide windows that cradled the room seemed to blot out their view of each white star, one by one.

Adam caught himself from yet another yelp of fear. He swallowed the sound, buried it deep in his
chest and focused his eyes to Eugene. The man seemed unremoved from his pacing. His back was to Adam. Eugene only briefly glanced behind him to check on Adam, and, if seeing Adam staring, if a bit dazed, into the water, seemed normal enough to the thief, he made no motion to suggest otherwise.

Adam had somehow managed it. He slowly released a hot snarl of air from his nose.

Things would not turn out as they had before in his castle. Not here. Not now, of all miserable times.

"...Aren't you going to say hello?" Hades asked him, yellow eyes peering around the room curiously. "Love what you've done with the place—and the horns? Take it from me...ladies love a good scare." He fixed his teeth into a thin, razor line. "Hmmm?"

Adam blinked, making the motion quickly, but he made no other sound. Hades...whatever this demon may be...real...dreamt...hallucination. He would not be brought into another game.

"Oh..." Hades was quick to catch on. He folded his arms casually over the edge of the tub, inching closer to Adam, attempting get a rise out of the mortal, which didn't come. Yet. "What's the matter? Beast got your tongue, kid?"

"Adam," Eugene called.

Instantly, Adam fought to respond normally. He turned to catch his friend's eye, his expression tight, and, he prayed, he looked about as earnest as he could get—with the Lord of the Dead drilling a hole with his burning yellow eyes into the side of his face. "Yes?"

"You hanging in there? I noticed you, uh, had gone quiet again."

Quickly, Adam grasped for a hint of life to offer to his friend's concern. "...You told me to shut up."

A brief crackle of a laugh escaped Eugene's thin scowl. "And it worked?"

"It worked."

"Jeez. Didn't think it'd be so easy. I know how much you just love talkin' peoples' ears off."

"What a fortunate time for you, Eugene."

"Hey. Hey. Jerk with the horns? Shut up. I'm still thinking."

Adam slowly locked his eyes back to Hades, his voice curt. "...As you wish."

Hades seemed intrigued. He met Adam's gaze in clear, unbridled sarcasm.

"Oh. You've wised up, little king. You're going to ignore me, then? Pretend I'm not here?" Hades eased closer, edging so close to Adam's face that those sharp teeth nearly scraped skin. "Why? So that kid over there won't think you more damned than you already are? How you so weakly cling to your precious dignity." As if tantalized, Hades rolled his eyes across Adam's body, lingering over his horns. "My my, those look painful, and—"

Eugene asked suddenly: "Adam—quick question; Belle's coming here anytime soon, right? Travel time wise?"

Hades blistered. The water seemed to boil from around him and he turned to stare daggers at the man across the room. "I'm TRYING to have a CONVERSATION here! Mortals, oy vey, absolutely no respect for—"
"No, she's not, not until her next letters arrive," Adam cut Hades' off.

"Okay. Okay. Just a second more." Eugene returned.

"You are just asking for it, aren't you, little king?" Hades murmured darkly. He twisted his boney hands through the air, crafting the fumes of the hot water into tiny skulls, and flicked them in Eugene's direction, his eyes trained over the back of the thief's head...before the yellow in them slowly widened. "Hold the phone—I'm sorry, have you died before?" He narrowed his eyes over Eugene. He looked to Adam, a look of surprised brought to light over his ghastly features. "Is this...a friend of yours?"

Adam bared his teeth. He kept his face pointedly downwards, a failing attempt to not look insane to Eugene, but it was all he had to offer Hades in retaliation.

"Friends," Hades gave a mocking laugh. "As if. I heard what you thought, when your 'friend's exposed heart was so close to your mouth, you could taste his blood. Hah...please. Don't fool yourself. Last time we chatted, you were locked in a castle of ice." Hades hissed, baring the word 'ice' with a hot, slithery 'ssss' sound between his teeth. "Since when do you have friends?" He leaned forward, hands unable to touch Adam, but oh, how they curled with the intention to crush Adam's jaw. "I've seen all your precious little memories and now you're attempting to change them?" He dashed a hand back to his own chest, feinting to be hurt. "How could you do this to me? You know, time is running out, little king..."

Adam gave a slight shake of his head.

Hades' eyes went wide. "I'm not someone you can refuse. Remember what I told you? Even if I can't physically touch you here, in your petty little reality, it's only a matter of time before someone else..." Hades rolled his eyes back over to Eugene. "What is that fool doing? He's certainly upset, isn't he?" Hades slowly turned back to Adam, his eyes narrowed. "So, you have a theory, do you? You think you can stop what's happening to you?"

Hades sharp teeth slid into perfect place upon his face. A smile fit for Death. "You're killing yourself."

Adam's eyes went wide. He snapped his head to stare at the demon. His face bloodless and pale as the moon over the sea.

"What?" Hades' continued. "Don't believe me? Well, I may be Death, but I can be merciful. I might as well tell you that. Not like She will. What does it matter to me?" The God of Death snorted, a small puff of smoke, before he swirled the boiling water once more with a hand. "Die by your own hand or die by someone else's..."

Adam felt his heart slow to watch Hades study Eugene so thoroughly. "...Yes, you did die before, didn't you..."

"Leave him out of it," Adam hissed under his breath. Those five little words, a mere whisper, but Hades found them quite enthralling.

"Now you've got something to say to me, huh, you little brat." Hades' returned, his voice thick with loathing. "I don't take kindly to being ignored but, what can I say, I'm a glutton for punishment. I'm not here for anyone but you, babe." Hades' smiled again, teeth jagged and pointed as the stars above. "See, I'm not interested in the living. I could hardly care what you do with your boring lives. But, those that have died and come back, I can always hear them...Call it a...intimate connection. I just chose to ignore them. But, ugh, he's practically screaming inside of his head right now. And no, don't
get your terrible little horns all in a twist—I don't care that your friend was dead once and has been brought back. You see, I don't care because it wasn't personal. No...you're mine, and mine alone, because you were always meant to be...

Adam swallowed without relief. The heat from the bath, real, imagined, he couldn't tell, between the pounding inside of his head and the slow, sudden spinning of the room...

"You know, I have a theory of my own." Hades continued gleefully. "I may not be able to touch you physically, but I can manipulate your mind. Just like your fun little blow-out in your castle. How about we play a game?" Hades' yellow eyes zeroed in on Eugene. "Your buddy can join, too."

Adam sucked in a sharp breath, the only sound he could manage to hold back the real roar, building inside of his chest.

"Don't be like that, little king. It's a fun game! It's a memory game. Since you want to go about changing your fate, I'm thinking, why not take a walk through your worst memories? Just a peek, a simple reminder. Nothing can be changed inside your past. Only illuminated. Because, you know, I think I'm gonna have a small surprise for you when you finally join me here...and I want my priceless reaction...guaranteed."

Slowly, with a languid, practiced motion, Hades raised a single hand from the bath. He gave Adam one final smirk. His mouth did not move, but his voice still whispered...I can see it still, the spinning, endless woe of your worst fears...but it's not blood I'm after...not your precious love, or your family, or your future...just this moment...the tiny, fragile shattering of your heart...I can see it. The memory that started it all: the moment you realized that your father didn't love you. And, if your own flesh and blood couldn't love you...how could you love yourself?

Adam's hands grasped at his face, digging nails into flesh, and he could no longer resist the raging anger inside of him.

"No! NO!" He screamed. "Get out of my head!"

But it was too late. Hades gave a snap of his fingers. And was gone.

And, as if swallowed by the world, Adam was, too.

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"Alright, Adam, I think I have an—" Eugene turned from his place along the edge of the smooth walls, having piled on a pile of dishrags left to dry, before he turned back to face Adam.

Instantly, the stack of smaller cloths fell from his hands.

For he was no longer in the bathhouse.

And he was no longer in Denmark.

He knew this rather instantly, because, in a single push, a shock like a blow to small of his back, he staggered forward, and found himself standing inside of a huge, long hallway, where the rush of a myriad of bustling staff scrambled past Eugene, speaking very quickly, and very loudly, in French.

The sudden eclipse of not being where the hell he was within the last instant he had blinked caused Eugene's brain to tinge his vision to blacken at the edges. He pulled in a breath, grasped a hand to his chest, and forced his heart back inside of his ribcage. He frantically looked all around him—first the ground—plush rugs, definitely not bath tiles, no cloths he had picked up before—and then down the hall.
Light, sunlight, was falling through the windows, clear and as bright as the morning sun.

...It wasn't night anymore.

"What," Eugene said out loud.

"What?" Someone answered back quite readily. "What', what, sir?"

Alarmed, Eugene jumped and found himself standing, er, rather, staring down at a ruddy-looking older gentleman, fixed in polished vest and holding a gleaming pocket watch. He was a rather plump man with a curious twitch to his nose. He was staring at Eugene strictly through one end of a monocle glass.

"He…hello." Eugene stammered. He looked behind himself. He closed his eyes again. He peeked open one of them.

This gentleman looked ever more distressed. "Sir, are you lost?"

"Uh. Yes. I. Think?"

The gentleman scowled at him. "Well. From the looks of you, I would say you're due somewhere in the kitchen galley. I suppose Lumière, that fool, ordered one too many cooks for His Grace's gathering today, hm?"

"…Um. I'm looking for someone."

This man gave a rise of an eyebrow. "Excusez-moi?"

"…Adam. I'm…looking for Adam. Uh, he's, um, a king here? Right?"

A look of utter astonishment cascaded over the older man's face. "Sir, you are very confused. I don't know what, exactly, you are meant to do here, but you shall see no such person. First of all: His Grace is perfectly healthy and fit to rule for many years to come. His son, however, is dutifully late, per usual, to his father's customs. And you shan't see him, either."

"Adam?" Eugene felt his head spinning.

"His Grace's son." The man clarified slowly, as if taking to one rather daft. "The Prince, I presume you mean. And I highly suggest you do not use his Christian name. He doesn't take kindly to strangers presuming his company. Now, wherever did you say you were meant to be today, lad?"

Whatwhatwhatwhat, Eugene's thoughts began, a prompted loop that found no ending. Where the hell am I? What is happening?

"…Uh, just as you said…the, uh, cook's galley."

"Right," The man gave a doubtful look and quickly ushered Eugene along the halls. "Well, hurry—hurry, off with you, then. You clearly aren't from around here but I'm sure we are much in need of your help. Today is very important to his Grace, after all, and I can't have you dilly-dallying. Go on, find Lumière, he shall guide you the rest of the way."

Right, Eugene added. Find Adam, you mean, and get the hell out of here.

Eugene found himself in a senseless mess.
The castle was impossibly large and only seemed to stretch on further with every hall, every confused parlor, as he was chided from someplace called the 'East' Wing to the 'West' Wing. To the castle servants all around, he must have looked an utter idiot, but he ran, no, full on sprinted, uncaring of who saw him fleeing. He narrowly avoiding head on collisions with large pieces of lavish furniture being moved, the skirts of young servant gals bending over to clean the floorings, over the carpets, around yet more staff, hurtling straight down the cramped, dim corridors, until, at last, he could hear the unmistakable yelling of his friend, echoing down the halls.

Tripping over his ankles, Eugene tailed it, throwing open door and after door, the name already on his tongue to yell—but he smashed himself, hard, into a locked door, the final one between himself and Adam.

Eugene banged on the door, breathless, his heart hurting with each pant. "Adam?! Adam, seriously, I think the curse just gotten-times worse—because everyone here seems think you're not you, and we are so not where we once were, and that you're still—"

Eugene stopped. Two voices were arguing very loudly in the next room, deeply engaged and unhearing of Eugene's own gasping along the other side of the door. Eugene thought to give a rattle to the door but thought better of it, dragging in three long, loud breaths, before he slid a little ways down, pressing an ear to the wood of the doorframe…

"Young Master, please. Please, just stay here. Don't leave. I—I'm quite worried about the court, their —gossiping. You know your father cannot stand for scandal." A voice began. It sounded breathless with worry.

"Why?" Another voice demanded, bristling and large, and, absolutely Adam's. "Why ever not?"
Adam slowed his tone, the passion inside of his voice akin to coals over a fire, seething with anger. "So that my dear father might titillate his court with more ludicrous refinery, that every ring on his fingers be polished by noble tongue? Lumière, I cannot take this for much longer; He has done this all deliberately to punish me."

Adam...Adam believed this? Eugene could not shake the lapse in logic from his head. Adam—being talked down to like he wasn't already a king?

"Try to understand, sir," This voice, this Lumière gentleman returned, his own pitch rising. "His Grace is only seeking political establishment from the other provinces for the benefit of the castle's keeping; Your father's most recent upheaval of taxing the towns has created quite an start in the mutual relations between—"

"He won't stop, Lumière. This is all for false niceties and shallow apologies. Just like him." Another pause, a short, bitter laugh. "He thinks he is untouchable."

"And what will stop him, then?" Lumière affronted. Eugene swore he could hear the heavy sound of something moving moved inside the room. Perhaps a table, or chair. "You? You and sudden courage to brace His Grace's royal court for nothing but your stupid sense of pride? Courage, which I might add, that you have so recently found at the bottom end of a bottle? If you think your father is fit to punish you here, you might reflect on the reasoning why he won't allow you a seat at this table."

"Everything he has ever done, Lumière, is because he wishes I were gone."

Silence. Eugene found his hands pressed tightly over the door, as if the force of his hands might better allow him more access to the voices inside. The quiet continued, punctuated only by the sound of what Eugene might have guessed would be a cork from a bottle, cracking open.
"Stop this, Adam." The voice of Lumière urged. "I won't let you leave as you are. Sober up."

"Who are you to demand an order of me?" Adam gritted out. From inside the room, another loud noise clattered. Wood on glass, maybe, or something falling from medium height to the floor. "I—I will show my father for everything he truly is. No one will stop me."

A rattling of the door forced Eugene to back away, ever so slightly. "Not while I'm here, between you and him."

"Get out of my way, Lumière!"

"No."

"Will you remove yourself from this door, Lumière, or will I be forced to do so myself? What will my father think when he finds insubordination within his ranks? Is this what I am to expect, if I am ever given my birthright as king? A simple maître'd that pretends to know better than a prince?"

Another heartbeat of silence. "Please." Was all the voice said, this time far weaker. "I'm begging you, monsieur."

"Move."

Another clamoring of the door. Eugene moved away, tossing himself backwards, backing up just so until his back touched the hallway wall. The door opened with a jolt, wilting from hinges, as Adam stormed from the entry way. From Eugene's side-glance, everything in the room looked normal enough. If one presumed to ignore the two bottles of empty wine, dripping across the table inside. Eugene caught another glimpse, too, the absent stare of another man, Lumière. He was a young man himself, none too much older than Eugene. His face was cast down, hands tight to his sides. He seemed to look straight through Eugene, further still, through the walls of the castle, as if he could sense some dark, sinister presence lurking far below.

He could not help but give a slight shiver, caught between those eyes and the wall.

Adam shouldered by him without a second glance and Eugene blinked, stunned. No horns. He didn't have horns?!

"Adam?" He called instantly. "Adam, wait—" He reached out to grasp his friend's arm. "Your horns are gone?—What the hell is—"

Adam ripped his arm away with a heavy motion, his face flushed, as he stared at Eugene's face in spite.

"Who are you? How dare you speak to me using my name?" Adam snapped.

Eugene felt himself taking a single step backwards—the way Adam was so ready to yell into his face, disorienting, and reeled Eugene's authority away. It was impossible. This was Adam—no horns, major improvement—but—but yet. "Wha…"

Here Adam was, but yet, he seemed so completely different. Gone was that look of contemplation, a skittish, haunting reprieve over his features, nor the unintentional, rather commoner-look of the reddish stubble that had littered his face when Eugene had found him along the beach—but younger. His hair was short as well, more chin length than to his shoulders.

"…Adam?" Eugene asked in wonder.
"Are you deaf? Stupid, too?" He sneered. "Don't use my name again. What are you? Some petty local hire? Lost, little duckling?"

"What?" Eugene returned, his dark eyes huge. He stepped back again. "Are you kidding me right now? What the hell is going on?!"

Adam and his servant exchanged a dubious look. "Throw him out. If I hear his annoying voice again, I'll want his tongue cut out."

"Wait—what?"

Lumière said nothing. He rolled his eyes to Eugene's, tightened his glare, and jerked his line of sight to the door. An obvious cue to leave at once. "Right away, young Master."

"Wait, wait, wait—Adam?" Eugene called again. He steeled himself and forced his way right into Adam's face. "Seriously?" Eugene suddenly stop. He studied Adam's face. The flush over his cheeks. The matted tangles of his hair from having raked his own fingers through his locks one-too-many times. The unsteady way at which he leaned, drifting ever so slightly, unable to entirely be still. "Are you drunk?"

Without warning, Eugene found his vest curled between two fists—far smaller fists than his own—as he was pulled straight up to Adam's dark, angry growl: "Say my name in your wretched mouth, one more time. I dare you."

"Ho-okay, Eugene lifted his hands, unarmed and shaken by the look in his friend's face before him. This certainly was Adam. The hair, the opaque blue in his eyes, the slight rough youth in his voice—this was Adam. This person just wasn't his Adam.

Even without his Beast's form, even without saying so, Adam was certainly an older man than he seemed. Possibly beyond Eugene's own pride at raining over the other young princes that bickered and squawked by him. If anything Adam acted older than anyone Eugene could recall: he was thirty-four, thirty-five, at the very least. Eugene wasn't sure. But, what he was sure of, was that this—whatever had happened, whatever the curse had done—it had dragged Eugene straight backwards by the scruff of his neck for, oh, fifteen years or so and dumped him, crazed and confused, at the edge of Adam's adolescent years.

This was Adam as some jerkish, stubborn, little punk. Definitely a kid to Eugene's height and build; To the thief's nearly thirty years, Adam looked skinny and stupidly arrogant—all of fifteen, at the most. It was all Eugene could do to not give a sharp, half-hysterical laugh into the boy's face, standing before him, all swagger and piss and teeth to his face—but he was just an angry, crooked-kid.

So…it's not a 'where' I am…it's a 'when'?

"I….I'm sorry, Your Grace." Eugene managed to keep his tone, and face, deadly serious. He took to his 'Princely' voice—the sort of contrite tone he had to use when speaking to Rapunzel's father, or the guard-staff, or anyone that Eugene felt would happily look down on him, and his 'title' otherwise. "I have mistaken my place for, uh, someone of, um, a higher—um—standard."

Adam snorted at this. He dropped his fists, gave a surprisingly strong shove against Eugene's chest, and pushed the thief aside. "Lumière. See that I never see this man again in my life."

"Yes, young Master." Lumière agreed, his voice tone-less.

Eugene clasped a hand over his mouth to hide his uncontrollable grin. Holy shit. Adam is going to
kill me if he ever learns that truth of this crap.

And with that, Adam was gone, vanished from the room with all the poise and refinement of a wild, attention-starved little pup that thought breaking vases and pulling chairs around added up to something in the long run.

"…I do not recall hiring you, monsieur." Lumière broke the tension between them, eyeing Eugene with a keen, anxious eye. "Tell me—what possessed you to feel you could speak so frankly to him?"

Eugene darted his eyes. Sweat collected at the back of his neck. "I'm…not sure. I, um, overheard your concern for him and—and I wanted to try and help you." That was basically the truth, more or less.

"The young Master does not take well to strangers, monsieur. And that discussion was private."

"Right." Eugene cringed at his honesty. This, this is why lying made the damn world spin 'round without a hitch. "Did I mention I'm the village idiot where I'm from?"

"Hmm," Lumière recalled dismissively, unconvinced, but he moved on with his duties. "Follow me, monsieur, for that busybody Cogsworth will be spitting fire and beguile over a moment more of my being gone. You shall accompany me today for serving the opening appetizers. That way I can mind your 'idiocy'."

"Uh, of course. Right. Absolutely. That's me." Eugene agreed. He felt he had little choice to chase after Adam now, for all the good it would do for him. He could only hope that he'd find his way back to—the present, reality, whatever, soon. He pushed by the high, pleading voice that threatened to enter into his tone whenever he dared to speak: Help me. What is going on? This is so messed up. I want to go back.

Can I go back?

…How far did this curse really go?

Red. His least favourite color.

The stripped him of his usual, casual clothes and suited Eugene up in some garish, velvety, frou-frou get-up that made the man feel more out of place than usual within Adam, or should he say, Adam's father's palace. 'His Grace', apparently, didn't have a name nor would anyone dare to speak it. 'His Grace' was iron fisted and tight lipped. 'His Grace', this— 'His Grace' that. It was certainly not Corona. No smiles lit up the faces of even the common folk while speaking about him. Many seemed almost frightened. The man was like an ominous shadow that covered the place. Even the hired staff seemed to drop their pleasant conversations to simmer their voices, soft and low, their hushed bantered turned to rumor and uncertainty over the man in question.

Even Eugene, once he had escaped fully away from Adam and many of the gossip servants, could ascertain nothing of value from Lumière.

In fact, Lumière would see to none of his complaining. Apparently, whatever he had fallen into was some seriously, serious royal stuff. A kind of champion gathering of the French court were to be gathered at the castle's main ballroom today and it seemed that that every major village sought to have a hand in it somewhere. A minor stage-hand, which was Eugene's major alibi. It was fine by him. He didn't care if people looked down on him or if they even bothered to look at all. He never wanted to be praised or given respect by some flock of conquesters. His dreams, even by Rapunzel's side, stayed fairly resigned and simple: happy, relaxed, no longer worrying about starving to death.
Maybe add some beer in there, a couple of picked pockets when a guest wasn't looking—really, it wasn't too that far off from his life before finding a certain lost princess.

Lumière gave Eugene a measured look. The pair were standing, finishing the final touches to their dress, in one of the servant's quarters. Lumière stood lost in thought, humming loudly to himself, grooming before a mirror. His was mustache finely waxed and perfectly straight. His yellow button up suit and jacket gave him an almost uncanny glow if he stood beneath a lantern, striking his grey eyes with a more playful exposure as he occasionally glanced over Eugene's face.

"…What?" Eugene asked slowly, careful to keep his face aloof, a typically normal day for any servant at the best of it.

"Your, erm, facial hair." Lumière commented drily, "Is that a new sort of fashion?"

Eugene moved a few fingers to trace over his goatee, noting it was not nearly as sharply shaven as it had been the night before. "…Uh, yeah. It's super popular with the ladies." Eugene gave a smirk, a single raise of an eyebrow, and this seemed to please Lumière. Lumière's rather distant demeanor from before seemed usually hard for him to keep up.

"I will have to take your word for it. From one gentleman, monsieur," Lumière returned back to the mirror, a faint sparkle in his eye. "I have been so long from Paris, it makes my heart ache to know I am steadily going out of style."

Well, the whole 'wearing powdered wigs' things was super out of style, too, but Eugene made no move to upset his one guiding light in the entire kingdom.

"Well, then." Lumière stood back from the mirror, picked up a tray, and motioned for Eugene to do the same. "Do you have any further questions before we begin? I…ask you to not treat anyone here with the familiarly to attempted with His Grace's liege." Like a curtain falling over a dark stage, all playfulness fled from Lumière's face. He, all at once, seemed to transform into someone else entirely. The grey of his eyes turned to stone. His face stayed perfectly still. "Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal." Eugene agreed. He swallowed thinly and clutched his tray a little tighter between pinched fingers. He was moments away from entering into the court. If this was really a court. And not a dream. Or a split reality. Or some kind of other disastrous magical trick.

His heart picked up ever so quickly. Once this was over, he would do everything, anything in his power to find a way back out of this strange, posh, hell-hole.

He skirted his way through the serpentine crowd. Dukes and their knights, heralds and their men, a handful of saintly looking-chaps, and several dozen more, had packed the ballroom to its very limits. Eugene's job was simple. He was to keep still, quiet, and not talk to anyone. All things Eugene was perfectly good at.

Save me, Eugene thought.

It wasn't a hard job by any means. The royals snapped and motioned for him to be handled along like some ragged child, fit to hold a tray, hold his tongue, and do not much else. He could not help but glide his eyes over the tops of the crowd, searching for Adam. That fight had had overheard earlier… what was that all about, anyway? Bad blood between Adam and his father? Since when? And why?

Eugene struggled to wrap his head around the idea of fighting with such a figure. Rapunzel's father, and mother as well, were rather amiable to him. It seemed easy, almost too easy, how he slipped into the life of someone else, someone that could easily turn to shake hands with the King of Corona,
share a beer, get a hug from the Queen, and call it a day. Living in a dirty, rapscallion orphanage with other dirty, rapscallion little boys just him made Eugene understand a sense of brotherhood. But father-hood? The idea made him queasy. Not just at the idea of watching a little hell spawn of his own pitter-patter around, one day. But to bare the weight of some blood right, some older, wiser man that wanted something impossible from you? No thanks.

*Everything my father has done, everything he wishes, is to see me gone.* Eugene recalled Adam's words, battered and flippant—but heavy in their weight. What was truly going on inside this castle?

…And what did Lumière fail to stop Adam from doing?

Eugene turned, lost in his thoughts, before he caught the flickering eyes of Lumière, standing off the side of the ballroom, his lip stiff and his head held high. With a remote glance, Eugene slid into place, matching the man's stance, his tray empty.

"What is it?" Eugene whispered coarsely.

"His Grace is arriving. I suggest to stay by my side. And do not look him in the eye."

*Seriously?* Eugene thought—but no words were to follow, for he could not think at all.

For when Adam's father entered into the ballroom, the entire crowd parted, much like the barren sea.

Many bowed, and a few others offered up their hands, a simple sign of submission. Eugene found himself a mere foot away, staring at the profile of the older man, who slowly moved his head about the room as if searching deliberately for a single ruinous detail to be out of place. A sharp inhale sounded from Eugene's left. Lumière stood up straighter, his eyes pointed away, towards the ceiling, his face pale in distress.

However, Eugene could not bring himself to follow Lumière's advice. He stared at this "King" of France, the long, black tendrils of sewn hair that flowed down from the top of his head to the tips of his shoulders, like a dark cape, offering a flourish of darkness that moved with every turn of his mighty head. He was a tall man, with broad shoulders and a powerful, determined walk. He was dressed the most extravagantly of all. His suit was tailored with the intricacies of yellow-gold, the embroidery of small rubies scattered across the vest, the tapered pants, equally over-stated and matching of his wealth.

He stood for a moment at the edge of the dance floor, large fingers rubbing together tensely, and Eugene could not help but gawk at the absurd amount of rings that seemed pressed into the man's flesh. They each glittered in the dim candle light, a collection of dancing light: green, blue, purple, and black; an onyx ring on his left pinky that matched his dark hair.

Carefully, the King studied his staff. His face was tight and pale, and the words, *if a look could kill*, flashed through Eugene's mind. It was unnatural how much power this one man held within his stare, but Eugene felt frozen from the sheer shock of how much of Adam was alive inside of that deadly face. Adam shared many features with his father—his jaw, the bridge of his nose, the narrow, sharpness of temples and the shape of his eyes—but there was one key difference between the two.

Eugene found himself staring back into eyes as dark as his own.

There was not a trace of blue within His Grace's eyes. They seemed as flat and as dark as an empty night, as the smooth, mirror-like trace of the ocean after a storm. Eugene knew he was staring, matched by the look of awareness that etched itself, like a keen predator, over a weakling that dared to meet his gaze, but he could not look away.
Those eyes were not, could never be, Adam's.

So...he has his mother's eyes, Eugene reasoned softly. He leapt his eyes away from His Grace to trace the ballroom once more but he could find no such woman that could possibly be a match for such a person. Where was Adam's mother?

His Grace shook hands, made small conversation, and strode, casually, to his throne, where he sat with a look of intense scrutiny, distant, and removed from all the hard work that had gone in to create such a gathering. If the other servants thought themselves lesser, beheld in such a perilous look, Eugene could not blame them.

And, then, without warning, a large, devastating boom echoed through the grand ballroom. The two large doors swung open without restraint, crashing into the inner walls, and Adam entered, his own shoulders squared, his head ducked low.

From his throne, the King merely lifted his head half an inch. "...Adam." He greeted smoothly. He looked around the ballroom, the shocked and concerned looks of the people below, and gave a small sigh. "What are you doing here?"

Among a crowd of patrons, so finely dressed, with tall hats and taller hair, Adam looked, for all the world, a complete mess. If he seemed in disarray when Eugene had last saw him, nothing prepared the thief for see the boy now. His long hair fell into his face, sharpening his thin features, and his blue eyes hungered around the room, as if he wasn't entirely sure where it was he should be looking, if indeed, he could see anything clearly, the way the ballroom and its colors spun around him sickeningly, unbalanced by the hammering of his own heart.

"Merde," Eugene snapped his head to hear the whispered curse of another staff member, this time a familiar face, the older gentlemen that had dismissed Eugene before. He looked almost...in pain.

"Why shouldn't I be here?" Adam lashed out. He projected his voice around the ballroom assertively, but his legs seemed to disobey him, staggering him into a bourgeoisie that gave a little gasp to be so suddenly touched. He struggled to straighten himself, more bones and grit than a young man, as he unevenly made way to his father's throne. "I decided to invite myself, considering I wasn't allowed here."

His Grace tightened his lips into a thin line. "I politely asked you to stay in your quarters and—and this," The king slid the word over his tongue, as if they sickened him, bitter inside of his mouth, "This is how a son of mine enters into a matter of repose?"

"R-repose," Adam echoed, snickering the word. "Repose?!" The young man pushed back the hair from his face, his eyes red and wild. "As if anything you've ever done has mattered."

Those ringed hands settled like claws over the arms of the throne. "...Have you been drinking?"

"What else am I supposed to do, Father? Wait, smuggled away and forgotten, while you pretend to host your little gathering—as if you aren't robbing these people blind." Adam stared down his father. His blue eyes glistened like ice inside of his skull. "...As if these roughish nobles have any conscience left to steal."

A small gasp shuddered through the crowd—but the King settled it with a rise of his hand.

Adam turned unsteady—this way, that, and grinned, his teeth bared tightly, satisfied with what he has caused, and so quickly, too. It was easier than he had imagined.

"Oh, yes, what a terrible assertion, no? The Prince of Villeneuve, deranged, and soon to be sent away
by his father—Do not pretend to be so concerned. Our kingdoms could care less for one another. My father only seeks to quell a war that he started by his own hand. And he means none of what he offers. I can hear your pathetic rumors now." Adam turned, offering his arms wide to the crowd, a display of his last stand, even if they had muddled his vision into a senseless, endless streaming of faces that peered back at him, enraged. Only his father's dark eyes remind unavoidable. "Is that why we never see him? Didn't he die with the Queen, too?" Adam seethed, and he continued moving towards his father, hatred locked over his face. "Isn't that exactly what you wished, Father?"

His Grace studied his son unflinchingly. His dark eyes blinked slowly, unfazed. Until Adam was there, half way up the steps, stumbling towards his father's feet—and then—

And then, without warning, Adam lifted up his hand to lash out at his father's face.

Eugene's heart flared, his mind racing, and his mouth could not react in time with his thoughts. No!

But that raised hand of the King caught Adam's own.

"Silence." His Grace commanded. He lifted a finger, heavy with the blood of a ruby, and motioned, one time, to a corridor on the opposite side of the room. "Enough of his drunken ranting. I will see to it he will behave. Have him wait for me in there."

Caught within his father's grip, Adam struggled to escape, only to be nearly lifted by the socket of his shoulder away from the King—two guards had grabbed the boy and smartly removed him, without any trouble, out of the ballroom, much to Adam's yelling and cursing.

"I cannot watch this." Lumière said, the tension of his voice smothered by grief. He turned away, his eyes already closed, and disappeared, along with many of the server crowd. It must have been custom; Eugene felt as if, he too, were invading in on something dark and unsettling he was not meant to see.

The older man, the one that Eugene had first met since he had 'arrived', looked to Eugene with a final act of propriety. "Please. For our sake. Do not speak a word of this when you go back to your home. That is all I can request. Come. We all must take our leave now. There is nothing else for us here."

Eugene did not consider himself the smartest of men, but he knew when something was terribly wrong. This felt nearly like that night in Corona. To stab the Beast or not to stab the Beast.

To remain silent or to ask the question.

Like that night, Eugene chose the latter.

"What will become of him now? Does this happen often?"

The older man merely looked to the floor. "Just come. I can say no more here."

And, with that, Eugene did as he was told.

The silence between Adam and his father was near palpable.

They were down in one of the many wine cellars, dusty from disuse, crowded in cobwebs, and blearily dark. Adam was thrown into a simple wooden chair—a poorly made, rusty thing, that spoke of whatever long nights had rumbled over the miserable cellar, and the life of the poor soul whose job it was to be placed there. Two guards held Adam down by his shoulders. They were two big, clouts of guardsmen, a good many stone in weight, and they took no care in the fact that they were
handling a prince.

In the single attempt that Adam had driven to use against his father, he had already suffered the full forced blows of both men. He had been foolish and entirely wrong to think that the wine would have dulled the consequences of his stupid, conceited plan to ruin his father's pleasant gala. Their fists were large and his skin pitifully unblemished—so his jaw cracked easily, painfully, until he felt layered in purple, until he could taste blood over his tongue.

He faintly played with the idea of spitting it into one of the guards’ face but decided against it.

The dark eyes of his father strayed to him, then away, at the guards. He gave a nod.

And then, they were alone.

Adam's breathing tightened. His heart raced against his will. Swallowing was hardly an option anymore.

Those eyes returned, digging into his son, and he moved forward in a single step. He braced his arms over the table between them, leaned down to the boy's eye level, and said these words:

"If you wish to drink my wine, you may do so. If you wish break my valuables, order about my staff, then you can be my guest. But if you dare, dare to think, that have the right to humiliate me in front of a crowd, you are going to be sorely mistaken. Is that understood, Adam?"

"Father." The word an insult spat between them.

Then, the boy hesitated.

The man lowered his head, for just a small instance, and the long threads of his black hair licked at the wood under his palms. Adam could count the way his father's hands, spread wide and far bigger than his own, seemed to tremble. How his rings in the wavering light, seemed to grow larger, and sharper at their cut edges. "...How many times must I teach you this lesson, you ungrateful child?"

Adam willed himself to be brave. His mind was still hazy with the sight of all those people, the swirling of the ballroom, and a bit stubborn on drink. He found he did not dare. He had gotten what he wanted out of this night in particular. A bruised cheek and few cuts were an easy price to pay. Still, he could not pretend he was used to such treatment. He fought to keep down a bit of blood that lingered around his swollen jaw, scraping tongue over teeth, but he could not keep his father at bay for long. He looked him in the eye.

This only made his father more riled. Those hands reached, ripped Adam up from his chair, and he nearly felt the weight of his body suspended inside of one of his father's hands as if he weighed nothing. He was lifted like a rag-doll and brought straight to father's face, golden rings nipping at the collar of his shirt.

"You will speak when I speak to you."

"I am listening, father." Adam replied again.

What a meaningless term, to look up at the man that made his skin crawl with such resentment, he could not fool this man with the trifles of being born, of being of relation. His mouth was dry. His body still. The man gave a large sniff of the air between them and lowered his son. "You smell of cheap wine and cheaper manners."

"I suppose you should know," Adam returned curtly. "It is from your latest shipment."
Those dark eyes rolled over Adam. The boy felt his blood run cold.

"Then, I believe I shall fix my mistake." His father stated. He turned, rummaged around in the back of the wine cases, and pulled out a long bottle covered with a ragged cloth. He blew off the dust from the bottle and settled it onto the center of the table. He motioned to it. "Fit for a prince, I think." His father declared, clicking his teeth over the words. He twisted the bottle around, shaking its contents inside. "Well?"

Adam stared at the bottle in incomprehension. "...I don't understand."

"Drink." His father ordered simply.

Adam jumped his eyes from bottle to his father in disbelief. "What?"

"If you think my share of wine is too lowly for you, boy, then you shall drink what I tell you."

"I...I don't understand." Adam snapped again. "What game are you getting at? You—you offering me wine—after what I've done?"

His father coiled his fingers tightly over the neck of the bottle. "...If you wish to play a man's game, Adam, then you will find the rules will not be as you knew them." He pushed the bottle towards his son. "Drink."

"No." Adam held the word inside of his sore mouth. "I won't."

At this, his father gave a bitter laugh. His entire head thrown back, joyless in fervor. "Do you think I mean to poison you, boy? You aren't worth the price of the bottle."

"...I won't do this." Adam growled.

"...Yes." His Grace returned simply. "You will."

Adam felt his stomach drop at the look of the bottle. It was far heavier and larger than the ones he had nursed before, a few hours back. He glared back up at his father. "Why?"

"Do not keep me waiting."

"Is this somehow an idea of punishment?" Adam nearly gave a laugh. "Are you truly mad?"

His father merely offered a cold, small, smile. "Drink."

With a rough sigh, Adam reached out, ripped the neck of the bottle, and pulled it to his lips. It tasted sweet and rich as it slid down his throat. He pulled away quickly, done with his swill. "And now?"

"I did not say you could stop." His father finished. Those dark eyes burned into him.

The alcohol burned from where it had eaten into his open wounds. Now, it started to churn inside of his stomach. "...I don't understand..."

"You will drink. This entire bottle. I will sit here and watch you." His father enlightened with a twisted sneer over his lips. "And if you dare to stop, there will be consequences." He leaned forward, forcing his son to struggle backwards in a sudden, unconscious fear. "That is the price you will pay for pretending to be a man in my court."

Adam grasped the smooth skin of the bottle inside of his fingers, suddenly repulsed. This moment lasted far too long for his father's tastes; the man reached out to grasp the boy's chin between two
ringed fingers, squeezing the bruises there. "...Is there something more you wish to say to me?"

Adam fought not to shake. He truly did. But locked between his father's hands, far away from the light of the day and stripped of anyone to witness his father's punishments, he felt utterly alone. "...Please..."

"Please?"

Adam felt his voice folding in on him. That anger had been doused deep within his chest. Now, he only tasted bile.

"Father...I'm sorry...please."

His father let go of him—and instantly Adam felt the blinding strength of a blow to the side of his face. His head snapped back, rattling the teeth in his jaw, and Adam let out a whimper, not from the pain, but from the surprise, the ferocity of the swing.

"Don't beg. It's not becoming of people like us. You won't beg me. You are only going to make things far worse." He flickered those dark eyes to the wine bottle once more. "I am offering you a way out. Drink."

Stunned by the blow, Adam felt his entire body begin to shake. He sunk lower under his father's merciless gaze. "...I'm sorry...I'm so sorry..."

His father was unmoved. "I will not ask you again, boy."

Adam closed his eyes. He placed the lip of the bottle to his mouth. But he could not will his arm to move. He was shaking too badly. This only antagonized his father further. "Must I force you?"

He reached forward again but Adam found the power to move, caught between the darkness of his father's many rings that might tear apart his face with every blow, or the growing, painful heat that chewed away in the center of his stomach. But he fought the gagging compulsory to spit out each mouthful; Adam forced himself to drink. And drink. Eventually, there was no more taste—just the terrible, rising liquid that threatened to reach its way back up his throat. His stomach twisted and felt as if it, too, might burst from the pressure of the drink, poisoning his veins, killing him slowly from the inside...If he felt warm and untouchable over his time spent toying with wine, now he simply felt nauseating inhuman. His entire body seemed to be involuntary shaking. He couldn't feel his tongue or face—nor his legs. It was all he could do to not vomit out his lungs across the table.

Adam willed his eyes to open. The world titled, spun, and so, it seemed, did he. But his father caught his arm, forcing the boy to remain seated where he was. Between half-curled fingers, Adam felt the cold, unfeeling glass of another bottle.

"Again."

If Adam could feel his heart inside of his chest, and not the ragged, excruciating lungful he dragged into his aching mouth, he thought it close to breaking.

"N-no," Adam sputtered. Liquid dribbled out of his mouth, staining his shirt. He could not tell if it was blood or wine.

"If you will not drink, then you leave me no choice." At this, the man rose once more to his full height, towering over his son. Those golden rings glittered faintly in the dim as his father curled them into fists. In one swift movement, his father lifted a leg to swipe the table aside, crashing the table into the flooring, snapping the legs in its wake. He then moved, a hand to grasp at Adam's throat.
"Believe me, boy. You will rue the decision not to drink—for now I will make sure you feel every single inch of the beating I am about to give you."

Adam could only stare up, wide and horribly alert, at the figure looming above him. In the dark of the cellar, his father looked more demon than man. For a heartbeat, those rings lunged for his face and then halted. ".Close your eyes. I cannot stand that you inherited your mother's eyes."

"Father," Adam choked, but the word was lost.

"Close them." His father ordered.

The world was already lost in confusion and shadow. It was so easy to close his eyes now.

Adam did. And his father kept fair to his word. The wine would do much to dull the blows—only, it became a new form torture. As, when the opening strike was a swift kick to Adam's stomach—and the assault stayed there—kicking him across the floor, the boy instantly retched. The world to Adam became nothing less than a stinging of his throat, the hot tears, unmasking his hatred into fear, pouring down his face, and a pool of sharp, endless violence, with his father, standing at the center of this suffocating world of pain.

From outside that locked cellar door, Lumière heard everything.

The world was frozen to him. Black and cold as the innards of the main cellar around him. Cogsworth, one hand heavy over his shoulder, might as well have been a statue feigning solace. He tossed his friend's hand away, lowered himself onto his knees, and raised back a fist—bringing it wordlessly, breathlessly, down into the wood.

"Lumière," Cogsworth said. His voice was beyond reaching his good friend. He managed to lower himself onto his own haunches, a hand to the back of Lumière's neck. "If His Grace hears you…"

Lumière did not stop. He braced the door, forced his nails into the wood, until it splintered. Blood took the place of properly trimmed fingernails. Still, he did not slow. ".That man is a coward."

Too frightened to fully give voice to this agreement, Cogsworth gave a deep nod. "...It will be over soon, my friend. I know that you tried to prevent this," Cogsworth gave a small sigh, flexed his fingers, and attempted to rise Lumière from his spot along the floor. "Lumière…please. Your hands…"

"He is going to kill him, Cogsworth!" Lumière cried, uncaring of his friend's warning. "If not this evening, one day, by God, one day that boy will be dead at the hands of his own father—and—" His voice shattered, giving way to a sob. "Why, Cogsworth?! Why didn't I stop him?! Why?! Because I wasn't strong enough!"

Cogsworth had no answer to this. "Lumière…"

Another sob racked his friend's body. Quickly, Cogsworth nearly dragged him away from the door, grasping bloodied fingers within his own. The blood stained his vest, Lumière's pants, but the two remained locked, eyes tight in a relentless argument. "I know what you are going to say, mon ami…"

…That you are not the boy's father, Cogsworth thought sadly, but he could not dare to bring those painful words to his lips when Lumière was falling to pieces in front of him. Cogsworth knew that his dearest friend was a younger man than himself, but only by two decades or so. Cogsworth and Lumière had been working together for fifteen years now; Cogsworth having been hired own at the castle for nearly thirty. But Lumière, if he dared to dream outside of this life, never made any
mention of children, nor wanting any for himself….but yet.

But that was the difference, Cogsworth found, between Lumière's wishes and his own. Cogsworth found enough of a family with the staff at the castle. Lumière still dared the hopes and wishes of a younger man, to at least want for a wife if his chasing after Plumette were to come to pass, but Lumière—Lumière always had the thrill of life inside of his eyes. It would seem, emotional attachment, this love and compassionate audience that thumped inside of Lumière's heart, could not be broken by any blood standard.

That boy was his, and Hell itself wouldn't dare to challenge that right.

"…That you have no control over this? Oui, that, you do not, but you have control over yourself. The boy…he has made his choice. And His Grace will treat it as a lesson. He would not fatally wound the boy."

"Cogsworth, there is nothing to be learnt from this! This is blood and wrath! This is not punishment; this is murder!"

To this, Cogsworth did not disagree. "His Grace can be…ruthless."

"And what of our lesson, my friend? What do we learn from this?" Lumière demanded. His nails were now ripped at their cuticles, knuckles red and purple, from his assault over the locked cellar door.

"You mistake me, Lumière. The boy goes onwards, drifting into the madness of his own father…but us?" Cogsworth gave a slow shake of his head. "…This is our punishment."

Lumière gave a low, angry groan. He curled his hands, flexing his fingers, and pulled himself to his feet with Cogsworth's help. His eyes narrowed. "It does not matter now. We all know what is happening. We only lie to ourselves."

Cogsworth said nothing more. He merely moved to rest his arm across Lumière's shoulders.

Eventually…the door opened.

Words could not describe the scent of a freshly beaten victim, curled up in the corner, the obvious salt and sickness that wafted into the chamber. His Grace walked slowly out of the room, his dark eyes scanning, first the cellar, then for his two servants.

"…Do not get him yet." He ordered firmly to Cogsworth and Lumière. "If he can walk into my court, and dare to move to strike me, then he will only be allowed help once he crawls out of that room."

Lumière said nothing. He kept his eyes low, to hide the tears lurking within them. Cogsworth spoke for what his friend could not say. "Understood, Sire."

"…Is the court still together?"

"Yes, Your Grace. We made sure that no one has left."

"Then this has changed nothing." He turned once more, and suddenly stopped, for from the shadows, another figure lurked. A servant he had recognized, eyeing him from the ballroom. The King moved forward, his face composed—as if he had not spent twenty minutes beating his son. As if challenged, he sized up the local hire, whose dark eyes and sharp features, stared back, wide and clandestine.
"This changes nothing, am I correct, monsieur?" Adam's father split the final word between straight, white teeth.

….Eugene could only give one, low, deliberate nod. He had shouldered himself just out of eyesight, and said nothing more as he watched the man move up the cellar stairs and out of sight. His face pale. His eyes blank. His ears still rung, filled the low voices of the two men before him.

Eugene could only stare at his hands—how they were once, too, covered in Adam's blood. He felt terrified. Angry.

…Helpless.

Why was he here? Why did he need to see this?...

A faint snap echoed from somewhere to his left—a low chuckle that sounded, for some impossible reason, familiar to Eugene—a dark voice said, *I think I've had my fun here*—and the world changed once more.

Adam groaned. He opened his eyes briefly to stare into the soft gaze of another person, looking over him carefully.

Her hands were poised, wrapped in a white cloth, and was mending the wounds along the side of his head…She noticed Adam stirring, the disorientation of his pale blue eyes…

"Easy. Easy." She said softly, her voice soothing. "Honey, do you know you're bleeding?" She began. Her voice sounded thick, slow, like honey. A strange, attractively accent. She was a very pretty young woman. Her skin was dark and her cheek dimpled delicately, as if two fingertips carefully crafted the indentions with a maker's mark. "I found you both just lyin' here and…” Her dark eyes zeroed in over Eugene, none too far off, equally sprawled along the floor. "…And I think I know why."

"Huh—" Adam coughed, his throat too dry, the room too bright. *Horns*, he panicked, *his horns!*

"Shush. You're gonna be fine. My Daddy didn't raise some little princess that couldn't take care of herself. I've fixed knife cuts, burns, the occasional missing finger—just lie still. Your wounds are deep. Do you remember what happened?"

No…*horns*…Adam managed. He couldn't bring himself to sit up, not quite yet, but his head felt lighter. The pressure of two blades along his scalp, suddenly gone. This woman…she wasn't screaming so…again, as with his fangs…they were gone.

Adam closed his eyes and faded against the cold of the bathhouse. Where was Hades…? Where was Belle? What had happened…Eugene was talking to him and…*Hades*…

He was too tired to figure it out. He could fight back against the dark wave of exhaustion no longer. He fell into it gratefully—half hoping that, this time, he'd wake up perfectly human, and his dreams would give him one peaceful night of rest.

**AN:** Thank you, everyone, for enjoying and keeping up with me. I wish I could return to that time when I uploaded everyday, but I am just now coming off a near seven day work-week and am dead, hahaha. Someone once teased in the reviews stating that these chapters must take forever to write. You, my friend, aren't wrong. I know these chapters are long. I am afraid that is just the sort of writer I am. I hope they still remain enjoyable, even if I take a little longer than most. Thank you all again
for the support! Belle soon. C:
"My Queen?"

Cogsworth peered around the castle's library with great exaggeration. It had grown very late, very quickly, in those frivolous hours since dawn had appeared and the day had been winding down to its end, as rightfully as a finely tuned clock. Per usual, the majordomo's duties had turned over swimmingly. The newly ordered portraits had been hung expertly—one depiction the castle in its more gothic esthetic (a fondness, The Master, was still more than a little defensive of)—the other, Belle's home town, all bustle and light, captured in watercolors that ran like the little river just beyond her father's cottage. The kitchen's menu, via Mrs. Potts and her husband, accounted for and pre-planned for the oncoming week.

It was only now, with the cold, velveteen wrappings of the night appearing over the kingdom, to tie this peaceful day into a neat bow, did Cogsworth realize he had missed micro-managing a very important detail.

He did not account for Belle and her…tenacious ability…to ruin his devout sense of order with nothing but books.

Books. The thick tomes, the papery novellas, the leather bounded, the handwritten—they rose around Cogsworth like the topography of an uncharted new landscape; it was vast, squareish map consisting of piles and piles of books. The library, the nicely organized library with nicely organized shelving, half empty in their holdings.

A candled, shielded by the wall of curled fingers, guided Cogsworth through the wild, physical cacophony of the clearly scoured library.

"My…Queen?" Cogsworth called again, this time a tad timid.

There was no answer.

Cogsworth picked up his pace. The library was large with its windows offering in grand amounts of starlight…and shadows, as well. Cogsworth cursed his old eyes. He had been soon to bed himself and his monocle was on his desk within his private quarters, far from this part of the castle. This dark night would taint his good day after all. He huffed through his nose, straightened his back tighter, and added more authority into his voice, calling for Belle once more.

"Cogsworth?" Her soft voice answered him. "Is that you?"

Cogsworth managed his way through the books, muffling a curse when the sharpened end of a book corner connection with his shin. "Belle, Ma Reine, what in the world has happened in here…?"

He had arrived, and none too soon, at the edge of the room, where Belle emerged before him. She had been hidden, low to the cool flooring, wiggling out from under what seemed to be a stuffy fort made from wool blankets, bobs and bits of strange looking tools, and, of course, books. She stood before the majordomo, one hand firmly into the pockets of her dress, the other, wrapped halfheartedly around herself, as if chilled.

"I didn't realize how late it had gotten…” Belle began, her voice nervous. Her dark eyes checked over her handiwork, giving a faint swallow, refusing to meet Cogsworth's eyes.

Cogsworth felt as if his eyes were truly failing him. His Queen, ever so naturally a beauty, looked
ravished by some terrible specter. Her volumous hair clung limply to her cheeks. Her skin was
glowingly pale in the moonlight. Her eyes gazed at all dusky spaces around him, heavy and desolate.
"Belle?" Cogsworth began, a hand reaching to take her arm. "What is the matter?"

"You've caught me in a poor moment, Cogsworth." Belle said dejectedly. "I have full intentions of
putting every book back where it belongs. I, um," her hand tightly over herself, ruffling her dress,
patch-work blue, common for the housework that was not expected of her royalty, but Belle insisted
regardless, much to Cogsworth's own chagrin. Her lips purse. Even they looked less full than usual.

Cogsworth was to her side at once. His eyes were a-light with worry. "You joke with me, surely. I
am dreaming. I am dreaming, and this brave new world of books, beyond measure, are the, ah,
figments, of such a nightmare."

"I know that I have made quite a mess." Belle ran the palm of her hand over a half-tossed away
book, as if apologizing to it. "I must look like Papa, after a fortnight of hiding away in the basement,
tinkering…" She trailed off, solemn, recalling the memory as if she had changed it into something
criminal.

Cogsworth studied her cautiously. "You do appear a bit unwell, my Queen."

"Do I?" Belle returned expectantly. She raised a pale hand in front of her eyes, her brows narrowed,
as she studied her own hand…however, her stare may have lasted, more inappropriately, than
normal, for the majordomo's taste, who stood at her side, his eye thick brows slowly rising
indignantly.

So, The Underworld, that haunting, immeasurable force, it still lingers inside of me? For how long, I
might feel so weak? How to test such a horrible affliction? Belle considered faintly, uncaring of the
other pair of eyes, digging into her.

"Were you looking for something?" Cogsworth inquired in distinct wonder at Belle's sallow
complexion, amongst the heavy load of carting those books down from the high walls, and how she
accomplished such a feat all on her own, without asking anyone for help, not once. His weak eyes
were unable to make out whatever it was Belle sought to obtain in her own staring of her skin. "You
know, my Queen, I would happy to have helped you. I might seem quite busy, and, in fact I rather
am, but for you, Belle, I am here. Beck and call, rain or shine…” Suddenly, he trailed away.

Cogsworth griped the edge of a ransacked book, smoothed the pages, and placed it fondly under the
crook of his arm. When Belle offered him a curious expression, Cogsworth gave a small, respectful
nod.

"Ah, you wouldn't have known." He allowed a tired sigh from between his lips. He then looked at
Belle with great warmth. "Her Ladyship, The Master's mother, she—she too, had a grand appetite
for books. This one, I recall, she kept by her beside often. I often helped her categorize His Grace's
collection, at one time, you might know. It started off The Master's father's, of course, but, really, it
became her own." Cogsworth froze into a small, wishful smile. "He bought nearly any book she
happened to glance at, even at the utter disaster of whatever importance it might have possessed to
someone of a higher power. She wanted it, and he made it hers. Or, at least, if it was what he thought
she wanted…" Cogsworth gave another nod of his head. "…And, when she died, it would seem, so
did this place…The quiet, the stillness, the pity of a thousand worlds gone to ashes when His Grace
sought to burn them…”

He looked around once more, those empty shelves, the books, all about the room, half opened, half
sorted..."How strange, to feel as if I have seen this before…” He turned to Belle again, having had
collected himself once more. "…Perhaps, a little chaos at the end of the day. It is not so bad." He dropped his tone further. "…Do not tell Lumière that I have ever said such a thing, I will very cross with—"

A strange, pained look overcame Belle's face. At this, Cogsworth fretted, unsure of what to say in the moment of uncertainty, his own heart giving a tiny skip, as if he had offended his dear friend. At once, Cogsworth moved to right this terribly wrong. "Belle—I am so sorry, I never meant—"

Belle pursed her lips once more, pale and thin, her mouth tight in remorse. "I know Cogsworth, I know. I just…" Belle turned to look behind her, into the darkened nook she had thrown together. Cogsworth strained to keep up with the young Queen. "…There is so much I still do not know how to ask."

"Belle?" Cogsworth placed a reassuring hand over her arm, then allowed a faint gasp in surprise. "Belle! You are freezing cold?!!" The old majordomo gave a moan of defeat. "A new draft from the outside? After all of my careful bloody measurement, you will think that Enchantress's might've used an inch of her vengeful magic to right such an ill-driving chill into this lovely reading area—if you will excuse my frustration, my Queen, I am sorry for such language."

"Oh Cogsworth," Belle pinched the bridge of her nose, clearly unperturbed, her cheeks flushed coldly. "You don't understand! I don't understand!" She flung her arm away to stab at the air, the books around her, as to damn them all. "Nothing, not a single one, in this whole library, nothing will work!"

Cogsworth flinched. He could not help but to do so. The heavy flash of resentment in Belle's angry shout was not what he had expected from this nominal evening.

…Now what on earth could that mean? Cogsworth pondered, his heart stagnate inside of his chest to stare at her. Her thinly vailed perspiration to her temples, the rise of pink at the hollow of her delicate throat. Cogsworth rested his hands upon the tops of her arms, gently holding her together. "Belle… are you quite alright?"

Two hands pulled back, away from him, as Belle's ripped tightly at the face to her face, her scalp, erratic and upset. "No, Cogsworth. I am not. In fact, I do believe I have only made everything worse!"

She was acting nothing like the fervently evenings before, where they had shared in letters, jokes, the occasional snuck biscuit they had shared, nicked in secret out from Mrs. Potts watchful eye…

"Belle, Belle," Cogsworth began, his eyes wide to behold Belle's studious, gentle manner casted away. "You are speaking too quickly for these old ears to follow. What is this 'nothing'? What are you…"

All at once, Cogsworth felt breathless. Belle. She would only be this upset if it involved The Master's curse!

"Oh no," was all he could whisper. He felt his legs seize, the unspoken danger overwhelming him. The day before him, blistered and tanned, ripped away to reveal the ugly truth about it. He had gone on as if everything was normal when, ever so carefully, the hours were slipping away from him, and all the estrange rationality he clung too, like some old fool…

"Cogsworth," Belle was quick to hold tight to her friend. She grit her teeth, chiding herself to take her feelings out on her poor, meticulous friend. "No, no, I am sorry, it is not Adam."
The weight lifted at once. Cogsworth was not as good with open affection, particularly of those with a social standard so far beyond his reach, but he was glad to give what little comfort his Queen could find within his company, and him, comfort in her, but he would not be removed from the truth. "Are you quite certain?" He pulled back to match Belle eye to eye. "I can tell if you are lying to me, my dear. I may be old, but with searing away my good looks, I am besotted by wisdom."

Belle could only give a gentle squeeze of Cogsworth's arms. "It is not entirely Adam," She confessed meekly, the entirety of her plotting tugged from her lips; It was hard to avoid that knowing glint in those scrutinizing eyes.

"But, it does have to do with how I am not, again, a metal clock?"

"…Perhaps," Belle murmured. Her throat felt very tight. "It…" She turned away, hardly able to say the words to Cogsworth's wonderful, worn face. He had been through so much. The entire castle had. And what had she gone and done?"You may think me mad, that I sound like Adam, if you truly wish to know."

She willed herself to be strong. She had used the Enchantress's book and she had forced her way into the heart of Hades', Adam's feverish premonitions come true. Now, Belle felt truly lost. How could she stand before Cogsworth, who know of such suffering, and dare to say she thought she knew better? That she could handle the returned curse and its consequences, the overwhelming real lives she had discovered with Quasi's translations. How could she, a former farm girl, compete with the terrible will of the Enchantress?

"Cogsworth." His name was a trembling note in the dark. Belle squeezed her eyes tightly, her last defense against the hot tears threatening to expose her. "My friend…" Her voice choked. "This is my fault."

"Belle…" Cogsworth ached to hear her broken tone. She truly believed in her own words. "Nonsense. Utter nonsense. You and The Master both. You are much too hard on yourselves."

"…The book will no longer open, Cogsworth." Belle confessed fiercely. The words felt like broken glass inside of her mouth. "The Enchantress' book. I used it. I used it and one of those other books, the ones I had translated. I thought." She gave a sob. "I thought I knew what I was doing."

"The Enchantress's tome?" The magic book that travels you…" Cogsworth blinked in a great daze. "Oh." He managed shortly. "The magic. It…has returned to the castle…"

Belle could not form the words. She willed in breath after breath, trying to quell her tears, but she could not control her shame. How was Cogsworth so calm? Did he not understand her once more? Why did he not cry out in fear of her? She had touched the fire of the very heart that had poised this family before. She played with a power she did not understand nor possess. And now, she was locked away from it.

She pulled up her hands to cover her face.

Cogsworth was a smart man, and being in the service of the curse for so long, he quickly completed the rest of the equation of Belle's efforts. "The other books. All of these books. All in an attempt to stir the Enchantress's tome once more." Cogsworth grasped the understanding easily. "But, if it rejected your original travel book then…"

"…It rejected them all." Belle finished.

Cogsworth slowly picked up his Queen's arms, gently pulling her hands down to face him. He did
not need to see clearly to imagine the look of anguish over Belle's sweet face.

"...It is rather nippy in here, hm?" Cogsworth asked lightly. "How about we bother ol' Mrs. Potts for a nice cup of tea?"

Belle merely stared at Cogsworth in fragile disbelief. "How are you so kind to me?"

Cogsworth only smiled, while soft and dim, it was very real across his wrinkled face. "Because you are so kind." He answered her steadily. "Because you are so brave." He gestured to the hundreds of books, like mountains she had built, all around them, and, finally, crushed her to him in an effortless hug. Belle swore she could hear the question, emotional shaking of her dear majordomo's heart to hear him say: "Because I believe in your brilliant mind."

He took her hand within his own to lead her out and away from the dark restlessness of the library. He paused only once at the central door to pour his eyes over the books once more. His own questions, bubbled to the top of his mind: What did Belle discovered through that tome? For just how long had this been going on under his nose?

...What was happening to turn her flesh so cold?

Another, brief staggering of pain over took Cogsworth for a heartbeat. It felt like a sudden strike to his heart, a mere dot of darkness, like the error of some ancient painter's mistake, dappling the paint over his confidence—The Master's mother, His Grace's bed chambers, a view Cogsworth should have never been privy to see—he had felt such cold skin before—Her Ladyship, still and icy, so much like Belle's arm...

Cogsworth gave a shake of his head, unwilling to succumb to the memory any further.

Belle tried not to tremble beside him. She had tried everything to travel back to The Underworld but the book had snapped shut and she had been spirited back to the present, all to absolutely no avail, with only a single rubbish coin to show for all her travelings...How could Cogsworth offer faith in her now, if he knew such a pitiful thing?

"You have saved us once before, My Queen." He moved Belle along, allowing his hands, despite their age, to warm her own. "And for that, I so deeply respect you. I care for you. And I know you: you are only doing what you feel is right."

Belle bit down on her lip. She bore her dark eyes into Cogsworth, unsure, her heart heavy. All her plans, all she had learned of Hades, Persephone...Megara. She couldn't even remember the last words she had said to Meg. She was telling me about herself. Belle fought to renew her thoughts. And flaws. Flaws that Belle knew she had, too. Flaws like a promise she could not keep. What Cogsworth saw in her, Belle was not entirely sure was there, not anymore. Hers had been a hero's journey she accidentally fulfilled in the time before, before the curse was undone. But now, Belle felt the weight of what she could not keep. A promise to save Meg...

A promise to save Adam.

"I don't think I can save anyone," Belle said. "Not this time." She felt helpless. Defeated. She had locked herself away from the one theory she had. One that seemed to be the start of a new mystery. It had to lead somewhere new. It had to mean something. But, for all Belle hoped she grasp, she only came away with a pain more understood than ever: how little power she truly had as a mortal. Mortal, mortal, the word slammed into her endlessly in that place of gods and nature.

Cogsworth carefully moved, fingers light, to hold Belle's chin with his fingertips, pointing her face to
look up at him, the grief washed across her features.

"This time, my Queen, you will not be alone."

Belle could only offer a sad smile back at him. "Then, I shall tell you. Everything."

Mrs. Potts and Cogsworth listened with nerve-wracked faces as Belle, between sips of hot tea, told them of her discoveries. Of Adam's dreams, his frantic, terrified ramblings, of a demonic pressure in a strange, ancient land, of, perhaps, the notion of a mystery that somehow connected it all to her husband. And, of course, the Enchantress's tome, suddenly so useful, and suddenly ripped from her understanding.

"Oh, Poppet," Mrs. Potts responded, her good-nature shining through, even after being ushered from a good night's sleep by a stern Cogsworth and tear-filled Belle. "Forgive our strange reactions. We have lived so long in earnest under our bewitching. I am inclined to think, against all that is good and merciful in this blessed world, that anything is possible. Especially the unspeakable, impossible things."

"Impossible world, indeed," Cogsworth agreed, his mouth terse and face pale to think of Belle so far from the protection of the castle. "Quite possible, and quite ominous. To think, you traveled to such a place all alone! It is terribly frightful for a woman, is it not?"

At this, Belle and Mrs. Potts exchanged a cool look over the strife in Cogsworth's tone.

"I assure you, Cogsworth, I was most prepared." During my second trip, Belle added, but chose not to say.

"Have you ever considered, Cogsworth, you old bean, that Belle did not want anyone else hurt in her strange journeying?" Mrs. Potts asked pointedly, her lips hidden behind her sip of tea. "That miserable place sounds like trouble for just about anyone."

Cogsworth lasped back in his chair, hands folded over the cup. "...And yet, only now you have been denied? How curious. The Enchantress's spell has certainly never failed her before."

Belle slowly sip her tea, intrigued by his words. A flaw? It seemed too simple for someone as heavy handed and vengeful as the Enchantress. Perhaps, she willed it, then? "I am beginning to think that it is not a fault in design but a change." She closed her eyes, briefly analyzing what had changed since her previous journey. She had not seen Persephone again. She merely walked with Meg. They had talked of Hades, his power…and she had taken the golden coin…

Belle slowly sip her tea, intrigued by his words. A flaw? It seemed too simple for someone as heavy handed and vengeful as the Enchantress. Perhaps, she willed it, then? "I am beginning to think that it is not a fault in design but a change." She closed her eyes, briefly analyzing what had changed since her previous journey. She had not seen Persephone again. She merely walked with Meg. They had talked of Hades, his power…and she had taken the golden coin…

Belle opened her eyes. The coin. A singularity?

"A change. A reinforcement of the curse?" Mrs. Potts continued, her own brows knit. "But you did not speak of seeing The Enchantress."

"No," Belle confirmed. "You are right. I've not seen her, not since…well, The Beast. Adam's transformation."

Belle tried to envision her, but that was difficult. She had been a beggar woman in the village, one Belle often pitied but rarely spoke to. "Agatha" often seemed mute and was thought to be so, beyond a few words every year or so. Besides all of that, Belle had been so overwhelmed at the unfurled magic all around her, old friends with new faces, Gaston's horrible scream as he fell to his death, fresh in her ears. Of her Beast, human and blue eyed and hers. The Enchantress…who was she in all of that before that moment…who was she to Belle but anything less than a golden memory, a
woman, a wrath, then, disappeared, once more. Papa spoke of her kindness often, as Agathe had
saved him from Gaston's attempt at murder, but Belle could not be as sure as to why she could not
trust fully in it. She was forever grateful that her father was alive, of course, but it didn't make sense
in her mind. What caused such a change in her heart? Did the Enchantress even have one?

Why would someone who had reached out to hurt so many people, take a singular pity on just one?

"Beyond what Adam has told me, and—"Here, Belle looked guilty at Mrs. Potts, for once now
coming clean of the return of the curse—in the middle of the night, having cried into her skirts like a
little girl, startled from a nightmare she had crafted all her own—"Adam's little changes…sudden
fangs, sudden claws, then, gone once more…together, we couldn't pin down the reasoning why. It
seemed to change on a whim, too. I have little to link his curse to what I have found, but I cannot
lose hope that I was close to something important." To someone, Belle thought painfully, the look of
hopelessness along Megara's face, haunting in the still of the night.

"However," Belle continued. She gave a little, slow sigh of relief from having two new minds to
bounce off of. "I do know that I saw was absolutely real. I have to go back there. Somehow.
Someway." She looked to Cogsworth, a faint weary smile of determination to her face. "I cannot
linger in this for much longer."

She felt her heart squeeze tight. Hadn't Adam said something so agonizingly similar…? God, she
missed him so much. Please, be well, my love, she thought as clearly as she could, as if he might hear
her, and know. She reached into the sewn pockets of her dress to touch the coin. It still felt smooth
and cold to just the tip of her index finger. "Something is wrong. I am beyond my own limits and I
have to try something else."

"Well, you know we are right here for you, dearie," Mrs. Potts encouraged, her face full of light. She
reached over to pat Belle's knee. "I love you, and The Master, so very much."

"I love you all, too," Belle said instantly, the words easy and true. She softened to be stared at so
lovingly by the older woman, one she admired so fondly. It was closest Belle could ever hope to be
looked at by someone that she wished to believe her own mother may have been like.

"How can we help, Belle?" Cogsworth asked prudently.

Belle pulled in a breath and gave a moment to think.

…Beyond what I understand. Beyond what I can ask of my family here…but there are others.
Others, like Quasi, who had been so kind and trusting without a second thought. Belle allowed a
thin swallow. She nodded at her two friends. "I am afraid you both have already done everything I
need from you. I have to depend on others now. My friends, such as Ariel. I…I must go to
Denmark."

"Do you want us to come along as well?" Mrs. Potts said suddenly, her face hesitant. "I don't know
if I feel comfortable letting you leave all by your lonesome."

"Thank you," Belle began quickly, but she was already set in her decision. "But I fear I have learned
my lesson too late; I must leave immediately. Tonight, I have to go. The second the ship is ready."

"Denmark?!" Cogsworth gasped. "But The Master said—"

"Yes, yes, it's dangerous," Belle flared her nose at the restriction. "But I am not speaking of Adam
nor his duties." Belle's eyes flashed in conviction. "I need an audience with the others, the princesses
and." Belle winced. "Rapunzel. They might know of a magic I do not. I have to try."
"To fight magic with magic." Mrs. Potts commented worriedly.

"To leave in the dead of night," Cogsworth remarked weakly. "Please, reconsider at least until the morning."

"I must open this tome again. I must undo the damage I have done. That means I must leave tonight." Belle continued, undeterred. She stood and gave a quick hug to Mrs. Potts, returning the cup, and faced Cogsworth head on. "Please, I need to get my—"

Belle stopped.

From the corner of her eye, a lean, tall figure peered about the entry way's sitting room. It was Chapeau, weary and quiet as usual, who met Belle's eye with a clever, understated smile. He opened his arms slowly to offer Belle her pink winter's coat—as well as her leather satchel.

"Oh, Chapeau," Belle began, surprised as she was moved. She moved quickly to hug him, as well. He gave a shy shrug, attempting to pull away as quickly as he had come. It was his way. While other servants had adjusted to the loud and happy reunion of the peasant town below and finding their families, a few stragglers knew they had nowhere else to go. And so, Chapeau was all too happy to stay, even if he often did not voice that. "Must you always eavesdrop on my every desire?"

"Touché," Chapeau allowed, his words choice and finely cut as Lumière's carving knife over dinner lamb. "Bon Voyage. Mm."

"Chapeau!" Cogsworth thundered. "Do not encourage her!"

"...I'll fetch your bedclothes, Belle," Mrs. Potts reminded gently, standing herself.

"And to find Quasi's translations, and to get the Enchantress's tome..." Belle returned quickly, walking away from Cogsworth, who now sat upon his chair, arms crossed, his face wavering.

"And what of sending a letter of warning to Denmark?" The majordomo inquired, his voice a muffled bark.

"There is no time!" Belle called, already down the hall. She entered back into the library to search for her books and found them quickly despite the disarray. There was more Cogsworth had shouted to her beyond the halls, but she found his words lost in the echoing chambers, and she began to prepare herself for the long journey ahead.

When Belle returned from gathering her things, she was met by the door with Chapeau, Cogsworth and Mrs. Potts, clad in their night gowns, but their faces watched her with deep passion between them both, as if they had quickly conversed about something very serious and could not speak all of their words between one another before Belle had arrived back.

"What is it...?" Belle asked faintly, her cheeks pinking to be stared at. She gave a gentle clear of her throat to keep away the exasperation of wanting to leave as quickly as she could. "Am I forgetting anything?"

The majordomo only stared at her, reminisce in his eyes.

"Nothing, my dear," He responded quietly. Despite his qualms, he had settled into what Belle was set out to do, and looked from Mrs. Potts to Belle once more. "It is just...in that moment, when you made your choice, when you commanded your things...you reminded me so much of her late Ladyship."
Belle blushed, the rose-like colour a delicate stain to her cheeks. "Oh, Cogsworth."

"He's very much right, my dear." Mrs. Potts said proudly. With a gleam of found opportunity, Mrs. Potts strode from the parlor and back again, placing Belle's coat over her shoulders, tightening its fuzzy strings. She then reached up to cup Belle's face, her palm rough from her daily chores, but the feeling, soft and loving. She smoothed away the final trail of tears that had rolled over Belle's skin. "There are worse sins in this world than tempting magic. You may feel lost in what you've done, Belle, but you must keep going forward."

At this, Belle wrapped Mrs. Potts tightly in a hug. Then Chapeau, and, finally, Cogsworth, who tried very hard to appear as if had something in his good eye, and was definitely not crying.

"Thank you. All of you. For forgiving me. For believing in me. I am going to take what I need, Phillippe as well, and I will chart the fastest ship to Denmark. Ariel will have to forgive my sudden arrival."

"She will be overjoyed to see you again," Mrs. Potts nodded. "Just, please Poppet, write to us once you are settled in. Please."

"Belle," Cogsworth said, his voice coarse, but his eyes weighting into her. "Be safe."

Belle stepped forward once more to him and placed a kiss to his tired, worn cheek.

"I will. Thank you, Cogsworth. Thank you."

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**AN:** I have this headcanon that Chapeau only speaks in French and that is why he never really says anything in the movie, so the joke is super meta considering that it is supposed to be a French story, in France, where people speak fluent French…beyond being a coat-rack…but when he is human. So, I hope you all enjoyed my little joke of his French sayings. Because, if he spoke more than he liked, I'm afraid I would have no earthly idea what he is saying. Hehe!
AN: This chapter is running a bit late. Sorry all. Work and all that. Tired. Very tired. Anyhow, I hope you enjoy!

For reference in case it’s been a hot second for anyone, Tia Dalma, (AKA: Calypso) is from the Pirates of the Caribbean series alongside Jack Sparrow. She appears mainly in the second and third movie and is mentioned in the fourth. She is the voodoo queen/witch doctor/former (?)slave underground railroad runner/etc. Also, she is the best. I love that the script insinuates that her and Jack slept together. It makes my skin tingle as it is a ship I didn’t know I needed to sail.

Where was the light in this place? Shouldn’t the faint glimmer of ice be nestled here, buried beneath the arms of laded snowy branches and timid handfuls of shadow? The wood was musty and thick, like laid flooring, but it sprung upwards, too, building around like a tomb of earth to all sides. If this were a dream, as Adam had dreamt before, where metal bit holes through white exposed bone, where the ocean roared and swallowed him whole, where a demon with a sharp, endless smile played with his fate, then it was a new dream.

A new dream. One without blood.

Adam’s nose twitched uncontrollably. The invasive scents held within the center of this tiny, harrowed place staggered him. There was the smell of the ocean. Mist. Birds. The shadowy, wispy tendrils of sweat—sweat that dripped off the faces of other men. His eyes drifted open, or so he thought, as he peered into the exposed innards of a horribly disfigured shack. It lacked any sense of integrity in its structure. Half the flooring was nailed haphazardly together, lifted from the base boards, tethered together to make new, floating half of the cramped space. It was too dark to make out details if they were not coated with the details of smell, the sharp kind of bark, the tongue of the ocean lapping at his face, the quiet stirrings of creatures, breathing and unblinking, just outside of those wooden walls... Wood, upon wood, splayed upon wood…

A shaft of moonlight broke this muggy darkness. Adam lifted his head to capture the tinge of silver air with all the strength of his eyes. There was a ragged, splintered hole in the roof above. The midnight air exposed the coils of rope and cages, old skulls, old plants, the makings of what appeared to be human hair, all strung from the cloud-like ceiling. Adam stayed still, lying upon the floor, his eyes drinking in the size of the moon, straddling the world from above, eyeing him, cold and unmoving.

But something else did move, just out of his line of sight. Adam flinched, his eyes dipping to close, hiding himself away. A heartbeat met his ears. His own quieted. Breath, calm, collected, drifted over his cheeks. Adam thought to play dead. Whatever it was, it was close, warm, and very much alive. In this, to Adam’s great relief, and surprise, it was not Hades. He had expected to wake up again in chains of ice, a new throne of thorns, but he merely lay prone on his back, with the world no longer spinning around him.

“What be you doing so far at sea, beautiful stranger?” a voice asked of him.

It circled around him slowly, with footfall as soft as an evening rain. It was a woman’s voice with a woman’s tone...but it was not familiar to the rest of voices had heard when last he closed his eyes. There were long stretches, longer now, of silences, which flooded Adam’s senses. He chose not to move. Not to speak. Where was Eugene? Where was Hades? Where was that kind voice before?
“Surely some old sea witch don’t take your voice, hmm?” She intoned again. She spoke with a heavy accent, patterned and textured with dips and odd bends that cradled her words almost musically. “Because last’d I checked, she been dead for years. Don’t meant other wicked forces aren’t searchin’ about.”

Adam repressed a shiver. The woman padded around him again. There was a little fluttery sound, a delicate laugh, that spilled from her throat. Then, she felt closer. A floating, ineffectual presence with every moment.

Fingers graced Adam’s jaw. Nails, sharpened, dirty, fluttered down to the hollow of his throat.

“Your skin is so smooth. Pretty,” She continued. She dragged her hands lower, inspecting the washed up body under her palms. A single, light pressure traced under Adam’s torn coat, gashes of his dress shirt, waning over his bare chest. “No scars?” She whispered curiously. She reached lower. She then lifted up his arm, fingers peeling under cloth. “Not a pirate?”

Adam took a shallow breath. He caged his every screaming instinct to not flinch. A chill crawled through every notch of his spine. The repulsion tinged his jaw. He resisted setting his teeth into a snarl. His heart picked up with every touch; uncertainly washed over Adam. The air was cold, the light dim. He could feel the rough skin of wood under his back; suddenly, all made logical sense to Adam’s conjuring. Wherever he was, whoever was looking over him now—she was undressing him!

He paled. The realization was nearly as winding as his struggle to keep control. The fear, the uncertainty swinging like a pendulum tight under his eyelids: Move? Yell? Fight back? Continue to pretend to be unconscious? He knew himself far too well to think he could hide for much longer. This woman—was touching him! He hated being touched. With the dampening of the floorboard gripping his back, chest, neck, entirely exposed! How long he had been lying here? Where was Belle? Eugene? Ariel…?

A pressure pushed down on Adam’s chest, her hand now slipping into the tear of his clothing to glide fingers along the bare skin of his chest once more. She was humming softly, some out-of-tune tavern gib. Those hands were warm but rough. A hand used to heavy labor, then. His heart beat painfully inside of his ribs. Adam felt his skin turn to goose flesh under her touch, as, gingerly, her hand sank lower and lower, toward the buckle of his pants…

He could not bear it. Adam jumped, jerking away as quickly as he could, dignity be damned. The small, water-warped world twisted around him, dark, dark, dark.

“Ah,” Those hands stopped but that voice sparked with amusement. “So he do ‘live.”

Resisting the fight that would be just to pull himself to his feet, Adam could only gawk at the woman before him.

She was slender. Dark-skinned. Her eyes were sharp, cunning. She was dressed in an unbecoming manner of which Adam had never seen in his life: her dress stretched and tailored with the rough layers of every assorted fabric—dyed brown and knitted with fishing rope and other bobbles. Her handmaiden’s corset was extremely tight to her chest, accenting her figure as well as her breasts. Her hair wiped along her narrow face and high cheekbones, like eels, thick and drizzling to her shoulders in coiled dreadlocks. She was perched on her knees before Adam, none too surprised. Clearly, his acting hadn’t fooled her.
Her stare was cool and expectant.

Then, all was quiet.

The woman hummed again. A smirk lifted her pouty lips. “He ‘live. But do he speak?”

Adam flickered his eyes around once more. Dots of fire cradled the shadows. They were littered everywhere, some in dusty window sills. The room being so architecturally ruptured to even Adam’s stellar lack of historical knowledge did not steer him wrong. Those candles seemed to be floating mid-air among the ropes, hanging flowers and plants, leering back at him. Whenever Adam lifted a hand to wipe at his face, the floor creaked out from under him. The hole in the thatched roof still proudly hoisted the wide face of the moon.

His eyes stayed to the candles. Hadn’t he seen such a strange sight before?...The fire. The fire wasn’t blue. It wasn’t blue as was Hades’ fire—the fire here was as orange as that tiger’s pelt. The faint memory lingered before him—worlds away now, when Mrs. Potts had roused him from that desk—the image of a floating candle at her side...

A desk…a desk he had now smashed to bits with wounded fists, unfeeling, unseeing, all because…of Hades.

Or, perhaps, it was in his blood alone.

Blood! There was so much blood before he had last closed his eyes! He sprung a hand to touch at the sides of his head only to pull back and find nothing. The floor, that bare, earthy mess underneath him, was clean as well. Surely, his clothing was ripped and his muscles ached, but there was no blood.

Slowly, Adam raised up his hands. He traced the tips of his fingers with his eyes. Human. He was still human. He flexed them, brought them close to feel his face, teeth, nose. His head, once more.

No horns. Just as that voice had answered him. Another woman’s voice that was sweet and clear…Tiana. Tiana. Was that her name? Naveen’s wife. Where was she? She has spoken so gently to him. Nothing like the other woman before him now. Where was everyone?

“Where…am I?” Adam asked. “What is this place?”

Now that Adam was fully up, he could smell this room so clearly now. It had become a palette of scent. Wooden, rotten, water-soaked, every inch of it. The smell of sand, gritty, crushed, lingered through the rips in his clothing, under his nails. His nose twitched again.

This amused the woman. She looked at him fondly. “You are in ma’ home.” She explained slowly. Her accent did not help in Adam’s understanding. She lifted a hand to touch at the swell of her chest. “I, am Tia Dalma.”

Those flames seemed to brighten and dim in rhythm to this woman, this Dalma’s words. Adam eyed them warily. His jaw tightened once more. Magic, he thought darkly. There could be little else. And only he, the most unfortunate man in the world, to be in the hands of yet another witch.

He did not understand. Why was all this happening to him? Why was he now here? While his head no longer ached, his mind felt hazy. The last effort he could recall making was blocking out Hades—Hades—who, with a snap of his clawed fingers, had spooled open Adam’s mind as easily as a wicker wife could weave her thread. A memory spade out, hung from the edges of what had been reality, the tips of stars, as pointed as Hades’ teeth. One snap alone had left Adam defenseless. If
Hades could invade Adam’s present, and pull the past from his head, then how, how on earth, could he save his future?

If he could escape this place alive, he had to tell Belle. Her fight to conquer the curse—this was too much.

It was just too much.

Adam could feel it happening again. The ballad of hysteria unraveling his skin, purging his eyes, souring his nails, chaining his soul. The curse was so much bigger now—the world was so much bigger now—and others, wicked or not, far too powerful to fight.

“This is the end, isn’t it?” Was all Adam could say. He closed his eyes. He couldn’t stand the sight of her. “Nothing makes sense anymore. If you are the last of this misery—then tell me what it is you want. The last thing I recall is a different woman, far different from you, speaking to me. You are not her.”

“An’ you be no sailor. No pirate, neither.” Tia Dalma answered him. She collected her dress to stand. Her feet were bare, just as Ariel’s had been, and she moved them quickly through the senseless dark in a flawless, graceful manner, unafraid of running into the harsh corners of the shack.

“A pirate?” Adam intoned, his voice a low rumble. He squinted open his eyes at the sheer idiocy; him, a pirate? Was she mad? Madder than him? He grasped for what she meant. “Have I been kidnapped, then? Are you—“

“A pirate?” She crooned. She had cut him off. “No, no. You be safe here. I mean you no ‘arm. I simply find you here.” Those dark eyes looked toward the moon, silver and wide, as if hooked by its presence. “I sense om’nous winds on de’ air tonight.”

He forced a deep breath, his mood wild between giving up or to scream bloody murder at her until this entire wretched dream—world—life—disappeared—disappeared like it always did. “I will only ask you this one more time, Tia Dalma. What is it that you want with me?”

Her eyes returned to him. He felt pinned by her stare. “I cannot say. You came to me.”

Adam turned his hands to fists but he remained still from where he sat, knees curled to his chest; a foolish, childish, attempt to cover himself from her prying eyes that took so much delight in his half naked state. “You are lying. I want nothing to do with you,” He bristled. “With any of your kind.”

She raised a dark brow. Her lips slid down into a tight line. “I am a collector o’ lost souls over d’ese seas. Usually I find men—pirates an’ thieves an’ sailors.” She settled herself from her pacing onto the seat of a roughly carved stool. She spread her legs suggestively, picking up her skirts with long fingers to reveal one of her legs to him. When she found his eyes in the dark, her smile blossomed across her face with the passion of a flower looking for sunlight. “Yet…here you be.”

Adam swallowed thinly. He could care less for her eyes or legs. But that smile. It truly unnerved him.

“Then…this is real?”

Tia Dalma could only widened her lips, exposing her dark, unpleasant teeth. “Did ma’ ‘ands over your body not feel real enough to you? I would gladly show you again.”

“Enough.” He growled. He closed his eyes. It seemed to look at her only tempted her further. “These men you find lost at sea.” He pressed the palms of his hands into the flooring, wanting of splinters,
anything, everything, to hide how they suddenly shook. “Are they dead?”

“Some,” came her quiet reply. A droplet of a word, fragile, small, but its effect like a whirlpool over a still sea.

Adam felt his heart slow. “Am I dead, Tia Dalma?”

A slow, knowing smile skittered across her face. “Not yet.”

Not yet. Adam clung to those words. You’re killing yourself, Hades had told him, the answer to Dalma’s reassurance. He had bled—he had lost so much blood when he fought the entirety of his Beastly change—over that bathing house, that tub, Eugene’s chest and hands, Ariel’s fingertips, his own hands—the change—the change—killing him!

“I do believe you might ‘ave some life left in you, ‘andsome stranger.” She continued. “I don’t know who would want someone as beautiful as you dead—but dis world is strange an’ stranger yet. I find you on an empty beach. You smell like death an’ blood. Somewhere, I sense, d’ere is someone taking care o’ you. Someone d’at do not want you to die. But you were close. Close enough for me to touch you. To bring you here. To feel de’ warm o’ your skin.”

Adam shivered at her enjoyment. He dared not to think what she did with the bodies of those poor souls she dragged ashore. But there was a phrase she said. Her touching. It was so much like Hades. His burning desire to get his own hands over Adam’s throat…

Adam sighed tiredly. If this woman meant him no harm and if she had saved him for a moment more, the he had little left to hide.

“Hades told me I will be dead soon. He longs for it.”

Suddenly, that smile dropped from her face. She seemed to look at Adam now with the intensity of her own burning candles; she, the flame, and he, the wick.

“Hades,” The woman hummed the name deep in the back of her throat like a sensuous purr. “D’at is a name I ‘ave not ‘eard for many moons.”

He refused to allow her to see his surprise. The flames, the men, her looks…a new witch, indeed. “You are associated to him, are you not?”

“Keen boy. Yes.” Dalma said brightly. Then, that same perplexing smile crawled over her. “An’ no.”

The air seemed to grow colder. He resisted the shiver in his voice. “Then, who are you?”

“I am many t’ings. Shaman. Priestess.” Her eyes rolled over him. “Witch.” She pursed her lips. “Goddess. But I am not just d’es t’ings, neither. Identity is a precious t’ing. Particularly to mortals, no? You all so desperately crave identity.” She stood and moved closer to Adam, her hips swaying in tempo to unheard music. “I once, too, was a children’s rhyme: I am ocean, I am sky, but as dey change, so do I.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, young king, I be no friend o’ Death. I only offer freedom.” She was closer now. Too close. Adam pulled back, hands behind him, and slid until his back hit the wall of the wooden shack. She bent herself low, her face inches from his own. “I can tell a man’s fate by ma’ ‘ands.” She raised her fingers, reached outwards—with nowhere left to turn, Adam only flinched away—but she caught his
face between her palms, and held him firmly. “I met men wid’ lust for fame. Eternity. Men wid’ a touch ’o destiny…”

Adam could only peer up at her, lost and alone, between the walls of this dream, this new reality, and Tia Dalma.

“And me…” He whispered.

She inched a heartbeat closer. She gave a lick of her lips. “Your future is clouded.”

Adam tightened his stare. Whatever she might do, he would not be afraid. “I am cursed.”

And then, with a single word, she dropped away. She stole like a shadow. The hard imprints of her fingertips along Adam’s face as traceless as a blown out candle. “…Cursed, say you?”

“Yes.” Adam answered. He still kept his voice low, deep inside of his chest.

“An’ who be givin’ you dis fate?” Tia Dalma asked, her own voice rough to match his own, her wonder apparent.

“I did.”

“But you are no sailor. You? A breed of dog d’at I do not get to pet often,” Dalma persuaded. “Why dis curse be’ so sweet on you?”

Adam gave a bitter laugh. “Sweetness has nothing to do with it. And why would you care of my fate?”

At this, Dalma gave a dry smirk. “Ol’ Dalma is no friend o’ Death. Do you fear me, child?”

His heart quickened. Adam only lowered his head. “I fear many things. Including you.”

Next, when he lifted his head, he was face to face with her once more. She did muse in his surprise, his face so easy to read at the will of strangers. “T’ink of me as… impartial ground.”

“A witch with well-meaning? Dubious.” Adam answered her, his voice breathy. He had not expected her to suddenly be so close. It was as if she only simulated movement for his sake. Perhaps, like Hades, she hardly needed to pretend to be human at all.

“An’ a man who don’t like to be touched? Unusual.” She smirked again, in jest, but Adam remained unmoved.

“Not by you.” Was all he said.

“I don’t bite, child.” Dalma continued.

“I may,” Adam allowed. “My curse turns me into a Beast. Fangs, fur…claws. You shouldn’t come near me.” It was both the painful truth and his only defense. How easily it might be to get her away from him if he could change at will. “I am dangerous.”

However, Dalma stared deep into his eyes and did not move her hands. She merely listed backwards, and, without warning, sat down. There they stayed, eye to eye, an arm’s length away. “Den’ I shall not touch.”

She gave a wave of her hand and before Adam a bowl appeared. From its insides, a boiling, hissing mist spouted from its mouth. She waved a hand through it, pooling the mist around them both,
obscuring the already shadowy shack.

“What is this?” Adam asked her wearily.

“I ‘ave answered many o’ your questions,” She began. “Perhaps, you may answer some o’ mine. Dis pot ‘o mine will be our guide.” She glanced up at him and gave a small wink with her large eyes. “It may not look like much compared to de’ magickal items you know but it is safe.”

Adam gazed her somberly. He had little choice. “What is it that you wish to know?”

“De’ curse. It is bigga’ den you. Bigga’ den Death. You wear de’ lingin’s o’ a perfume I once knew well. Tell me, ‘andsome. Is d’ere someone else involved in dis magic?”

Adam could only offer the shattered remains of what he knew. Of what little he, Belle, his staff, anyone ever knew. “There was an Enchantress. I was cruel to her.” Adam forced the words to flow as the tears had from that painful night, that final night, where that kindly old woman had stared up at him, desperate for shelter from the bitter cold. “I knew not her name. Perhaps she had none. Perhaps she was never there at all.” He close his eyes. He pulled in a breath. “My wife…she told me once that she was a beggar woman in her village. Her name was Agathe.” A shake of his head. “She is gone now. And her name does not matter.”

At this, the pot hissed—and glowing, bright green light seemed to echo from inside. It flooded the room. Dalma only gave a pleased laugh, her head thrown back, and her hair moving like snakes to her shoulders. “Is dis all you know?”

“There isn’t anything else.”

Tia Dalma smiled at him. “D’ere is more. Far, far more.”

“About…The Enchantress?” Adam repressed a gasp. Her smile was too knowing. And the pot only rumbled more. “Can you tell me more? Will you? About why she torments me still?”

Dalma only gave a small laugh. A girlish thing. The green light from her magic glittered her face, turning her cheeks into a sickening mockery of a blush. “Care to make a deal, ‘andsome?”

Adam blinked at her. “A deal?”

“I don’t mind if’n you change none.”

His heart gave a pained skip. It all became clear. Her movement, her flirting, her clothing. Adam felt his mouth go dry. “N—no. Absolutely not.” That old priest’s words rushed through his mind—the rewards of magic, of offering one’s body in exchange. He felt ashamed that he did not see it sooner. Repulsed. Then, against his own will, disheartened. He would not ever act upon such an exchange. And, even if he dared, what good did he have left to offer? He could barely offer his wife anything if he could not break the curse.

But that was just. As the old priest advised.

He would make his own way. He had to be the one to break the curse.

“You misunderstand.” Adam explained deliberately. “I do not want for anything, or any information, that requires what you ask. I only wish to have this fate be taken away.”

“Den I cannot help wid’out somet’ing in return.” Tia Dalma lamented gravely. She picked up the pot as if to put it away. “D’at is too bad.”
"The Enchantress left me little to sell. I own no soul. No magic. I hardly have a body to give. I came to this sea with only what she left me; a magic mirror that guided me here."

That seemed to gather her attention once more. "A mirror?"

Adam felt, once more, caught before her eyes and the face of the moon. "It—it shows you what you want the most."

The pot fell from her hands. It hit the wooden flooring with a metal clank. But Dalma did not move. She merely stared into the empty silence and shadow. "...She stole it." Was all the witch whispered, her tongue thick.

Adam resisted pulling back, finding only wall. "What was that?"

Tia Dalma lifted her head, and, across her face, Adam could only see the fury of a woman crossed. A look he was all too familiar with in his lifetime. "She stole ma' enchantments. Ma' magic. She stole de' spells d'at I slaved for!" At this, Tia pulled the pot back into place, spat into its center, and then lifted a single hand. From the pot, a huge rush of water sprayed—catching Adam across his face—and curling the droplets into the air where...where they remained, suspended. "She always been a conniving little pest!"

Adam could only wince at the impending droplets below. "How—how can one steal magic?"

Dalma looked at Adam. She then twisted her wrists and those water drops hardened. Turned to ice. Turned sharp. Adam gasped at how the spun just above them both. "Tell me...child." She whispered. "Do she still use snow to get her way?! Do she still love to capture de' water an' make it still?! Do she still t'ink de' ocean petty?!"

"There—there was a storm that night. The night she cursed me and my family. Then—then when I dreamt—when Hades came to me—I dreamt of a castle of ice. He says that it is not his doing, it is hers!" He confessed quickly, the words pouring hotly over his lips.

At this, Tia Dalma seemed to soften. She uncurled her fingers and the ice pooled together, foaming in midair, and then, all at once, they dropped. Cold fingers of rain pattered their hair and shoulders. Adam could only shiver, grateful at what they now were, and that they were not sharpened bits of ice.

"Are you telling me this kind of magic has been used before?"

"I once gave a pirate a compass d'at did d'exact enchantment d'at your mirror do." She said gently. "Forgive me o' ma' anger. I just did not t'ink..." She turned away and her dark hair fluttered with the lapping of the ocean. She lifted her hand again. She scrunched her eyes tightly over Adam. "Again you mention Hades..." She collected a breath. "'ow much do you know about 'im?"

"Hardly nothing. Only what he's said."

Tia offered a tight smile. "Hades says a lot o' t'ings."

"Yes," Adam managed. "He does."

She hummed again, tapping at her chin, before she gave a short nod, deciding something in her mind. "We cannot make a deal. So I cannot tell you more about your Enchantress." Her dark eyes sparkled, faint with the movement of something else, a far better plan. "But I will tell you a tale. An' I will give you a little advice. If you choose to take d'at advice is yours alone." She swirled her fingers around the mouth of her pot in contemplation. "I do not like dis story. It is very sad."
“I am listening.” Adam replied, his eyes tight to her face. “Please. I thank you for whatever you can give.”

“Do not t’ank me yet.” Was all Tia Dalma said. “Young king.”

Then, for all her talking, Dalma quieted.

From all around the wicks of the candles lifted, and, one by one, they floated over and towards the pair. The witch placed a single finger to her lips. The moving candles cloaked the room in shadows and wavering flecks of light, golden pieces that skittered across the room, and then disappeared with the movement of Dalma’s hands. She was playing with the light, the flames, and mist, and created shadows along the walls…

A gentle, cloudy mist filled the room. Inside it, Adam felt his blood run cold. For a larger, dangerous shadow was poised in that mist, the form of Hades. The only characteristic glowing through were his burning yellow eyes, like a lantern, and his pointed teeth, ragged as an ancient constellation painted over a star chart.

“Many, many eons ago,” she whispered. “De’ Lord o’ de’ Dead attempted to till de’ earth for ‘imself.” She waved her long fingers, and, like puppets to strings, the mist unfolded. Now, the shadowy form of Hades was not alone; a new one, bigger, taller, arosed, shaped like a crippling ocean wave was beside him. The shadow of Hades offered clawed hands filled with treasure before the wave but it remained unmoved. “‘owever, ‘is brother, Lord o’ de’ Sea, Poseidon, refused ‘im. For it is not Death’s place to be upon d’earth.”

“Hades is no man to deny.” Adam watched in horror as Hades’ smoke-filled body burst into hellish red flames. Within the shack, Adam swear he could hear the swell of a thousand spirits, crying out in pain. Poseidon’s wave, too, then disappeared. “Immortal do not fear Death—but Hades knew betta’.” Another shadow—the skin of the ocean, calm and steady, and the silhouette of a woman, sitting upon a tiny island. “For Poseidon ‘ad fell for a ‘alf-mortal woman. Wid’ ‘is love, he gave ‘er de’ life o’ a fish.” Here, de’ woman shed ‘er legs for a tail…a mermaid’s fin. “An’, wid’ ‘er, dey ‘ad seven daughters, each as beautiful as d’eir mother, an’ each only ‘alf mortal.”

“‘owever, Hades waited. An’ waited. For he knew Poseidon would not dare to t’ink ‘is wife could be taken from ‘im wid’ all de’ power o’ de’ sea. He changed ‘er name. Claimed to make ‘er a god such as ‘im…” The woman, now mermaid, had her backed turned away, as, over the horizon, a giant galleon of a ship sailed. It was headed straight for her. Adam felt his blood turn to ice. “…But it was too late.” Suddenly, shadow Hades sprang as the ship overtook her, and his body coiled around her like a serpent, his mouth stretched gruesomely wide, his teeth a long spiral, as he swallowed her whole. Then, the mist settled once more. There was only nothing. Just that same island, now, disturbingly, shaped like the body of a sleeping woman. A low, mournful cry, like a whale’s song, echoed across the empty mist. “Hades’ revenge ‘ad begun.”

The mist wavered, erupted, and Poseidon sprung to life—in his great arms, the mermaid-like bodies of his daughters, writhing, squirming, but safe. “Poseidon did not fear Death—but for de’ lives o’ ‘is ‘alf mortal daughters. ‘ating humanity for d’eir ships, ‘ating ‘is brother for what he ‘ad done—’ating ‘imself for de’ death o’ ‘is wife. He ‘id dem. Deep, deep beneath de’ waves.”

“One cannot hide from death,” Adam said quietly, his voice not daring to shatter the illusion playing out before him.

“Oh no?” Tia Dalma intoned, her dark brows curved skywards. She moved her hands again. The figures melted to reveal only Hades, alone, over an empty sea. “It is said…Hades still searches for Poseidon’s daughters to dis very day.”
Adam stared at the mist before him, filling his mouth and nostrils, and breathed out, forcing the taste from his tongue and lungs. “Why are you telling me this story?”

“Hades used to be…a sweet man, you know. Death is natural. It should not be feared. But time, time changes everyone. Some into monsters…” She trailed off. “It is true. Death comes for all but…”

“You’re telling me…I can hide, too?” Adam finished, his voice in awe.

She gave a deep nod. “Yes…but I bid you warnin’: once it is done, it can be impossible to return. You must ‘old onto somet’ing precious. You cannot lose it. If you lose it, den you may be lost forever, wonderin’, unsure o’ who you are.”

Adam considered this. “…I do not think I have a choice. I must keep living. I must break this curse.”

She quieted. The mist was beginning to lift. The air, once more, breathable. Before Adam now was just a woman, a copper pot, and a look upon her face that seemed very sad. She took a deep breath herself before she said: “Ma’ name was not always Dalma. Ma’ name was Calypso.” She looked upon Adam, her eyes dark and deep, and dropped them once more, as if ashamed herself. “Names are very important in dis world. Dey are a magic anyone can possess.” She placed the pot to her side. “You can out run Death… if you be willing. I can tell you ‘ow. As I ‘ave told others.”

She then moved forward, her hands searching, until she found his face once more.

Adam felt the room reeling around him. How could this be real? Dare he truly believe in what she was saying? What did she mean about names? The Enchantress? Hades? Where did one begin and the other end? And what of Poseidon?

“I…I…” Adam staggered. His chest tight.

Then, from all around, a low wailing rattled through the shack.

It was the sound before. The sound that had caused the change. But yet, there was no pain. Still, it froze Adam to his spot, his breathing flown away from him in anticipation of the agony. Tore Tia Dalma away from the rough stubble along his face. His eyes leapt frantically about the room—the windows, the hole in the roof, then the shaman’s, her own eyes wide and unblinking, for, finally, he was not alone! She had heard it, too!

“What is that?!” Adam cried out. His voice was nearly lost, thrashed along the trembling wood. “I have heard that before and—and—”

“It is Poseidon!” She answered quickly. She moved around her shack like a storm herself, tearing open bags and books. She flipped through them and then tossed them away. She moved to her table. She moved back to her pot, fingers dancing over its edge, as it hissed to life. This time, the smoke had turned red. “Oh no, no,” she murmured. “Hades—Hades is moving faster den I ‘ad thought! ‘e is up to somet’ing most unnatural—an’ Poseidon is angry! Hades—’e is searching for ‘im, an’ will find ‘im, soon!”

“What is it?! He denied his brother once—what could else could Poseidon want that Hades could want?”

“Besides ‘is daughters,” Dalma—or was she Calypso—“’is trident!” She screeched back to him. She motioned over the pot faster, faster—“It is ‘is most powerful artifact, like your Enchantress’s magic, ma’ dealings, Hades’ scheming! I do not ‘ave much time before you must go! I cannot ‘old you here against Poseidon’s will!”
At this, Adam reached out for her. He laced his hand over her wrist, holding on as tightly as he could. The sound was increasing, blurring out his vision. The room was going to bits—just like his own skull had at the sound—she was right. He was fading from this place!

“Tell me! Tell how to escape Hades! How do I—“

She held his eyes—once more, they looked so much older than she could ever appear. Adam found his heart shudder under his ribs. “You must give up everyt’ing.” She said. “Everyt’ing. You must give up your name, your body, where you go—d’at is de’ way you escape Hades. It will not be forever. But it will give you more time.”

“How—how could I possibly—“

“De’ curse will ‘ide you. Hades wants you dead but you cannot give ‘im d’at. You cannot fight de’ change. When you feel it coming upon you once more—you you must give in. If you do not, ‘e will ‘ave you! It will kill you to stop it! You must change! You must ‘ide, far, far away! You will tell no one your name! Your name will reveal you once more!”

*Change. I have to change.* Adam winced at her words. The sound was over taking him. Could this be real? Was this all a dream? Was this dying? Was this living? How could he give in to the one thing he could not do? When he had turned into his Beastly form that night in Corona, he had been searching, lost, alone, in pain—was that to be his fate for all time? He couldn’t even remember what he was searching for! How could this be acceptance? Is this what the Enchantress demanded of him? Not to just take his body—it was now so much more than that—but to hide from his friends…his life…Belle…Belle!

To become a true Beast. Everything gone. Even his name.

His final fear.

“I am sending you away before ‘is anger destroys ma’ home! You are to return to de’ lan’ o’ which you came! An’ you must do one more t’ing for me—you must find a man named Jack Sparrow! For I do believe ‘is compass is what is leading Hades to rule de’ seas! You must!”

Jack Sparrow. Adam felt his stomach twist. What else more did this world demand of him before his life was through?

“Change your name—give up your identity. As I did mine. As Poseidon changed ‘is wife’s, den changed ‘is own for ‘im to become Trident, in mockery o’ what ‘is brother wants most. You must. You must, young king.”

“Wait—Wait!” Adam felt himself slipping from this place. No walls, no light, no heat—no sound. “Calypso, wait—“

“I ‘ave given you more time in your reality but you must ‘urry. De’ tide is coming an’ no one can stop d’at. If you wish to save d’ose you love. If you wish to save yourself—den you must remember —“ She turned and gripped his hand tightly, the final sensation not lost to him. “Names be very, very powerful. Do not lose yours. Do not lose yours!”

*I cannot lose…my name,* Adam thought, before her hand slipped from his grasp, and all went quiet inside his head once more.
AN: If you have a moment, please let me know what you think!
AN: Hello again everyone! Thank you SO VERY MUCH for your support, comments, reviews, follows, etc, it thrills me to NO END how much everyone has enjoyed this lil' fic. Well, I say 'lil'. Har. I wanted to give a huge thank you for everyone that mentioned that they enjoyed the lore changes I made, particularly with Ariel's father and Hades and all the fun mysteries that go along with that. You can ask my editor about how insanely nervous I was about posting the previous chapter. I believe most of my texts were: "I'VE RUINED EVERYTHING. THIS IS STUPID. THEY'RE GOING TO HATE IT. I CAN'T DO IT." Hahaha, so I was so delighted when you guys were so kind to me and rolled with my punches!

By the by, for all of you that enjoyed Calypso's accent, you'll once more, be thanking my editor! While I wrote the base dialogue, it was my amazing editor that jazzed up her speaking pattern and accent, and she was endlessly happy at the reviews that mentioned what a good job she did (not I, hahaha, I have NO ear for accents), so, from us both, thank you all for enjoy! Anyhow, I hope you enjoy this chapter as well! Yes, many anachronistic little items are mentioned in this chapter. I think I've worked hard enough to earn SOME gags by now, hahaha.

Thank you again for reading!

A pause. A short breath. It wouldn't be long now before he asked. Tiana merely drew in a deep breath herself as she gave a brief fluttering of her eyes to summon all her willpower to not smack Eugene upside his head and demand to know what had really happened in Eric's bathing house. Why she was, breathlessly and suddenly, dragged to a stranger's side, Eugene desperate and covered in blood and please, Tiana, please, you gotta help me, please, help him! And how, for whatever reason, now she was expected to have all the answers to the mess she had stumbled into.

"Is...he awake yet?" Eugene tested. It was both feet into the river or nothing with Eugene Fitzherbert. Tiana would swear this over the Bible. His little toe was not required for most cases, if he didn't already cut it off in some outrageous drinking game years ago. He wouldn't explain the blood. He offered no answers himself, but humm'd and hermm'd every few minutes, clearly desperate for Tiana to throw him a bone, as if she was the one keep him on edge!

"Tiana?" Eugene asked again.

And again.

So, here they were, Eugene and Tiana, with her tearing apart Eric's very expensive bath towels, methodically moving her hands to check the breathing of the man before her. Adam. That was his name. Eugene only said it seventeen times in the past minute.

How this Adam person and Eugene ended up squaring off together, Tiana couldn't say. They looked nothing alike and for all the roguish company Eugene tended to keep, this man certainly seemed separate from that crowd. While Eugene was all blown-out brown eyes and I'm-Thin-as-a-Beanpole-But-I-Occasionally-Convince-Women-That-It's-Muscle, Adam was definitely royalty. Those features, even beneath his moon-pale skin, had to be blue blood. Tiana was half surprised that these clothes weren't covered in blue instead of red. She had met enough of Naveen's glittering family to not point-blank admit that, yes, often times the wealthy also got the lion's share of the pretty genes. What was it about royal families and being so good looking? Regular nutritious diets? She didn't want to be so bold as to call it unfair. That wasn't right to think God made anything to be unfair...but,
really. Really.

The more she spent looking, the more she kept wondering about it all. Even if she wouldn't exactly call Adam her type. He was handsome, she supposed, if one liked that whole I've-Clearly-Never-Shaved-My-Own-Face-Without-Assistance-look, as, wow, Tiana marveled at the whole sported get-up, as Adam had so much hair—tattered remains of auburn sideburns and long strands about his face, that her daddy would've had a fit to see him in the streets...

"Is he awake yet?"

Oh, Eugene, Tiana muttered under her breath. He'd started up once more.

"I don't know, Eugene. You're being very loud."

"How do you know what to do?" Eugene questioned, his dark eyes drilling into the woman beside him. It had only been minutes since Tiana had shaken him awake but Eugene couldn't help but feel anxious as to why Adam wasn't awake yet, why he wasn't talking yet, why this wasn't working yet. "How do you know what you're doing is even doing what it's supposed to do?"

"You're asking a lot of questions while I'm trying to concentrate," Tiana returned sternly.

"But. he, uh, he's gonna be okay?"

Tiana looked at him teasingly. Despite the blood, dried by the time she had arrived, the wounds over Adam's head weren't so bad. Sure, they looked pretty bad to anyone caught off guard, but Tiana had seen worse in her very own kitchens when boiling oil was involved. Whatever had happened, she had never seen Eugene break that aloof, cheerful expression of his. It made for an easy friendship with Naveen. They were all too happy to play their pranks all day long. But what was this? What had made Eugene Fitzherbert this upset? There definitely was more than some "pirate scouting gone wrong", as Eugene had originally told her.

"You sound awful concerned, Eugene."

Eugene sunk his shoulders. His impatience was getting the better of him, and he knew it. However hard he tried to remember, no matter what he pushed aside for basic first aid, he always ended up in the same place: Rapunzel's magic, light and beautiful and endless, coiling around a broken bone or spit wound, and within moments, the horrifying ordeal would be over. He didn't want to admit how much of a luxury it was to not have to think about the consequences outside of Corona. The island was just too comfortable with Rapunzel taking care of, well, just about everything. It was a golden, peaceful place.

And...it was a dangerous mindset to keep without, occasionally, wondering how the outside world fared. That magic couldn't fix everything. Eugene struggled to remember that...sometimes, feeling helpless was part of the process of waiting for better news. Helplessness, Eugene thought, picking the word from his thoughts and attempting to figuratively drown it in the mouth of the fountain fish. He hadn't felt that kind of skin-revolting shame in years. Since the crown. Since Rapunzel. Since Gothel had tied her up and dragged her down a staircase...Eugene closed his eyes. He had taken to staring at Adam again, and he had trouble staring at Adam's face for too long, even if he awaited signs of life.

That face. It was near the same one that had stared at him under the beams of an old cellar door, a face much like that vile Gothel herself, a face that Eugene sometimes still had nightmares about, a face that Rapunzel rarely, very rarely, accidentally slipped, called "mother", and the look of horror that spread through her entire body, a horror that Eugene couldn't stop, couldn't take away, a face...
that easily darkened and easily demanded, a face that broke all her process of healing...

A face that said: I dare you to take this from me.

"It's just…" Eugene broke his silence with a heavy tone. "With Rapunzel, these things don't take this long. Hell, they hardly ever even happen."

Tiana studied the thief's face with a guarded look of her own. "And that's another thing: why, exactly, haven't you run off to get Rapunzel?"

A pause. Tiana wondered if perhaps her tongue was a little too sharp for her own good.

"I don't run off to get-" Eugene began starkly. He sounded a little offended. Then, he lightened. "Okay, fine. I usually run off to get Rapunzel. Fine. Look, things got really weird last night and I don't want her involved."

"Yet, here I am." Tiana motioned to the bandages all around them, wet, bloodied things, and then to Adam's head, promptly placed in her lap. "Wouldn't you consider this 'involved'?"

"You were a complete accident! What were you even doing here anyway?"

"This is a bathhouse, Eugene. What do you think I was planning to do in here?"

"I'm serious. Where did you learn to dress wounds?"

Tiana allowed her weight to shift back. She listed onto her knees, fingers still lightly holding the pressure to both sides of Adam's head. She blew out a quick rush of air to drive back the sweat daring to snake its way down her brow. "I learned how to do almost everything all on my own. This just looks impressive. Besides, you asked me to help."

"Yeah, of course," Eugene returned briskly, "And how could I not? When I woke up you had already fixed him a hell'vua lot better than I did! I couldn't just let you walk away!"

She sniffed. Fluttered her eyes again. "Okay. Tell me why these wounds match those of an internal blunt force trauma and not external?"

Eugene continued to stare at her in complete bewilderment. "What war did you serve in at the age of six?!"

At this, Tiana offered only a slight roll of her dark eyes. Really, her terminology wasn't all that impressive. Anyone could read a basic first aid manual. And then, maybe a little more as she had, stolen into libraries, hungry to understand the true effect those finals moments truly had before the Good Lord had separated her from her daddy on this earth for the final time…

"If you can't handle the wait…" Tiana lingered her voice. She could avoid questions, too. Their conversation has taken on twice its hushed tone in the echoing walls of the bathing house.

At this, Eugene could only give aggravated snort. "I can handle the wait! What I can't handle is- is-" he looked back at Adam and winced. "All this blood, and his attitude, and- all this magical crap that's been happening!"


Eugene placed his hands over his mouth and pulled down hard at the skin there, trying to save the handful of seconds he had to choose his next words, and chose them wisely. "You don't want to
know, Tiana. You really don't. All you need to know? You just saved his life."

Tiana knitted her eyebrows, clearly uncomfortable. She returned to stare at the man. She then looked back at Eugene, that worn look on his face, the blood still dark over his vest. She could feel a lump rise in her throat over a stranger she didn’t know, her mind turning over to a different time and place, where she wished someone might’ve said that to her, until she had to put that pain down herself, like a family pet, rabid in the streets. "Please don't say that."

"But you did."

"I'm just tryin' my best, okay? You asked me. I saw the blood. So I did what I could. I've never had magic and I'm not a doctor. I'm a chef. If you're convinced I saved him, fine, but I want answers, Eugene Fitzherbert, and I am not leaving until I get them."

Eugene seemed to crumple at this. He pulled at his own face, hair, lips, before finally deciding on his last, and only, hope. "Okay. You deserve to know. Just." He bit his lip. "Please...don't say anything. Not to anyone. Yes, not even Rapunzel. Especially not Rapunzel." He squeezed his eyes shut, hard, and then opened them again to take in her full gaze. "At least not yet. I still gotta talk to him. I need to know what he wants to do. Now that the horns are gone and all."

Tiana blinked, hard. "Excuse me? Did you just say..?"

"Horns?" Eugene sighed. "Yeah...it's...it's a long story." He only leaned closer and began, in long, breathless whispers, everything he possibly knew about the stranger in her lap, why Eric's bathhouse was covered in his blood, and that wild, inexhaustible look that haunted Eugene's eyes—and Tiana felt herself pulled in deeper than she could have imagined a midnight bath would ever get her.

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Eugene wasn't sure what surprised him more: that Tiana seemed more than reasonable about all the madness he had just told her—or that she actually was up for a rational debate about it. He had told her everything he could possibly imagine. The pirate episode. The bits and pieces he had gathered about Belle and Adam before they had arrived at Corona. How Belle had fought with Rapunzel, two elements that clashed together in a back bedroom. What ragged little Adam would say about his own past. That this curse was gone once upon a time. That he didn't seem to know why or how it was happening again. That, after the horns, he seemed to be dying.

Dying, there along that beach. And forgetting. He had trouble articulating basic things—important things, like remembering Eugene's name or why he had even gone alone to that beach at all.

Eugene couldn't bring himself to explain the final part: that dark, terrible voice that had twisted his present into Adam's past. He couldn't help but turn the mystery over and over again inside his head. It was impossible to not think about. Why did it happen? Was the curse widening its grip? Could it take other people down with it? Why there? Why him?

Why Adam's father?

Eugene felt a cold finger dance down his spine at the next question that burned into his mind:

*Rapunzel. What did this mean for Rapunzel?*

Eugene resisted his desperate need to curl into a ball along the floor.

Everything Eugene had fought for, everything he knew was right in his heart— that Adam was a good person and Belle was just as scared as he was and that they deserved a chance to fight whatever the hell was going on...for just a moment, Eugene felt afraid for his own life. It was a selfish, tightening
fear that made the thief's jaw ache in spite. What if it was better to just walk away? The unnerving question asked him, a whisper that he couldn't push away. What if Rapunzel was right…?

If Tiana had any idea about her friend's internal moral debate, she didn't seem terribly interested. She only inched forward, closer and closer to Eugene, her eyes bright, her mouth slightly opened, as if she could drink in the rest of the unspoken words between them.

"So, this curse, it's killin' him?" She curved her vowels in hushed, longer exaggeration, matching the wide stare of those huge eyes, and how her dimples seemed to twinkle in her cheeks.

Eugene leapt for the swiftness of Tiana's rationality. He clung to it. He was so sick of being alone. He was tired, too. Beyond his own wit's end, really. The Snuggly Duckling was a lifetime away and, even worse, the real threat of a pirate attack, and Adam, Adam still hadn't stirred, and he couldn't help but whimper the rest of everything he knew to her, selfish and terrible and needing someone else to sink with. Eugene always knew he couldn't die alone. How Adam managed to separate himself, emotionally, physically, away from the living, Eugene could never do.

"Yes. I think it really is. I think this because, when I saw him before, Tiana, when he was, ya know, a beast, I was scared. Scared out of my mind. But he wasn't bleeding. He wasn't. He was...just fine, I guess? Can you honestly be fine when you're cursed?!" Eugene raised his voice in utter exasperation, then, gave in, his words becoming a low chuckle, humorless and drained. "Blood or no, that isn't even a fifth of how badly he upset Rapunzel."

Tiana merely nodded at this. Her lips pursed in thought. She stared back down at the sleeping man resting over her skirts. "He's...dangerous? In this...form?"

Eugene closed his eyes. "I don't know."

A hand reached out to touch his shoulder. A squeeze. Eugene opened them to see Tiana looking at his warmly. "I...know this may sound strange, Eugene, but I believe you. I…" Here, Tiana struggled to find her voice. "I've dealt with curses before-and animals and…" She stopped. "Naveen and I both are...well, I know he plays the fool, but he's actually very observant. Don't get your hopes too high as what we went through sounds very different than Adam's. But I want you to know that I understand."

"Seriously?" The word slid slowly from Eugene's lips. Tiana was always so extraordinarily put together, busying and dizzyingly grounded and (occasionally) sassy that Eugene had to imagine her words running through his head a second time for her confession to register. "You...understand?"

Another quick nod. Now, Tiana looked at Eugene with a fierceness in her eyes that he could recall seeing so well. "And I believe that you want to protect him."

"See, now I have questions for you. Mainly about your sanity. Because if you're agreeing with me, then sister, now I'm the worried one."

"How about we focus on one thing at a time?" Tiana returned, her tone serious, but her eyes a little lighter.

"Alright." Eugene nodded. He tucked away Tiana's little aside for later. Animals and curses? In America? It had never occurred to him that his friends could equally run into their own madness outside of his own bubble of contentment. His concern and fear for Rapunzel's magic being used against her will felt a little ignorant now. After all, Rapunzel could only heal...and, debatably, bring back the dead. A little. Maybe. If she got there in time. But she wasn't dangerous. She was just powerful in her own way. She wasn't cursed nor could she summon curses.
Magic in this world must be far bigger and far more unusual than Eugene ever might have imagined. Everywhere, too. Like it was inescapable.

"Tell me more about what you saw that night," Tiana prompted. She shifted again, pulling Adam away from her lap to set him gently back along the tiles. She carefully began unweaving her latest set of bandages from around his head, hurrying to replace them with fresh ones.

"God. Alright. So, I saw his, uh, 'animal side', right? And he wasn't bleeding. He mentioned to me before that he was trying to force the curse back. Or. Or something. I think, anyway. Honestly, it's hard to get a straight answer from Adam in general, let alone when he's half-conscious."

"That's called a 'concussion'." Tiana explained gently. She was nearly done now with the bandages and was, strangely, inspecting his eyes. Eugene made a face as she forced open eyelids. It creeped Eugene out.

"Is that, uh, bad?"

"It depends. You said horns came out of his skull?"

Eugene gulped. He tried not to picture what other horrifying creature-like things would threaten Adam's life next if he refused. Claws ripping apart fingernails, horns through an already open wound, fangs to puncture lips..."Yeah."

She grimaced. "Well, we can't move him for a while, then."

A pause. Eugene could only feel that impatient panic rise up once more inside of him. He twisted around to take in the bloodied bath, the destroyed towels. How much did he really accomplish in helping? Had he done anything at all?

"Must be nice to be helpful," Eugene found himself murmuring. He darted his eyes to Tiana's and back again. He gritted his teeth, pushing down resentment. "Am I an idiot, Tiana, for not getting help sooner? What if I had just told you sooner? What if—"

"You can 'what if' yourself all day, Eugene, but I'm here now, and that is what matters."

"I know that you probably wanna tell the others—"

"No," Tiana cut him off harshly. "I really don't."

A pause.

"You don't?"

"No. I don't understand. This feels...wrong. I've always understood magic to be so straightforward. Almost literal. There has to be something we're missing. Like, how big is this curse? Do you know anything about his family? His folks?"

Eugene forced himself to look innocent. He had conjured that image his whole life with ease. Somehow, it seemed to be slipping under Tiana's imperious stare. "What would his folks have to do with anything?"

"I'm just asking. I'm trying to just gather as much information as I can. Y'think they made some kind of deal?"

"No..." was all Eugene answered slowly. "He doesn't really talk about his parents much."
"Strange." Tiana countered. She narrowed her eyes down at Adam. "Hiding something, are we?"

Eugene felt his stomach give an uncomfortable twist. "Uh, I don't think it's that. But I agree with you. I think you're onto something. This curse is bigger than just him."

Another lapse of silence. Eugene found himself gathering bits of the clothes to hide the evidence. Draining the blood from Eric's tub. He glanced back to Tiana. "You won't even tell Naveen?"

Tiana blew a small puff of air upwards, scattering her dark hair from its make-shift, pinned up style. Strands of her curls had come undone from behind her ears. "Maybe. If I can't figure this out, first."

"Didn't take you for a mystery kind of gal."

"I've read a few good books in my time. What? You just assumed I only like cook books?" Tiana flashed those dark eyes to Eugene as if to mock him. "Do you even know how to read, Fitzherbert?"

Eugene resisted a smirk. "Not really my thing. But yeah, occasionally."

"You and Naveen. Couldn't sit still if we tied y'all down."

Naveen. Eugene felt a small sharp pain shoot down his neck. He fidgeted with his small pile of clothes. "Speaking of...how do you think he'll take it? If you do tell him?"

"If Adam stays human?" Tiana asked, her tone distracted. "He'll probably want to help."

"And...if Adam doesn't?"

"Oh, Naveen will still want to help. He'll just have to stop his knees from shakin' first."

Eugene gave a short laugh. "Fair. He's pretty terrifying."

At this, Tiana softened her gaze. "Belle..." Was all she said. She twisted a curl behind her left ear in thought.

"Yeah." Was all Eugene could really offer back. "She's the only one brave enough to do this."

Tiana looked at him once more. "What do you mean? You mean you aren't? You're the only one who's managed this so far."

Eugene shook his head. "Blood freaks me out." He began drily. "I drink too much. People say I'm annoying. I'm just the village idiot."

"I don't think that. And I doubt he does, either."

"Eh." Eugene glanced at his hands. "I've known what it's like to not have anything...but I've just rarely felt so helpless." He forced the images that swirled through his mind: Rapunzel's tears and Belle's look of defeat. Adam—saying that he trusted him. "I feel helpless."

"If you are so quick to say I saved his life, then you must know something else." Her dark eyes willed into him, into the weight of her answer. "Well, so did you."

"I just made a split decision and it worked out. But if the curse is killing him then he needs to change...and I just..." Eugene trailed off, unsure of how to tell Tiana the rest.

"But you said that Belle implied that when she first met Adam he was still under the curse." Tiana continued. "But he was still himself- just a prince in disguise. If he changed again he could
communicate with us, right? The way he had to have spoken to Belle."

"I'm not so sure. That night in my kingdom, he acted more animal than man. And he said himself that he couldn't remember the change or what he was looking for. Just that he was in pain." Eugene explained, his voice empty.

"In pain, but no blood?" Tiana asked quietly.

"No blood." Eugene answered.

"So...if he changes again, he won't die but..." Tiana couldn't bring herself to say it.

"You have to promise me something, Tiana." Eugene urged, his voice low. "Because we're in serious trouble. If Adam changes again, if he doesn't know who we are...if..." Eugene swallowed roughly. "If he is more beast than man...I...I can't promise that I..."

"Don't go there," Tiana said calmly. "Not yet. We aren't out of options yet."

_Belle_. Eugene thought. Her shoving him away. Fierce and intelligent.

"Belle would know what to do." Eugene told her. "If only we- if only we could just get to her."

"I know Eugene. I agree, too. We _do_ need Belle."

"Ugh," Eugene groaned. He pulled at his face again. With the clothes collected and the tub drained, there was little else for him to do. He paced once more. Feeling stupid. Feeling slightly insane.

"You know, Eugene," Tiana said suddenly. They had been quiet for some time, with only Eugene's boots to break the silence. "There's a great saying where I'm from. About fire, and a kitchen, and _leaving._" He blinked. "You're asking me to leave?"

"I'm _telling_ you to leave. Go. It's late and I'm sure Rapunzel has been wondering where you went."

Eugene felt as if he had been knocked into the past all over again. "And what about you? And him?"

"I'll stay here. Naveen, Eric, and Aladdin are deep in their cards—and probably in their cups. He won't miss me until morning."

He looked toward Adam once more. He hadn't moved, not even a bit. Waiting could only get him so far. He allowed a tired sigh. He did miss Rapunzel. And his bed. And a world where things made sense. He supposed it was too late now to be so sentimental. "...Okay."

Tiana quirked her brow. "Really? No big speech? It was that easy?"

Eugene offered a weary smirk at her. "It was that easy."

"I'll find you again once he's awake. In the morning, I would think." Tiana answered back. "I'm not leaving. I promise."

Eugene only gave one final nod. "Tiana...I—"

"_Go_, Eugene." Was all she said, before she returned her full attention back to Adam.

And with that, Eugene closed the door to the bathhouse, and was gone.
It was still dark when Adam opened his eyes. Thankfully, it was a far more natural kind of darkness. The long, wide windows that circled Eric's prized bathhouse were opened and glittering with the beads of stars, still and unblinking, as they had been when he had first arrived with Eugene. They offered little light. The glow filled the tub and the tiles in a hazy, silver starlight, and between his own eyes, slowly taking in the room, and its uncanny silence to the dull roar that had been his world before, Adam did not notice that there was a single pair of eyes staring at him with a heated, careful gaze.

"Can you move?" A voice asked him. Adam gave a little jump, turning suddenly to pull away from the unmistakable warmth of another body so close to his own. Strangely, he merely moved into more softness—a little pile of cloth none too far off from where he had laid. "I see that you can." The voice answered its own question, a tad amused. "Adam? Can you hear me?"

Adam blinked. This wasn't a voice to fear. It meant the world had returned as Calypso had said. This meant this voice belonged to... "Tiana?"

A soft exhale met his ears. She moved closer to him. Her hands were steady to take his shoulders. She pulled him near, as if to inspect him, and Adam lacked the time to prepare for her being so close. Even so, he found himself lacking the will to struggle away as he had with sea witch. Tiana was always spoken about with good grace in Belle's lead, and he had always heard that she was a more logical woman than those he usually met in political court. Adam attempted to submit under her touch as she snapped fingers in front of his eyes, shifted around his hair, and, finally, looked at him as if she had found a simple solution to what, Adam could only imagine, would be Eugene's ornate lie as to why he was found a bloodied mess in Eric's home.

"Okay. This is good, this is very good. If you can move, hear me, and see me, then we're better off than I thought." She moved her hands to turn on the fountain, rinsing her hands through the water, before she settled herself back, eye to eye, her eyes forward and alert. "Are you in any pain?"

Adam squirmed uncomfortably under her dark, watchful gaze. It was easy to see this woman had twice the confidence of a more practiced ruler, her every move deliberate and well-planned.

"Tiana?" the man rasped again. While he had been lying unconscious for hours, his timbre suggested otherwise, like he had actually been screaming, and she had merely failed to hear.

"And you're Adam, I'm sure." She reached out to gently shake his hand, unsure of how she should really address a wounded stranger she had only heard whispers of. "The pleasure is mine."

Adam could only stare at her. She was here, alone with him. Eugene was nowhere to be found. He reached up to touch at his hair, the wounds along his head, and found that his fingers brushed along bandages instead. They wrapped around the entirety of his head, forehead as well. "I...I…"

"I, um, took some liberties to help you." Tiana returned, her voice a little nervous. "Hope you don't mind. We'll get you better ones soon."

Again, Adam stared, dumbfounded. *Someone is working to save your life*, Calypso had told him. Someone like Tiana. Who had...medical knowledge, apparently? Medical knowledge and...what else? What had Eugene said to her? "No...I'm very grateful. I..." He stumbled, consumed by the rawness of his own voice echoing back to him. "Eugene? He's gone, I think?"

"Yes. I told him to get some sleep. He'd been looking after you far longer than I have."

"...I see."
"I understand if you're a little lost. If it helps, I can fill in you on what you've missed."

Adam raised his eyebrows at this. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Two hours, maybe?" Tiana answered. She didn't seem so sure herself. "I haven't really kept a close enough count."

"...Tiana. I want to apologize. I know that you perhaps hoped to not spend your night mending a stranger." Adam replied. "I don't know what it is that Eugene told you, but I…"

"He told me." Tiana said quietly. Their eyes met in the dark, blue and brown, and Tiana held hers strongly to trace his face. Her eyebrows tightened, as did her jaw, as she waited. "I know."

"You know." Adam intoned. It took him a moment to comprehend her words. If he had any remaining blood inside of his body, it fled from his face in that single heart stopping moment. "He told you."

*She knows.* His heart began to pound. Sweat collected, cold and clammy, over his skin. Rumors like wildfire. How could she sit there and be so calm? *She knows. Who else now knows? What has Eugene done?*

"Eugene said I saved your life. He said that he wanted me to know the real reason you both were here," Tiana explained quickly. Her eyes dashed around, taking in the only exit, and she seemed ready to move, as if she was already aware of Adam's thoughts to fly out of the bathhouse and ghost into the night. "...I want you to know that I don't regret what I did. I wanted to help."

"...You have saved my life." Adam said, after a long moment, his gaze heavy over her face. He attempted to stand and, again, like a miracle, he could. He no longer felt the world swaying under his feet. Tiana rose with him, returning to be close once more. "You and Eugene."

"*And* you can stand? I've seen men that could hardly speak after going through the likes of what you have. Is it the curse that makes you so resilient or is it you?"

Adam met her eyes in shock. She wasted no time in getting into the thick of what he desperately wished wasn't true. She spoke about him as if he was more fascinating than terrifying. He shook her question away. "If Eugene has told you, then you know what I am."

"I know what you might become, yes." Tiana returned, as sharp as the edge of a knife to take down Adam's thinly veiled suggestion that she wasn't safe with him. "What you are, however, is human. And someone that matters a great deal to Eugene, Ariel, and to Belle." She looked at him, her dark eyes probing yet overwhelming sincere. "I promise, Adam, I won't tell."

He could hardly believe his ears. This woman, all stranger and unflinching intelligence to his weakened defense that used to put so many off. There was something about Tiana's bright eyes that reminded him of his wife's. The mere connection felt like a new hot pain to turn him breathless without cause. This was all his fault. All Belle had worked so hard to procure and he had ruined it. Slowly but surely the others were finding out. God, what was becoming of him now? Human until the next change? If Eugene felt the fair price of his life was to offer the truth...if he actually took the Goddess's advice... Couldn't he at least protect his wife from his accursed fate?

"Adam?" Tiana asked, her voice suddenly worried. She placed a hand over his arm. "Do you feel cold? That's from the blood loss. You have to tell me what you're feeling. And we should probably get you back to your ship, too. I'll walk you back. Do you have someone else with you? I imagine you don't want me watching over you further."
Question after question. She was terribly rational about this. How? Why?

"...Forgive me," Adam rumbled coarsely. "You've left me quite speechless."

She studied him once more. "I know this is a lot. I can understand that, at least." She swallowed thinly and gave his arm a squeeze. "If anything, I should thank you for being patient with me. Naveen tells me I can be far too invasive but I don't share his hands-off worldview; If I'm getting to know somebody I'm getting to know them. I know what you're going through must seem crazy. I know you don't even know me. That's a fair trade as I don't know you. But that doesn't matter right now. I'll come back later to clean this up. I know how to get blood out of cloth."

She gave his arm a faint pull. Soon, they were out of the bathhouse and moving along the darkened paths that led back to the castle. Tiana threw open the latch and iron gate easily as she guided Adam along. She was a slender woman, but her arms and legs did not tremble under force or labor. Adam studied her wordlessly, curious to run into a woman that seemed unbothered by the elements. Even Belle wrinkled her nose at the cold or the summer heat. Still, even the cool of the evening air couldn't earn Tiana's attention; her skin did not even turn to goose-flesh.

Regardless of her body's assuredness, clearly the silence Adam laid between them had disturbed her. Their shadows melted into one along the cherry trail.

"I'll bite." She began suddenly. She kept her eyes facing forward, her neck straight and tall. "You find it odd that a woman knows so much about medicine?"

Adam averted his own eyes. The truth was he did find it odd but that never prompted him to rightfully declare it so. "I never would dare to question."

At this, Tiana gave a little laugh. "Spare me my pride. I wasn't born some snooty princess; I was raised in New Orleans. A far poorer world from here. And, my daddy, he taught me everything his daddy taught him."

"Your father was a doctor?"

"No," Tiana said softly. "He was a cook. Then a soldier." She took a short breath. "Then, he died."

That same look of grief that had settled over Jasmine's features lingered over Tiana's in the dim moonlight. If this was his first common meeting with Tiana, Adam felt he could have tried harder in his attempts at understanding, but between the pounding of the sea, being dragged by Eugene, and being revived by Tiana all in one night, Adam found he lacked the emotional integrity.

"A war?" Adam struggled to comprehend the sheer idea of being willed to war. His father caused and settled many over his lands and was not loved the better over any of them. He tried to imagine his father, regal and ringed and posh, covered in chain mail, he placed Phoebus's broadsword at his hip for good measure, and Adam found himself all the more unable to relate. His father was a coward that would have never fought for his people. Chivalry must have passed them both over in the family line, Adam couldn't help but to think. The castle lacked weapons as well as a war room. Of Eric's teachings and naval intrigue, Adam was lost and defeated. To laugh at the image of his father was to laugh at himself.

To comprehend Tiana's grief, Adam only offered a soft sound from the back of his throat. A pathetic offering to give from his pathetic upbringing.

"Yes." Tiana replied curtly. She steeled her shoulders. "We never got his body back from the front lines." She lowered her voice into a quiet whisper. "It took me years to really believe he wasn't
coming home." She walked a little faster, as if trying to outrun her shadow. "My mamma didn't think it right; my...obsession with understanding what had happened to him. That it was in bad taste for a young lady but I had to know." Her eyes brightened again. "I had to know what had taken his life."

Adam's lips twitched faintly. "You...went to war yourself?" His tone must have conveyed the incredulity in his question. The moon was higher in the night sky and the sea to the west looked deceivingly motionless. They were nearly at the docks.

"No," Tiana answered again, but her voice sounded as if she found his response a little funny over the morose subject. "I just picked up every book I could find, books with medical pictures and the ways that soldiers die in war. And...I just learned."

"You are very learned." Adam answered her in turn. "Belle tells me you run your own restaurant as well. To think, you're also a nurse. You certainly prove more useful in battle than I."

"Oh?" Tiana returned. "You struck me as an Aladdin type. All ready to fight a pirate?"

He lacked enough warmth and blood to blush. "I wish to help if I can. If I can...stay as I am."

The curse. He did not wish to speak of it any more tonight and only hoped that Tiana might understand this. He now only wished to be alone. To write Belle a thousand more letters. To lay in bed and pretend to hear her voice…

"I never really learned any more about what killed my daddy. I don't know if it was a bullet entry wound or a knife. Or maybe mustard gas." Tiana finished. They were outside of his ship's dock. Tiana had turned to place her body between Adam and the edge of the sea, taking the brunt of the wind along her back. "But I like to think I was able to make him proud of everything I found in return. To lose my daddy taught me that I might be able to save someone else's."

Adam met her eyes, tired and thankful and unable to find the words for such a noble cause.

"Thank you, Tiana. This will not be the end of our conversation, I assure you. But I wish to lie down again." He gave a sigh at the idea of the morning. Of Eugene, and what else there was to do, if anything, to ease the curse for the remaining days.

She didn't hug him, as Ariel might, nor make some insecure comment to hide the pain with humor as Eugene would have. Instead, Tiana only offered him a soft, understanding smile. "Your secret is safe with me." It may have been a trick of the light, but Adam swore that she may have honestly winked at him. "You're a good listener, you know that?" She squeezed his arm again and stepped back. "Stay warm."

"You as well," Adam answered in kind. "Thank you...I owe you—"

"Inside," Tiana reminded him sternly, but her eyes were playful. "You can thank me more tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, then." Adam agreed, before he turned, finally, into the safety of his ship.

"Rapunzel?" Eugene tested. He knew it to be a lost cause. It was late. Super late. So late that the night might as well be talked about as the morning that it was.

She'd be asleep. That's why she wasn't answering, obviously. She was asleep. Everyone was asleep. Even Jasmine's big large huge giant ridiculous tiger was asleep, and stayed asleep, even when Eugene had tripped over it, striking it straight in the ribs while it slept outside her guest room door,
and still it didn't move. What a life, right? If only he could be so immovable.

Eric and Ariel were nowhere to be seen either through the halls. Who knows at what reasonable hour they had decided to go to bed. He had found Naveen and Aladdin asleep at their playing table. He got a bit of a laugh at seeing those two still fighting in their sleep. Naveen had pushed Aladdin's face away from him across the table, Naveen's palm now used as a makeshift pillow for Aladdin, while Aladdin had clearly attempted to kick the chair out from under Naveen, as the both of them threatened to roll onto the floor at their odd angles. Eugene had half a mind to finish the job and dump the both of them onto the floor, get a good laugh at the looks on their faces, but decided against it.

He was, after all, still covered in blood, and that would take more explaining, explaining of the explaining that he still couldn't really explain, and he was so done with talking.

Eugene could damn near feel the silence slide into the room as he nudged open the door. The light thrown from the candles along the hallway dimly awoke the sleeping chambers. Rapunzel didn't stir. It could pick out the soft curve of her hip along the bed, one leg out, searching for the sheets she had kicked away in her sleep. His heart calmed just a little to see her, still there. Of course she still was. What was there to happen all safe in Eric's paranoid castle of Fort Knox? Sure, it was weird to be away from Corona, but Eugene had to give it a rest at some point.

Plush rugs covered the cold title of the ancient castle. A large window was closed, locked, with the curtains down, but even with the effort made to block out the moon, it showed its face back at Eugene, wavering alone above the sea. So much sea. And salt. And wind. Eugene ran his hands over his face and hair, feeling the sand cemented into his skin. He should have actually used the bathhouse for its intended purpose-but no, he decided to march himself to his guestroom, covered in dirt and blood, and pretend that everything was perfectly normal.

Eh, if he could summon the brainpower to think of it, Eugene was sure he had staggered into Rapunzel's arms in far worse of conditions.

He made his way into the room, closing the door, carefully took off his boots and placed them by the wool rug near the fireplace. The guest room they had been placed in was square and wide. Corona was made up of triangles and circles. The strange shape of the room, of sleeping somewhere foreign, bothered him a little. He shrugged off his vest, undershirt, shirt, pants, and half-heartedly tried to wash himself up at the sink through the connected bathroom. It was a lost cause. What he got off of his skin merely transferred to more of Eric's fluffy towels and that made Eugene feel six times worse. Was Tiana right in not telling anyone else? What was he even doing, sneaking around Eric's own castle when the guy was clearly choking on the anticipation of a pirate raid? When Rapunzel's mom had mentioned that many of the situation Eugene got himself into were undoubtedly of his own making, Eugene found himself suddenly unable to argue back.

He gave a restless shrug to no one, clearing the conversation he made to himself in his own mind, and slumped onto the bed. With that large of a movement, Eugene found himself suddenly sunk low into the mattress, and then bump upwards again, as the once solid surface now moved and floated his body in a weird, weightless way.

"Whoa, whoa, what?" He sputtered, dragging himself up in surprise. From the other side of the watery bed, he heard his wife give a little sleepy giggle.

"Ugene?"

"Uh, hi. Why is our bed moving?"
"Water."

"Water." Eugene deadpanned.

"It's a waterbed, silly." Rapunzel finished. She turned slowly over to stare at him. Her cropped hair clung to the right side of her face from how she slept. She gave him a droll smile. "Eric's idea. He wanted them in all the guest rooms but this is the prototype."

"Why did we get the test bed? That's just plain rude."

"I think he thought we'd like it."

"That's stupid. A bed made of water is stupid. Eric is stupid."

"I think it's great. I jumped on it for fifteen minutes straight and there was no need to flip it over." Rapunzel defended.

"Baby, I don't think a bed's ability to be jumped on qualifies it as a good bed."

She made a cute sound of disgust. "I beg to differ."

"I beg to your differ," Eugene remarked back. He leapt across the bed and caged her inside of his arms, tickling her mercilessly. However, his plan of attack was harder to manage than he had thought; the bed caved inwards towards its middle, sucking Eugene down and forcing his grip over his wife to fall away from her and more towards the bed now drowning him due to their combined weight.

"UGH I AM SO SICK OF THE SEA." Eugene cried out as he clawed his way from the water bed's middle. He placed his feet to the floor, straightened his back, and threw himself down onto the bed, this time extra hard, so that it made Rapunzel bounce from the force, and her laughter buzzed down his spine like a shot of whiskey.

She giggled again and wrapped her arms around his waist. She had settled her face into the groove of his shoulder, curled into his neck. She gave a small sniff. Eugene felt the warmth of her breath moisten his skin. "Did you go diving?"

He stiffened. Too late still, she felt him stiffen. "Uh. Sort've."

"...For the shells I asked for?" Rapunzel asked. Her voice was soft. It already sounded disappointed.

"Um. I ran into some trouble along the beach." Eugene said quietly. He closed his eyes resist looking into her large green eyes. There'll be the death of his lies.

Her arms tightened around him, like he had told her the climax of a ghost story, and she was spooked. "What kind of trouble?"

A heartbeat. A heartbeat. What did it really matter now. She could feel his heart. Hell, she had his heart under the palms of her hands. "...Adam."

Rapunzel froze. Her grip over Eugene loosened. "Oh."

Oh, Eugene flinched at that tiny, painful sound. "Rapunzel, listen…" He reached around in the darkness for her hand, and when he found it, and brought it to his lips. "It's not what you think, okay?"

Rapunzel did not just move her hand away from his mouth-she ripped it so hard away that her nails

Eugene faltered back. He turned, bouncing their weight smoothly over the bed, and forced himself to pull in a breath. He was so tired. He didn't want to have this conversation right now. He knew it was just another selfish flash of desire. He did his best to not center his wants when Rapunzel might need him the most. Since Belle and Adam's departure from Corona, things had settled, for the most part. Now, the pair just weren't spoken of. But lately, lately Rapunzel's dreams had been more violent than usual. Her panic attacks more frequent. It was starting over. Back to the beginning of their first few nights spent back in her parent's kingdom. Back to when she'd have trouble referring to Gothel as 'Gothel' and her real mother as 'mother' and not Mother as mother.

There was one terrible night from way back when, when she accidentally called her real mother 'Gothel' straight to her face, (slip of the tongue, her father tried to rationalize to his daughter upon seeing Rapunzel's instant and terrified expression) while the look of absolute hurt across Her Majesty's face was enough to crush Eugene alone in his guilt and he wasn't even related.

Rapunzel pulled into herself. She was a tiny figure in the darkness. "What do you know about what I think," she murmured angrily. Her knees balled up to her chest.

Eugene sighed, hot and a little miffed himself. His own patience was draining fast. "Well," he began distinctly, "I would know more about exactly what you think if you were willing to talk to me about it,"

"About him."

"About them," Eugene corrected.

She breathed out slowly and closed her eyes.

"Eugene," She finally said, her face turned away, and her shoulders hunched. "I'm sorry."

"And—!" He blinked. Her apology had caught him entirely off guard. He blinked again.

A pause.

"...Sorry I assumed the worse out of you." He finally relented to her. "That was wrong of me. I know you're— you're just scared. I know." He sighed deeply and rubbed at the back of his neck. "I've had a rough night, too."

"...I don't want to be afraid anymore." Rapunzel whispered. Her eyes were open again in the darkness, green and silver as she stared out the window before them. "...I miss Belle."

Eugene allowed himself to relax, just a little. He scooted closer and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "...I think we need her, Rapunzel."

Those big eyes were suddenly focused entirely on him. "What do you mean?" Then, they blinked, and Eugene had to face the slow, careful realization as Rapunzel traced for his clothes in the shadows, dirty and bloodied. "...Are you hurt?!" She squeaked in fear. She was suddenly on him— hands wild and frenzied, curled into his chest, and they both fall back upon the bed. Eugene wasn't sure why he burst into laughter. She wasn't having any of it, however. She curled her little fists and gently beat at his sides. "This. Isn't. Funny. Eugene!"

He caught her hands and settled her to his chest. The waterbed wiggled distractingly around their fight. "Can't help it. You're just so cute."
She crossed her hands over her chest. "So it's not *your* blood."

"No." Eugene told the ceiling, his chin nestled into the crown of her head. "It's Adam's."

Another short breath. "I was right, then. It's exactly what I thought it might be." Her voice took on a hard, guarded edge. "He's changing. He's changing again and it's getting worse."

At this, Eugene had little to defend. "He's still human. This was just a mishap. I think it's more complicated than that. But he's here right now, Rapunzel, with the rest of Eric's gathering, and we can't spend our time ignoring that."

She made a small moaning sound and hid her face into his side. "...I'm a terrible person."


"Eric has every right for him to be here. I'm..." Rapunzel pulled into another short breath. Eugene could only hope she wasn't going into another breathing episode. That was three weeks ago. She closed her eyes once more. It was so hard to not picture his face, no matter what she tried, and those damming eyes he had given her when she had denounced him from her kingdom, how *sick* she felt inside, how *sickening* and *cruel* it was that fate had forced her *to do what was right*—and how what was right was clearly hurting a man that Eugene, for whatever reason, really came to care for. "...terrible."

"Baby," Eugene whispered. Her head close to his chest, Rapunzel felt his voice vibrate through her, and it was strangely calming. "I'm not asking you to spend hours upon hours with him. But you can't hide from him forever, okay? He's...he's just about scared of you as you are of him. Hell, you changed him back at his very worst. Ya think he'd actually request your help." Eugene gave a dark laugh that Rapunzel did not share in. "Uh...but he didn't, just to let you know."

"You talked to him about me?"

"No, not really." Eugene confessed. "But...I can just tell. He's nervous. He's...basically a walking aneurysm. Even when he isn't, you know, a monster."

"...Did you see him again?" Rapunzel asked, her voice low, as if asking for a terrible secret. At first, Eugene wasn't entirely sure at what she meant, but then he found her meaning.

"No, Rapunzel. He hasn't changed. Not entirely."

"...Entirely?" She picked at the word. Of course she would.

"...Baby," Eugene tried to hold her a little closer. "I think this curse is killing him. That's what I discovered tonight. That's why he needed my help. He's better now. He's gonna be okay."

"So...so the blood was..." her voice cracked. He felt Rapunzel still. Then a breath. Another. Another. Faster. Faster. Too fast. Too fast, she was breathing too fast and—

"I can't cure him," Rapunzel murmured thickly. Her throat sounded tight and hoarse, already on the verge of tears. "I can't, Eugene, I can't, I can't."

"Shhh." He pulled her close again to try to ease her breathing. "I know, baby. We know that. That's not what I'm asking."

"I *don't* want him to die, Eugene," Rapunzel whispered, her voice a warble of words that melted into his skin. Tears, too. "*I don't*, I know what I said and what I did and I know Belle hates me but I
"She doesn't hate you, honey."

"She won't write to me!"

"Maybe she's been busy."

A sniffle. "Is she coming here, too?"

"...I hope so, baby. I really do."

"Is...he all alone right now?"

Eugene swallowed. It was hard to say. Was Tiana still with him? Did Adam come to Denmark with anyone at all? He couldn't have come all alone, a dying man with a dying man's wish, could he? He settled for what he hoped was true. "He's resting right now. He's not alone."

"...Ariel really seems to like him."

Eugene blinked into the dark at the turn in conversation. He rolled with it. Whatever seemed to calm her down. "Yeah? Is that what your letter said?"

At this, Rapunzel merely quieted. She was so quiet in fact that Eugene wondered if she had fallen back asleep. "Blondie? Still with me?"

"Sorry. Um. Ariel talked with me about him, a little, before she went to bed. She was so excited he was here. I...I didn't understand. But she was so excited. She said that Adam is really funny."

At this, Eugene gave his own snicker. "Not exactly the word I'd use, but sure, I think I get it."

"And...Jasmine met him, too."

"Jeez. Guy gets around, doesn't he?"

"She says that he's awkward."

"Bingo." Eugene pressed a grin into her hair.

"...But nice."

"Eh. Fair. I think it's a lady thing. I think he's just more comfortable with women."

Another silence. Rapunzel listened to her husband simply breathing. His heart rate starting to slow towards sleep. "Eugene?"

"Mhm."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Huh?"

"About Adam."

"What do you mean?"

Another breath. Rapunzel shut her eyes. She didn't want to see it. She didn't want to admit it. But
there was something in Adam. Something in his shyness and his timid smiles he had once given her from a distance. Something painful and very afraid inside those eyes. A look only Rapunzel could understand. Something that she refused to seek. She wanted it all gone. In the only way she knew how.

"Did something bad happen to Adam? Like." She forced the next words. "Like what Gothel did to me."

Eugene only pulled Rapunzel closer. She could feel his heart give a little skip. His voice was low and drowsy. "Yeah, baby. I think so."

Rapunzel only curled into him more. Even long after Eugene had drifted to sleep, Rapunzel continued to stare out the window, into the dark of the sea before her. She felt cold. Her flesh turned to goose skin and no matter how she pressed herself into Eugene, she only felt colder. She closed her eyes once more, her own thoughts spinning around her. Terrible. Why I am such a terrible person? Because I'm afraid?

...When will I stop finally being afraid?

AN: THE PEOPLE WANT BELLE, THE CHARACTERS WANT BELLE, SO WHO ARE WE GETTING NEXT? HADES. Okay, whoa, whoa, I'm kidding I'm totally kidding, it's Belle. Belle. Belle's next. Omg, please, please don't hurt me fandom, hahaha!
AN: EDITOR: K. It's been two weeks, babe. What's going on?

ME: Work. Work. Work. Oh! But I signed on for my first apartment and also super hurt my shoulder by sheer stress! You know how my boy Stannis Baratheon grinds his teeth in, like, every other description G.R.R.M writes for him? That's just like me! Except with my shoulder!

EDITOR: You grinded your shoulder?

ME: …I'm on a lot of pain medication right now, dude. Man, he deserves the Iron Throne. I've wanted this since 2013.

EDITOR: He's dead.

ME: SPOILERS

EDITOR: WATCH TV SOMETIME IT'S BEEN A YEAR OF DEATH. EVERYONE IS DEAD. YOU'RE DEAD. I'M DEAD.

ME: FINE BUT I WAS WAITING FOR THE NEXT BOOK

EDITOR: YOU'LL BE WAITING IN YOUR GRAVE

ME: YOU'RE MEAN WHY ARE WE FRIENDS

EDITOR: WHERE IS THE NEXT CHAPTER

ME: OH NO, I've totally been doing that. Here, it's 50 pages.

EDITOR: You wrote 50 pages for one chapter? What the f

ME: Yeah….kind of got carried away.

EDITOR: …Do you think they'll like it?

ME: I twisted everything up again. But I think it's pretty good.

EDITOR: so…there's no bell-

ME: -OKAY SO THERE IS NO BELLE IS THIS CHAPTER BUT AURORA THO

EDITOR: /slaps on #1 Sleeping Beauty Fan pin/ SOLD

ME: OH THANK GOD BECAUSE I AM REALLY TIRED AND AM GOING TO SLEEP NOW

AN#2: Thank you all for being so patient. I hope you enjoyed the conversation I had with my editor, haha. A few housekeeping notes before you dive in:

- the poem quoted in this chapter is from: *Le Printemps* by Théophile Gautier
- yes, this is 50 pages. My longest chapter yet. I hope that isn't too terrible. ;-) 

- yes, Aurora and Prince Philip are in here. I have played with a few details for realism and to give our sleeping beauty a bit more...complexity, as I have with the other princesses.

- I have decided to have Maleficent's body remain in the form of her dragon-self instead of turning into dust A La Mother Gothel for funsies

- I have made a slight tweak to the ending of Sleeping Beauty because I have wanted to play with playboydickAdam(withasecretheartssomewherewithinthere) since the beginning of this fic, and am delighted to have it appear here. This change is my taking Philip and Aurora's wedding and postponing it by a few months to recover from her sleeping curse.

- whatever happens, Aurora and Philip are going to be fine, I promise

- Aurora is going to appear in future chapters in a more mature form compared to the other princesses. I've been dying to have young!Adam meet a young!Princess for a long time now. It worked out quite well for the rest of the story that I have laid out. That being said, since this particular chapter obviously takes place about six or seven years before the curse is cast on Adam, this chapter implies the characters involved to be older when we return to the "present" chapters. If Adam was cursed at about age 24 or 25 or so, then spent ten years a beast before Belle broke the spell, then it goes without saying that Aurora and Philip are to have aged as much as Adam (or at least for Adam mentally, if you don't like the idea of an older!Adam). I have also decided to formally make her Queen in those future chapters, because she is totally a Queen B youknowwhatImean?

- finally: thank you for enjoying and I apologize again for the delay!

THE DRAGON'S HEAD OF HER CAPTOR STARED AT AURORA FROM THE CENTER OF THE TABLE. It had been over two months since her daring rescue and introduction back into her parents' kingdom, hidden deep within castle Poperinge, and yet the dead beast's body still followed her wherever she went. She hardly needed to look upon it without her skin prickling in unnatural discomfort. It sent her blood to chill, her jaw to clench tightly, far too tightly, as her mother might chide to her, for a lady to look so distraught in mixed company. However, the beast's body never behaved as it should either, and in that, Aurora took comfort in what spiteful, moody humors she could afford herself in her dive from forest to riches; her life, after all, was finally, finally to begin anew. It seemed that this new life of realizing one was, indeed, royal, was as full of surprises as well as many mysteries.

The Dragon was most obvious of these. It was the talk of all the kingdoms. Philip's kingdom offered the loudest of their voices, as well as her own, but it seemed every royal clamored for a piece of the conquest. Its massive body had been keenly sliced to show off whatever section its victor thought best to parade the tale of their legend. A left leg to hang in the market square in Corona. A right to stun all who approached the massive port gates to Denmark. Perhaps its front quarters as far reaching as Maldonia for all Aurora could guess. Its head was unquestionably saved for only Aurora's alone, she had come to assume, as it adorned every feast table she sat and promptly soured her mood at every ball she attended. It never was far from her person. Once, as a mean joke, Philip even dropped its massive jaws into her hot bath for 'safe keeping', whereas Aurora, in a fit of rage, decided to drag him down into the water with it, her limps as cunning as a Greek water nymph, to teach Philip she wasn't to be toyed with so easily.

For all Aurora adored in Philip, he was never shy about his passion for big game hunting. The Dragon, his most succulent kill at the ripe young age of only twenty, he was more than proud to court it about. For it was The Dragon, the final true heart of the Dark Fairy of the Mountain, and
there was no rumor of any dragon after her.

And for Aurora, it meant only one thing: she wasn't dreaming anymore.

Maleficent was dead, finally, unequivocally, and her rule for many years between the mountain pass that split Aurora's kingdom from that of its beautiful, pine-feathered Arendelle, was over. Finally, Aurora's sister kingdom had been brought forth in shared piety. As Aurora trailed after her prince, so did the quarters of The Dragon. From balls to social parties, to celebration, to the very last handful of the few remaining kingdoms that sought to pay their respects to the found princess…

Aurora could not wait for it all to be over.

She wanted nothing of it. Of course she wished to smile and look pretty and meet new people. She loved all of that…for a little while. How exhausting it was to face stranger after stranger and share in that strained, practiced dance of "welcome home, royal one, your life is yours again…when your people allow it to be". The celebration could not seem to end. At the sagging tail of every ball, all she wanted, deep, deep down, was Philip's attention. And, if the rebellious, fancy to take her imagining far away from the bores of social-lighting, to imagine the frost layering her skin as she would one day rid herself of that damnable, awful monster. Philip's pride be damned, as Aurora, toe after toe into the snow, wished to drag it up that mountain to bury the body herself. She wanted to be safe and happy within the walls of her lost kingdom. She wanted to be married already. She had found her life and was free! Free of curses and expectation and magic…

I'm not dreaming anymore.

Magic, Aurora found, was connected by its primal source. Maleficent never aged and neither did her people nor herself when she had been placed under the sleeping spell. This, in turn, had convinced Aurora that the magic stayed true to the corpse of the beast.

The Dragon never took to rotting. Its bones never lost their incredible flexibility or unbreakable strength. The nails, teeth, and claws also never suffered any natural malady like how other prized beasts had often lost theirs in the primped processes that went along with stuffing. The Dragon's jaws and dagger tipped horns remained as sharp and as deadly as the moment Aurora had opened her eyes to gaze over the remains of her life's prophecy. The scales never dared to lose their luxurious, obsidian shimmer, akin to fresh cut diamonds from Snow White's northern mines. How it was only a matter of time, or perhaps a turn in the music, or some innocent placement that, somehow, some terrible way, it always afforded that Aurora be once more caught in the lantern of its burning, toxic glare, just waiting for her to turn around…

Aurora felt herself recalling upon these speculations with absent dejection as she sat, dutifully, elbows away from the table and head straight forward. She was staring obediently at the two hushed figures of the gentlemen conversing from across the dining hall. A large brick fireplace peered out from behind the banquet table left, leaving swirls of pumpkin-orange light that flooded the shadows of the spacious pillion. The playful, bounce of glowing embers took to the winter's numbing breeze, skirting over the darkness to frequently alight the faces of her father, her wonderful, doting father, and the face of another man.

This other man. Another mystery that captured her father's attention all night.

He was a stranger she had only a moment to meet.

Like most, he had taken her hand with cool indifference, his own rings prominent over his knuckles, as he bowed to her.
He said little and ate even less. Most of the dinner had been stolen away by guests and sticky-fingered servants but the rest of the feast lay around her on silver plates and golden goblets. Cherry wine and roasted quail. Bread and mead and various, odd colored puddings. It didn't seem to matter at all to the stranger. He picked up only the small bones of the prime cuts and cracked them between his teeth before tossing the scraps away. When his dark eyes cut into Aurora's, she found herself unable to look away, caught in her own rude stare. So often her father would easily dismiss her "rudeness". Yet, this stranger with his dark, foreign curls stared back at her without a hint of intrigue or charm, or even disgruntled affront to be ogled by her.

It had happened before. Her whispered background of being raised in a forest churned the stomachs of those she met that deemed her unworthy of her title; the condensing tones of well how she wasn't quite preen'd yet to be a fit for a princess. They scalded her.

How often did she remember when she had been told she was a princess; she could hard breathe. She only cried, silent and solemn, her life nothing more than a shadow, puppeteer by a force so masterful, she felt nothing more than a little girl's doll, helpless and without any true form. These feelings did not leave her so easily with how often her mother corrected her posture or her father motioned for what spoon to use.

But, suddenly, on this cold night, with no one having a word to say to her otherwise, Aurora thusly stared to her heart's content.

Well, no one would have had a word to say… had she been entirely alone.

While the older man with his dark, curling hair and narrowed dark eyes flickered to her face for a few fleeting moments before returning to speak with her father, Aurora sat up straight and tall, refusing by all fronts to meet the eyes of his son.

This had been going on for quite some time.

It was not as if he sought for her attention. The feeling of mutual digression was nearly palpable. Aurora might slightly turn her head to steer her view of The Dragon away from her, and the boy, dare she really call him that, he was clearly even older than her, eighteen or so, would match her. His chin pointed ever so slightly down at her, eyes to the plate in front of him. He had spent the silent remainder of the night methodically switching the places of his meats and garnish between each other. The scraping of the plate infecting her ears like a low, maddening growl.

He looked every bit like his father, this king of sorts, but he acted like no such prince she had yet to meet. He said nothing beyond a common, well-practiced introduction of his name and nothing else. Adam. Adam and...that was it. He never smiled and he certainly never moved to touch her. For since, Aurora was deeply grateful. So many unfamiliar people in the upswing of her new life, and so many that felt they could handle her still without even daring to ask Aurora's own permission. The only instinct that called Aurora to pay him any mind at all was the moment when she had caught him stealing a glance at her, and then away once more.

What had started as feigning ignorance soon took on a sort of unfriendly game. She to scrutinize him with her eyes with little else to do, and the foppish prince before her, pretending to pretend that he wasn't regarding her the very same way.

The blue of his eyes startled her, an upstart that collected more of her attention than she wanted to admit. They were quite blue, a winter's coat, like how the waterfall near her cottage might freeze over during the winter and she could slip down it, crystalline and pale. It was only when Aurora caught his eyes, usually on the quick of him turning away from her, she couldn't help but notice how his brow tightened, the blue of his veins actually noticeable over his pale skin, visibly annoyed,
clearly holding back just as much as Aurora was herself. It was as if he was failing his own attempt at sabotaging the final legs of his journey to see the forest princess. His regard of her, a single wick that continued to alight no matter how often he snuffed the expectation; his own curiosity irritated him.

Here, Aurora found herself staring at him. The profile in his face in dull red light. There was something handsome about him, she supposed, like many of the young princes she had come to waltz with, but something decidedly unmanaged. His hair was longer than those she at met, something adduce with French stylings, she imagined, and he had a gauntness to his cheeks, exposing cheekbone at length, as he looked more akin to her servant staff than to Philip's healthy, athletic physique. With the way he sat, slumped, disinterested, she wanted to give a little jeer at him. *Picky eater?* Never in her forest. She had learned early to appreciate the tastings of all natural flavors. In fact, just the day before, her and Philip had a wonderful time hand picking blackberries and attempting to catch them in one another's mouths. Often enough, she only ended up pegging him straight in the eye, but Philip merely grinned that adoring grin at her, snagging the flesh of a berry between his teeth to offer to her …only to swallow the berry away when she went to grab it…

*Philip*, she thought sadly. Would he find himself missing her at all? Soon. Soon, they would be married. Soon.

She leapt her eyes to his father again. Took in the darkness of those features. She frowned. She studied her dining partner. The king had eyes the color of nightshade berries; his son's like that of a winter's hoarfrost, but each gaze was equally piercing. Interesting. She always had a wonder about the eye color in people. Hers were particularly unique, violet and pale, like the delicate skin of a flower opening in boom. She always found herself repelled when a stranger pulled her gaze for much too long; they always looked as if they wished they could pluck out the color from her eyes.

When the prince looked at her again, she found herself repressing an involuntary shiver.

She willed herself back to the task at hand; her father's attention.

Aurora could only faintly wonder what it was that was so fascinating to discuss at length when nary every guest had returned into their guest chambers for the night. Without daddy's blessing and good night kiss, she could not turn into the warmth of her own bed and he was all too consumed to not come to aid her various attempts appearing thoroughly *done* sighing and huffing from her spot at the table.

All too soon, Aurora's eyes occasionally found the beast's massive head, its snout, this time, covered in ivy and the fillings of rubies and jewels heaped upon her from the last visiting kingdom to see her, respectfully, in person, a French kingdom of Villeneuve, its king and his son. She crossed her arms over her chest to will away the reflex to sigh.

*Will you never leave me?* Aurora thought. She forced herself not to blink as she met its dead yellow eyes, still poised, wide and glistening, as if in waiting. Even in the dim cradle of fireplace light, those yellow eyes seemed to spark from within, as if the Dark Fairy of the Mountain only lay sleeping, with Aurora to be its jailor for all time.

She allowed the air to seep hotly from her nose, a ragged attempt to hide her disdain. How badly she wanted to leave the chill of this place. How little she had to say to the man before her. How stupid it was that Philip could pick and choose his entrances and she, dog to chain, a prisoner at her own party.

It was only after hers and the prince's father stepped away from the hall and into a side parlor that the silence was broken and not in the way Aurora had been told to expect. Without warning, the prince,
the boy, Adam, swung the blade of his knife in a single, smooth blur. Aurora flinched and kicked away from the table. The handle of the blade was sticking straight up between them. He had landed it deep into The Dragon's horrid yellow eye. Now, green blood oozed gently, like a weeping poisonous tear from its great socket.

This seemed to amuse him, much to Aurora's horror; his lips turned up into a snide little grin, an eccentricity that cut through his enduring will to remain unmoved. Those blue eyes hunted her own, determined now to meet her reaction head on.

"How disappointing. I was told it was impermeable." He said. For his thin frame, his voice was remarkably low in his throat.

Aurora could hardly form her answer. "I—impermeable?"

Adam's expression flattened. "Yes, I wasn't sure if you'd even know the meaning of that word—I suppose your rather woodland upbringing wouldn't teach you much beyond—"

"I'm fully aware of what 'impermeable' means." Aurora snapped back at him. She was standing now, her hands resting over the table, with her eyes unable to look away from the knife draining the eye of The Dragon, the One Thing Above All, The Beast Philip Would Die To Hear Was Ironically Injured In Death. "Do you have any idea what you've just done?"

Here, Adam reached out and gave the knife strong pull, wiggling it into the socket in his attempt to remove it. It wouldn't budge.

"I had an idea. I wished to test it. So I did." He explained curtly.

"That is my husband's prized trophy—you've ruined it!"

Adam fixed his eyes over Aurora's and scowled. "The dragon has been slain. What more is there to say about it?"

"I wouldn't know," Aurora continued heatedly, her fingers now folding tightly over the wood. "But you mean to tell me your first idea was to stab it in the eye? What is wrong with you?"

"I have sat here, hating this dragon all night long, all the while noticing that you seem entirely upset by its very presence and you're angry that I'm agreeing with you?"

"There's nothing to agree about; it wasn't yours to stab!"

"By all rights, it shouldn't be your beloved fiancé's right to make whole what is, undoubtedly, your tragedy." The prince countered, his voice only lowering in tone, remarking over Philip's actual position far too condescending for Aurora's comfort. It was as if he was daring to imply that he didn't care about her own feelings, or worse, that they weren't be wed so soon. She would be. Days now. It would be mere days. She could count them across four fingertips. Even if Daddy didn't know that yet. Even if it were more eloping than the grand wedding her mother wanted.

Her wedding meant little as long as Philip was hers and hers alone.

"My tragedy? He saved my life! There wouldn't be a 'me' without him! I would still be that thing's prisoner! I would still be sleep—forever!" Aurora growled, her lips reddening from how she had accidentally chewed too hard on them in retaliation.

Adam stood from his chair as well. Although he had to be merely a year older than she was, he was a tall young man. He didn't match Philip's height but, then again, Philip was nearly three years older.
For as small as Adam could make himself seem, he certainly knew how to make himself look impressive: he bared his shoulders forward, moved his legs apart, and spread his own hands to…

Aurora blinked. He was mirroring her. He was mirroring her again.

He had matched Aurora's position completely. His hair slid down to drape over the sides of his face, focusing his attention directly over the young woman before him.

"Do you feel more empowered this way?" He gave a small mock of his head to match the princess's own. "What a funny girl you are. I've been told that a way a woman holds herself while she is alone is everything, but, by far, you move more like a man."

Aurora felt the blood roar in her ears. All night, she had sat and wondered about his strange young man and then, with every word that fell from his mouth, she only wished she had gotten up sooner to walk away. "What I do with my body is my business alone and I won't have you commenting on it."

He gave a small chuckle at this. The very nerve of him to laugh at her. The sound seemed to move through her, to clip her bones, to settle inside of her lungs, like a pressure she was only now aware was building inside of her. He closed his eyes briefly as if the notion tickled him so much that he couldn't stand to look at her. Then, those harsh blue eyes trapped her once more. "Do you really believe that?"

Aurora ground her teeth at him. "Remove that knife from Her head or I will remove it into yours."

"Threats of violence," Adam tisked at her, his tongue flickering against his teeth. "Not very princess-like of you. What will Daddy say?"

He purred her pet-name for her father through set teeth, this time relishing his mockery her once more. No doubt, he faked the entirety of his distance the entire evening. He had paid attention to everything, every time she thought she'd faint to see The Dragon ever closer to her, every time she sighed and called for her father's attention. Aurora could only redden in shock.

"Nothing, you arse." She so easily fell into that smooth, discreet tone that cast off her fears and replaced her anxiety with hot, white, anger. "Once you leave, Daddy will think nothing of this."

At once, Adam's smug expression dashed. He blinked at her, openly, astonishment washing across his face. He brought up a hand to hide his mouth. Aurora fought not to take off her shoe and toss it at him. She couldn't tell what he might be thinking with his expression hidden.

"What?" She prompted, her shoulders pitching tightly and her eyes willing holes into his clothing. "What is so funny?"

"You are serious?" Adam questioned, his words inching somewhere far less humorless than his tone implied, and when she said nothing, his voice turned cold. "You are serious."

"What?"

"Aurora," Adam leaned in close. It was a mere whisper of a word, but with more edge, more urgency, like a breathless hiss of disdain and wonder that all at once melted into one unique sound. It made her beautiful name sound acidic inside of his mouth. "Your father is planning to marry you off to me in the next room, right now, as we are speaking."

All the space in the hall and the shadows seemed to creep up to Aurora with every beat of her heart. It didn't make sense. What was he saying. It didn't make sense.

"Liar. You stab Her eye and now you're just playing with me, like how you did with your food."
"I am being quite honest with you." Adam sustained. He kept his voice quiet. A glance of those eyes to the parlor door. "I was mistaken to think you understood why I was even here."

"Why?!" Aurora demanded. She smoothed her hair back in fury, the fluffy golden shine looking almost green in the dwindling of the fire. It was too much. Too soon. She was scared. She was terrified. She was still staring at Adam, a lone shadow before him, feeling torn and shredded in a few seconds of conversation, and that demon head was still lying on the table before her, locked with a knife through the eye. "What in the world would make you think such a thing?"

"...Because this is what my father does." Adam answered. His tone turned bitter. "Because you think you have a say in this." He closed his eyes again, as if pained, or perhaps exasperated. "Because you're so...innocent." He slid this final word between closed teeth. "I should have known better." He opened his eyes once more but he did not look to her. Instead, he focused over the knife. "I've wasted so much time."

Aurora felt her nails dig deep into her palms. Philip's name rushed to her tongue. She should call for him. She should scream for him. He could come. He would always come for her. "I don't believe you."

"Mademoiselle, belief has hardly anything to do with our lives."

"Our lives?" She sputtered, uncaring that she sounded un-lady-like, uncaring of who might hear her yell, and dare her to yell once more, which she would gladly do. "I'm marrying Philip for love!"

"Yes," Adam agreed with a measured, disdainful rumble from the back his throat. "I know. But we weren't borne for sentimentality. My father's land is far bigger and my pedigree higher. Our commerce better...for the moment. It's not complicated, it's just good politics. The show and dance of the dragon is very impressive, even I must admit to that. But glory fades, mademoiselle. Money is forever."

"Love is forever." Aurora urged, her tone aggressive and hot inside of her mouth.

"Yes, and I suppose him being wealthy and handsome are just the conveniences of our times, hm?" Adam returned smugly, his grin, more teeth than anything, hard along his jaw. "You are nothing but a royal lapdog for our families to interbreed till the end of times. As am I, only, you shall find I'm not a terribly obedient little pooch. This is why father's plans never work."

"I would never marry you. I don't even know you." Aurora snapped, her pretty mouth twisted in incredulous fury.

"Let us keep it that way, shall we? Then, we are to be agreed." Adam responded in turn.

At once, Aurora flew to his side. She curled into his arm and wrapped herself around him.

"...What?"

"Aurora?!" A quick pattering of feet met the resounding silence as Philip, face red from taking the stairs three at a time, came to ungainly halt nearest Aurora. He wrapped one hand tight along his throat and sputtered a few breaths before he began: "What is all this yelling about? What is going on?"

At once, Aurora flew to his side. She curled into his arm and wrapped herself around him.

"...What is going on?" Philip intoned again. This time, his voice was muted. Darker. Aurora did not need to see to know that Adam and her love had locked eyes. "Why are you upsetting her?"
A soft sound left Adam's mouth. A sigh of sorts, but it sounded defeated. "…Must you play this game, too?"

"What 'game'?' Philip spat the phrase back at Adam. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know precisely what has been going on. You were too cowardice to step down here until she was nearly in tears." At once, Adam's voice seemed to focus entirely on Aurora but still, he sneered. "At least I purpose agency in this, Aurora. While your beloved fiancée, he already knows everything about what is to conspire here."

Aurora pulled her face away. She pulled at Philip's sleeve, hard, demanding his height match her own. Eye to eye. "Philip? Is this true? Is anything of what this man says...true?"

For once, Philip did not meet her eye. However, he did not pull away from her. "Aurora, listen."

Her eyes were alight with fury. "You knew? And you left me here?" Aurora rose her voice vehemently, dominating her shadow over her prince's, the fire flickering with its own heated throws to stay alive over its pile of ashes in the hearth. "You knew?!"

"Aurora, please, quiet your voice darling!" Philip explained quickly, his face ashen, arms poised as if to muffle her mouth to his chest. He rushed his voice to a gentle murmur, talking to Aurora, and Aurora alone. "I knew, yes, I did, darling, I did, but, listen, listen: this man is delusional. Your father knows me! He—he owes me! I only did what your father requested out of respect but I love you! I saved your life! We deserve to be together! Your father loves you, Aurora, this will never come to pass—with some foreigner—who clearly hasn't encountered a dangerous beast in his entire life!"

"Ah, yes." Adam interrupted the pair quite coolly. "The name calling. Very original."

"You have said enough," Philip darted his dark eyes to Adam. "Be quiet."

Adam's icy eyes rolled over the pair in rebuke. He returned to his chair and slumped down, leaning arms over the table, resting his chin on his steepled hands. He gazed at their shadows in the fading darkness, twisted and crumpled together, until one could hardly tell them apart. "What a lovely couple you shall be. How easy it must have been to fool your parents with declarations of love and the story of a dragon between you. How charmingly provincial."

"Aurora," Philip urged. "Do not give him a second more of your time. We should leave and seek your father at once."
to ask your father for your hand in two days' time. How could have this slipped under my nose so quickly?"

The stress tightened his youthful gaze. A faint pulse seemed to faintly move the skin at the base of his left cheek, as if his heart protested as strongly as his words. Aurora had half a mind to touch there, fascinated and alarmed. She had never seen Philip's levelheaded nature so shaken.

"You are surprised to be placated by her father's words?" Adam asked with a careful look. "Kingdoms are not protected by good intentions." He shifted once more in his seat, to cross leg and connect ankle to the opposite knee. "Surely, you've heard of Corona's missing child by now? Stolen nearly four years ago? Gone without a trace." At this, Adam lifted his eyes to meet Aurora. A strange chill trickled down her spine. "She will never be found."

"I was found. If I can be saved, so can that poor little girl."

"My point exactly. The notion that you were 'lost' at all is ridiculous. It's uncanny. I do believe your parents spurned you and have only collected you once more. You weren't ever really missing. You are a boon crafted out of a political strategy. And this story, this dragon, while there's evidence, it doesn't tell nearly an idyllic tale as you want the world to believe."

He returned to working his knife from the monster's eye and failing with every attempt. He cared not for the couple before him, how their eyes stared with heated insult across his face.

Adam merely gave shrug at his own loss before he continued:

"Love and knowing someone? Hardly the truth. And for you, princess, squeezing to his side as if the very thing that made your life miserable isn't dead before you already. You all act as if it's still alive. 'What is wrong with me', you ask? What is wrong with you? You and him, and whatever flea-bottom forest they dropped you into as a child, feel free to lecture me about political intrigue and what I don't know. What little mind you may possess for slaying a "monster" you've so much to learn of how to stop a real tyrant."

"The dragon?" Philip began. He had placed his hands at Aurora's shoulders, fingers soft over the sleeves of her dress. Now, they were clenched, knuckles white. His face still did not dare to turn to stare at the man before him. He breathed in deeply through his nose, as if willing an unreachable calm to control the blistering incredulity of his voice as he said: "You mean to imply it a hoax?"

"Yes, absolutely, you might have the entire kingdom eating out of the palm of your hands, but you shall find that I am not so easily persuaded."

"The Dark Fairy of the Mountain is dead and her corpse is enshrined through multiple kingdoms." Philip growled.

Aurora resisted taking his hand to pull them both away from this and alas, she did not move. Philip would not be moved so easily. He was sweet, encouraging, and protective of her, that was all very true, but his eyes now seemed to boil in ire. A resentful need to prove Adam wrong.

We shall be agreed, the prince of Villeneuve had told her.

While his snides were arrogant and his manners trying, he did not disengage the way other members from other nations had. This captured Aurora, despite all warnings, despite Philip's wounded pride. This feeling of confliction was new and a bit alarming to the princess. Aurora found herself caught between the two men. Philip knew of this arrangement and had said nothing, nothing to her, but she pushed down that small pain inside of her chest. He would have to have his reasons. She was sure of
this. She just was not sure why she couldn't have known. That it had come from the mouth of this insolent young stranger to prove her worst fear so close at hand.

*If* it were true.

But yet, he seemed *convinced*.

The way those hollow carriages with hollow people came and went, so passive and charming, never daring to step out of line or fancy a rumor. For once in her life, Aurora felt she was all too privy to conspiracy she was never meant to hear. Aurora knew she was sheltered. She had grown up quite lonely and away from any other children. Her godmothers could only provide so much attention to a curious girl. Even her curse had been still and quiet. Could it actually be that this young man's words were her only source of reality from the outside world?

"Do you know anything of magic?" Aurora asked of Adam. Her eyes were wide with the possibly of holding information that someone else did not already know. Was this prince so absent that he did not see magic was very real and very, very dangerous?

"No. I hardly believe in it myself." Adam replied slowly. "But I do understand entertaining a decent logic puzzle. Likely enough, this story is only one piece away from being completed. Multiple kingdoms with exclusive valuables not found between here nor Roeselare?" Adam observed. "Trade in smelting ore to forge hard scales, fangs with iron, so close to the most sought after gemstone route this side of the North Sea?"

Adam gave pause. He studied the handle of the knife once more, lacing his fingers over its handle, and twisted the knife in deeper into the eye. The wet sounds of tearing tissue made Aurora's stomach feel like water.

"Besides, there's an air of *desperation* about you with all this boasting. You *do* try to be so worthy of her. It makes me think: why couldn't this dragon be a tryst between smaller kingdoms…like yours, Philip?" A contemplative glare tested Philip's integrity to rip the knife out himself, but he did not move, lest he risk the look of satisfaction resting in Adam's eyes. "It only bleeds if you knew where to stab it."

Aurora felt those words far too ominous. Their meaning doubled. With the rising of the men's voices, Aurora worked quickly to gain back what little control she felt she had before Philip had arrived.

"Everything bleeds," Philip seethed. "Including you, I'd like to think, even if you share your father's snake blood. I think it red, like anything else."

A wolfish grin lit the young prince's face. Aurora did not need to try very hard to imagine points at their tips. "I do believe you would like to see my blood very much, wouldn't you, huntsman?"

"The Dragon is no hoax. The Dark Fairy Maleficent is dead and she is never coming back."

"It is the closest thing you've got to any sense of grandeur. I would cling to the lie, too. I hear it was just an old woman you stabbed through the breast. Noble of you. Magic, if it exists at all, begets magic alone. No sword could match that power. No love, or passion, or dedication, would be able to kill a beast such as that. So I propose it a hoax. It will not rot. It is indestructible in every way. But I believe that the chances are…there is nothing inside of it. A gilded glory, just for you, Philip."

A sharp *thunk* struck the air. In one powerful move, Philip took back the knife from Maleficent's eye. He flipped the blade between practiced fingers. Then, Philip shouldered himself away from the table.

"Enough talk." Philip demanded. "What is it, exactly, that you are trying to prove?"
Adam sighed, long and tired, before he fixed his eyes to the dragon’s ruined eye. Then, they moved to Aurora. Unblinking. Waiting…

"…I think he means to stop the engagement," Aurora answered Philip quietly.

Adam leaned forward. A tight, unfeeling smile resting over his lips. "And, now that you've arrived, we really haven't much time left, so, Philip, s'il vous plaît, won't you leave us?"

At once, Philip's composure crumbled. "No. I will not."

"My plan did not account for you being here." Adam edged out, his tone hard. "If you care for your dear princess at all, you will lay down your pride and—"

"My pride?" Philip sputtered. His cadence washed away. Aurora had never heard Philip sound so disgusted in all her life. "Do you even hear yourself, you self-righteous bastard?"

"And of what of you to idle in the glory of old victors? The dragon, if ever was it real, lay dead and yet all the congratulation never seems to satisfy you. If there be none of like it, I pity your unsavory hunts for the rest of your days. Are you so empty headed that you cannot see how your poor princess hates it?"

"Aurora knows what it represents. It shows goodwill and prosperity of Poperinge and Roeselare, as do she and I. It is a symbol that shall last forever." Philip declared rigidly.

Those black scales shimmered from the corner of Aurora's vision. Was it breathing? Did it move? It never failed to play with her mind…as if she had never woken up. If the dragon existed, its magic and malice, then how was her endless dreaming truly over? And forever? What could Philip mean by that? Was it just one more diplomacy she could not speak against?

Why? Aurora fought not to cry out. Why must The Dragon stay with me forever?

Suddenly, Adam threw back his head in laughter. The pealing crisp and deeply amused. He brought up a hand to muffle the noise but the shaking of his shoulders could not be controlled.

"Tell me, did this dragon actually fight you? Or did it just lay down and die in light of your chivalry?" Adam managed to ask.

"It nearly killed me." Philip defended.

"Perhaps," the young prince leered. "Even if it was all just the conjuring of that frail old woman."

Philip stilled the knife between his fingers.

"You know. I've heard of you as well." Philip kept his eyes to Adam. "The sickness your family carries. They say the plague is in your veins. It's why your father has been cutting out trades all over the nation, one by one, spreading and dashing away. That's why your father is so desperate to marry you off before your kingdom becomes a complete despot."

Adam flashed a cold smile that made Aurora tremble. His eyes held hers perilously, as if they had only barely yielded to Philip's accusations, and had far more intrigue into her reactions to hearing it.

The plague, a walking death that terrorized so many. Did Adam know of it? Is that why his father forced reconciliation before it was too late for his bloodline? Adam's eyes drew in all the warmth away from the room. If they had looked a winter's storm before, now they appeared strikingly willful, as if Aurora might walk across the thin ice resting inside of his eyes only to fall through,
plunged into darkness, forever, and Philip was only risking the fall to be ever greater.

What lay under the surface of Adam's looks and disinterest, Aurora could only stare back in absolute wonder. A strange heady pulse raced up her wrists and the balls of her feet. The more Philip willed this fight, the stronger her heart beat under her ribs, winding her. Adam's veil of condescension was cracking with every verbal spar that Philip lodged at him.

*I have to stop this. I have to do something.*

There was a tinge of fear, and anticipation, and then, nestled at her throat, a very real flush of a thrill. For all his regality, Adam looked a mere instant away from his skin slipping back and that dark, primal anger locking its jaws around Aurora's throat.

For he only kept his eyes on her.

*Your tragedy,* he had told her.

This was getting them nowhere. Regardless of who he was or how clumsy his exhumation of her future, Aurora knew what she had to do.

"Philip," Aurora broke the tension determinedly. "I want you to leave."

"Aurora?" He turned to her in absolute shock. "You cannot be—"

"I mean it," Aurora cut in again. "Go back upstairs. Act as if you never came down."

Philip turned in shock at Aurora, the two exchanging a long, breathless moment of determined staring, before Philip retreated.

"Fine." Philip snorted as he lodged the knife into the wood of the table. Turning swiftly on his heel, he stifled walked back up the stairs and was soon out of sight.

Silence.

Aurora stared down at Adam. "What did you mean by 'my tragedy'?" She sniffed the word. "Marrying you?"

He looked up at her from his seat. "Your tragedy is easy to see. All those nobles preying on the ignorant nature of some forest girl. This wild twisted fantasy they've wrapped you up in, Aurora, the delusion your life. It's innate. Mad, even. You just don't know any better than to believe." He pushed himself up from his chair, moved around the table, and to stand an arm's length away.

Aurora matched him. She took a step closer, her eyes tight to his face. "The Dragon was real."

"I'm not talking about the beast, Aurora. I'm talking about you. You have no idea how difficult your life will be from now on. The tragedy is that I know you are aware of this. I can see it in your eyes."

A hot panic crawled through Aurora's chest. Her insecurity laid bare across her face by those cold eyes. It was if he knew so much about her by studying her face in the silence of the entire evening. More than her father could see. More than her mother. The way he inched ever closer with every controlled breath. "What is your plan to stop this?"

He glanced toward the closed parlor door. "It won't be long now."

Aurora furrowed her brows. "What do you mean?"
"I will tell you this. Once this occurs, I will not be welcomed back to this kingdom. If not by your father, then my own. I won't be attending breakfast nor dinner tomorrow evening, either."

Aurora shook her head. "Wait. If this is the last time I'll see you…please. We should do something more—we should stop this from going on! What about the next princess or the next after her?"

"It will be over. He has to die one day. That or I will not rest until all optional candidates have thoroughly been sacked."

"Please." Aurora disputed. "Can I write to you? At least to thank you."

Aurora looked toward the stairs, the ones Philip had ascended, how far away he felt from her.

"You're right." She finally managed. "Is that what you want to hear from me? I get that I don't understand. I get that what I dreamt my life to be won't come true, and not while I stand here and pretend with all my might. I don't have friends—not people that would offend and fight and dare to step on toes as you do. I've never even seen a fight before now and…You've…I don't understand how but…you've corrected my life back to the way I thought it might be. What can I do to repay you?"

"Nothing." Adam said. "Forget me. Forget my face. That is what you can do. It is what I do."

Aurora's eyes widened. Closer than before, she peered at Adam in guarded wonder. "Why do you say such things? Why did you say such cruel things to hurt Philip? And…me as well. As if you know my life? You don't know me!"

"That is precisely what I am trying to tell you, Aurora. Yours is a life that is not worth knowing." He met Aurora's stare, a heartbeat away now, and stopped before her.

Aurora felt struck at those words. Her face paled. She refused to show the hurt. "I don't understand you; what is it that you want from me? You wanted to stop our forced union only to insult me?"

"You look but you do not see. Did you ever see the dragon alive or where you supposedly slept for that nightmare? Then, why is it still here? When do your horrid little dreams begin and end? And what if none of it was ever real? Which is worse: the lie you believe or the reality you cannot face? Philip is a disgrace and a fraud as much as you are some lost little orphan that was pretty enough to make a good figurehead to be sold to the highest bidder. And that happened to be my father."

"I am not just a pretty face." Aurora squeezed her fists tightly at her sides. "The Dragon is real." She repeated again, her tone heated. "Her curse was real."

"You have no earthly idea what real truly is." Adam continued, his blue eyes tight to her face. "You think you've awoken from the nightmare of your childhood but you're wrong. You think you belong in this life of royalty and happiness and they want you to believe that. But they're wrong. None of this is real, not real for us, anyhow. It's just another state of dreaming. And, now that they've found you, you won't ever wake up."

Aurora felt her hands clench. She stepped forward, unafraid of how close she was to his face. She could feel the sweat damping the curls of her hair at her neck, her shoulders. What could this boy know about her new life? Why did he pick apart every good thing she had welcomed into her heart? How did he know that she was still afraid of it all being a lie?

I am not dreaming anymore, her thoughts flew, and she barked the words into his face: "Be quiet!"

"Do you want to know the other rumors I've heard whispered about you?" Adam wondered aloud.
He was so close to her now his words became nothing more than a hushed whisper. "The thorns around your castle swallowed the lives of horses and men indiscriminately. All, of course, except for Philip." He leaned in close into her ear. In a hoarse whisper, he said: "'and how the thorns parted before him like a lady's thighs'—"

Then, Adam stopped. He tasted a hint of blood in his mouth. The sudden pain of tongue against teeth. Aurora struck outwards with the back of her hand, blinding him across the face.

"Will that quell your tongue?" Aurora demanded of him, her teeth grinding under tense lips.

Adam reached up to touch at his mouth, before he pulled away, and with the movement, he merely smirked at her, red over the white of his teeth. "Oh no, mademoiselle, you will have to hit me far harder than that."

"Do not tempt me!" Aurora said loudly, her hand poised once more.

"AURORA!" An older voice cried out. Her father stared at her, aghast. His face was red from the excursion of his disbelief. He hurried to his daughter's side, sweeping her away from Adam as if she had been the one in the wrong. "Aurora! Whatever are you doing, child?!"

Aurora quickly dropped her hand. Shame crawled up her back. She had never struck anyone before. She had moved without thinking. She was certain this would cost her dearly. She was so absorbed in the spite of the young man before her that she had not heard the parlor door open, hurrying the two men into the hall, concerned by the rising of loud voices.

"Aurora?!" Her father demanded once more. Now, she was pulled even further away. She felt her father touch at her shoulders and smooth his palms down her arms. He gently collected her hands within his own. "...What happened, my pet?"

At once, the knowing smile Adam had worn disappeared. He only stared straight ahead, shoulders locked tightly, his eyes downward. Aurora turned stiffly to spy Adam's father only an arm's length away, a tall, looming shadow that stood behind the prince. While her father puffed and bothered, his hand wrapped around Aurora's own, the king of Villeneuve was entirely collected.

His eyes moved to Aurora's nervous face, to his son, and back to hers again.

Then, with a calm voice, Adam's father spoke. His words clear and direct. "What did he say?"

Aurora made to open her mouth but the words did not arrive. She merely turned her head away. "It doesn't matter now."

"Yes," King Stefan disagreed at once. "Yes, it most definitely does!" She watched as her father turned to give a disappointed look at the young prince's face, a look she was certain was meant for her. "I am sorry for my daughter's irrationality. Please, excuse us."

Aurora did fight not being led away. She only looked back once to see how Adam still endured to not move a single inch from the second those parlor doors had opened. Her brow furrowed in confusion. Adam's rage, his stubborn smirks, his articulate tongue. Where did all of go? What had he been thinking? Did this ruin everything?

It was impossible to say. The dark of the hall melted much of the light, and their faces fell into shadow. The last she saw of Adam that night was his father, reaching out to take the boy by the neck, and force him in the opposite direction, towards the guest wing.

Aurora waited and waited, her face turned away from her father, to stare back into the dark, for any
sense of understanding.

Adam did not once turn back to look at her.

"Aurora," King Stefan said. "Please, my pet, won't you look at me?"

Aurora would not. She was seated in the very parlor her father had been plotting in. The air reeked of foreign tobacco and rum. She pulled her knees to her chest, lifting her legs daintily from the floor, curling into herself. Her dress of pink silk evaded her pulling and snuffling. It was still smooth and pearlescent in the bubbling yellow light of the candles that lit the room. She was holding her head in her hands. Her mind full of voices that whispered of conspiracy and anger.

He was right. That terrible boy was right. If he hadn't been sure, if he hadn't had spoken his mind, they would have been promised in a fortnight to one another. Promised. Like cattle. Like an animal with no discerning need to say anything against the decision. To be brought home in a whirlwind and then shipped to France on a whim.

"How could you." Aurora answered in a hollow whisper.

"My sweet, you have to believe in your old father. There is a delicate balance to these kinds of things. You and Philip are well-known to me and your mother. Your marriage to Prince Adam would have never—"

"I know. It would have never actually occurred. But yet, it was true. For a few hours yet, it was once true."

"Yes…" Her father lingered on for a moment longer, struck by the distress over his daughter's face. "Aurora…you are so new to this life of politics. It takes a lot to run a kingdom. Trade, demand, markets, armies, they depend on money. You must understand why I at least had to entertain the idea."

"There are apparently many things I don't understand," Aurora pressed. She raised her head to burn her words into her father's reasoning. "But mark my words: if you dare to use my affection in your sick games, I will run away from here with Philip, and you shall never see your "lost" daughter again."

King Stefan could only stare on in fragile sorrow. "Clearly, Adam's words have deeply upset you."

He moved himself to sit at his daughter's side. A hand moved to cup the curve of her cheek. "Please, do not sulk my beautiful girl. You shall not be seeing that boy again. He will regret the blasphemy he said to you. All of it. His father assured me of this."

"Regret them?" Aurora gasped in awe. "I should thank him! Callous as his tongue may be at least he was honest! He only said the words that a thousand others might be thinking. How I glowed in my ignorance! How long has it been before I saw real emotion in your eyes? Or mother's? Why do you hide me behind curtains and meager fair weather friends? What are you so afraid of?! Maleficent is dead, is she not? What else will you be hiding? Was I ever even lost?!"

"Aurora," Her father murmured. "Please, calm yourself. It's over now." He went to rub at her skin soothingly, but she smacked his hand away with a fire of repulsion.

"No! It is not his words, daddy, or any other man that has brought me to my darkest conclusion! I am sick to death of men and strangers telling me that I don't know my own thoughts! I have always felt this way! You just do not find it proper for a princess to plainly speak her mind! I cannot believe I
have to tell my own father that I am not Shetland pony to carousel about!"

"Aurora, that is enough!" King Stefan recoiled away at her outburst. "This conversation is over. If you dare to yell in my face one more time you shall be sent to your chambers all of 'morrow without breakfast! Am I clear?"

"I am going to find Adam and thank him!" Aurora cried. Her face was crumpled in pain, how easily she was dismissed by her own father. "Go, and tell mother, too, how I also will not be present at breakfast!"

She was quick. Aurora was across the parlor and slamming its heavy door within seven heartbeats. Her father did not follow behind.

There, Aurora stayed, her back pressed tight to the door, holding in her anger at her father, the uncontrolled shaking of her legs for yelling all of her greatest fears into the crowded night. It was likely the entire castle had heard her now.

She clasped a hand over her mouth to muffle a sudden sob that racked her body. Hot tears ran down her cheeks. However, she pressed on. She would find Philip first and demand his truths. Heaven help if it he did not share as easily as Adam.

"No," she whispered to herself, each step weighting down on her, heavier than the last, as she climbed to the upper floor. "I'm not dreaming. Not anymore."

To abide by her mother's rules, Philip and Aurora could not stay in the same suite together until they were married. It did not matter how much Aurora begged her father to change his wife's mind or how entirely hilarious Philip's father, King Hubert, thought the whole fuss was. It only made Aurora pace the castle grounds tirelessly. It made Philip only more headstrong to sneak away to see her. In terrible twist of fate, Aurora now felt her whole life dictated whether she was or was not awake, and Aurora could not understand their reasoning.

Was she not good enough? Did they think so poorly of her that she had to be separated from her love during the most vulnerable time of the night? Was this the way by which all kingdoms treated their princesses? Aurora couldn't say. Before tonight, it was yet another set of expectations that Aurora had come to behold, even if she thought often, often thought very loudly, that the whole speculation wasn't fair.

She was sixteen—soon to be seventeen in just one more month. It was ridiculous. She attended all of her endless etiquettes courses. She minded her tutor. She could even walk steadily with a stupid book on her head. Where was it really getting her? And if she showed that she naturally excelled in everything her parents wished her to know, when would she finally earn their trust?

It hardly mattered to Aurora tonight. She had answered her own bitter thought. She had done it all for her parents and they had lied to her. Philip had lied to her. Everything she had done, everything she had put up with day after day she did for those around her only to be put aside. Her own father treated her as if she was the one that had ruined that insane proposal. As if he didn't hear all of those nasty things Adam was so happy to say straight to her face.

Philip would be at their garden. Aurora could only hope, this time, he would not lie to her again.

"Aurora?" Philip held her gaze for a single heartbeat. He could feel her body tense under his arms. She had come to him in tears and spoke rapidly about Adam's insults, her father, a slap…it was all rather fast for Philip to get in one breath. He pressed his face into the crown of her hair.
"Are you not going to stay with me tonight?"

He had hoped his voice did not tremble as badly as he felt his heart might. He was told all throughout his life that he was a patient man. If not by nature, then by practice. The thrill of the hunt demanded more of his mind than just his body. Tedium (leaves deliberately breaking under boots, a ripple in the air, the wind too strong, ruffling of the scent of his hair, *the doe already fled*) turned into anticipation. Anticipation (bolt or blade, arrow, quiver, his breathing becoming a solid pressure that burned his lungs, *breathe shallow, boy, shallow*) to thrill.

That thrill was his sole reason for rising in the grey, pre-dawn light. It hardly left his blood. His triumphs had caused his parents to glow with such overwhelming pride, Philip often joked their pride was brighter than the gates of Roeselare.

Philip had not known restlessness once in his life... until Aurora. Meeting her felt like his organs rotated inside his body. The point of the horizon slipping in reverse, a hundred moon sets and sun rises. He had just killed *The Dragon*, a legendary win that would bring his name into hunter of mythos, a new constellation next to Hercules himself. His nose filled with charcoal, legs shivering from adrenaline, his mind nothing more than a canvas covered in unearthly green blood. Philip thought himself finally a man.

Until Aurora had opened her eyes for only him.

Philip's vision had tingled to black. Surely, inhaling Maleficent's smoke had made his knees weak. Yet, it wasn't the magic infused blood on his skin that cause him skin to tingle. He had stared Death in the eyes and drawn his sword on instinct alone.

But Aurora, Aurora had slain him with a flutter of her eyes.

...and the princess's bed rushed up to meet him very quickly. The next thing Philip heard was her laughter, radiant and hypnotic as her eyes.

"Aren't only the damsels supposed to faint?" Aurora had teased him gently.

Philip scrambled upwards, his fists collecting the sheets of her bedding. "Poison? I've been poisoned?" Philip urged, his voice soaked with embarrassment.

"Oh, *pardon me, sir*," Aurora scoffed, unconvinced.

He had lived through a litany of horrible beastly encounters, but that moment, Philip knew, Aurora would never let him live it down...

...still, she had not answered him, Like a malfunctioning machine, Philip's patience struggled to remain. Could that wretched young man truly have wounded them both? Aurora had asked him to leave. *To leave!* They hardly spent a day apart since their reunion, meeting in secret just outside the palace garden. Often, they went woodswalking, trying to catch hold of a childhood they should have shared together. 'Woodswalking', Philip had smirked at her, the endearing little term Aurora had crafted for her love of traveling through the thick woods surrounding her kingdom. He indulged her in her walkings as frequently as he could—even if her loud walking disturbed any chance of hunting.

The garden, however, was where they were tonight. Aurora was still and pallid in his lap with her gold hair tickling his nose.

This was not how he had envisioned they might spend their precious few hours alone.
Philip sighed quietly. He tightened his hold over her. Aurora was of many fine temperaments, but only when she showed them. Philip understood little of women, could never tell what they might be thinking, and Aurora, his love, his everything, was a steel trap of the deadliest sort to presume. If she was nervous, especially as nervous as Philip felt, and fought to hide.

He should have been truthful with Aurora. He knew this now and the shame beat upon him from the inside out. He never meant for her father's courting of Villeneuve to cause Aurora any pain. He had been born and raised well in the careful dance of broken promises, swallow trades, loose family ties partings torn by a hidden folly. Hardly any whirlwind political betrothal came to pass anymore. It was fading with the growing of new ages and new queens, new kings.

Aurora was just so, so new to this life, delicate even, constantly overwhelmed, he only wanted to not place any unnecessary pressure onto her shoulders when none of tonight's transpiring really mattered.

Had it been any other rival, Philip might have objected further, but he knew exactly what most royals knew: Villeneuve was a crumbling kingdom without venture. Aurora's father merely played the humble host as he should. The appearances and select trade of France was profitable for now. She would never be married to such a cursed kingdom, wrought with plague and the whispered suffering of its people.

How to explain this to Aurora now and not bite his own tongue in the process? Would explanation only make things worse between them? Would she think he was being as condescending as that terror of a prince?

And that boy. What an absolute absurdity he was! It was as if he hated the very idea of Poperinge. As if he had plans of his own that went against everything the tradition of the political dance called for!

The realization crept slowly upon him.

"Aurora," Philip began faintly. "I've just had a thought."

Her reply came late. "…Yes?"

"I do believe he wanted that to happen." Philip replied lightly. "I know you said that he wanted to stop the betrothal, but I think your spat with him was his plan."

Slowly, Aurora pushed Philip's arms away. She arose from his lap but never turned her back away from him.

"Why did the truth come from his mouth and not yours?" She asked this in a whisper but the silence of the garden carried the conviction straight to Philip's shame.

"…My only thought was to ease your fears. You needn't know what would never come to pass. You already try so hard for everyone else. You shouldn't try for a stranger nor for me."

"Well, you have failed! You left me at the hands of that man and yet I feel wiser for it."

"Wiser?" Philip countered. "He may have been more honest than I, but he was only using you to just the same! He may have been plotting your outburst, exploring your insecurities, the entire time!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I do think he meant every word he said but he was trying to get you to snap this whole time. That was the trigger. So quickly it came to pieces. His father and yours are separated now and
when you spoke of their reaction to you and Adam …it's so methodical. Brilliant, for a foolish, arrogant man."

Aurora stilled in the moonlight. The pink of her dress appeared ethereal over the grasses, a timid ghost before him.

"...I am so tired of these games, Philip." She turned. Then, she flew towards him, ensnaring her body, his arms instantly opening in reflex to catch her. She pressed a cheek to his chest to hear how hard his own heart was beating. "How am I to know what's real anymore?"

Philip pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Aurora, I am so, so sorry my love. I never meant..."

Philip closed his eyes. "It is my fault you're hurt."

She merely shivered in his arms. "Yes," Aurora said sadly. "And no."

"No?" Philip remarked in confusion. "Will you tell how I can make this right? Do you mean the riddle of your words?"

"What's done is done. I just wanted to see you."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and placed a kiss to his lips. It made the hairs on the back of his neck rise. A sudden, unexpected shock to his system. He wanted to pin her in the grasses right there, so that this would be over, all clean and new, with his idiotic attempt to be, once more, her shield against the prying outside world, sundered.

But Aurora covered his mouth with her hand. He could hear the words on the wind before she even spoke them.

"I cannot stay long with you. Not tonight."

"...I know." Was all Philip replied.

"I must go see him."

_Him_. The prince. Adam. They locked eyes in dispute at once but Aurora had him transfixed to the ground. She would not compromise in this.

"Why?" Philip offered the word gently. If he could not stop the fall out of his own mistake, he might at least know her intentions would keep her safe.

"To thank him. To find the rest of my answers."

Philip swallowed to no relief. "Aurora, my love, you may not like what you find."

Her eyes laid into him with a sharp, annoyed glare. "I know what I am doing."

"No, no," Philip amended at once. "I only mean...be safe." He flickered his eyes out to the woods, scanned the high towers behind them, and then back to his princess, and her alone. "There is something not quite right about him."

"...People whisper those very same words about me."

"Aurora," The bite of his words could not hold back his staggered anger, what she dared to imply. "There is nothing wrong with you!"

"I was cursed, Philip, from birth!" Aurora stormed. "Maleficent certainly thought otherwise!"
"Maleficent is dead, Aurora! When are you going to accept that?"

"And what if she is not?" Aurora screamed back at him. Her shoulders heaved, her eyes darkened and damp, in anger, in fear, frustration. "What then, Philip?!"

Philip leapt to his feet, spurned by his fiancée's contempt. He could take this assault no longer. "I shall kill her a thousand times more! Again, and again, until you know freedom!"

Aurora's expression splintered in rage. She threw out her hands to shove Philip away. "You will never understand!"

"Aurora—!"

He reached out to touch her sleeve but entangled himself in Aurora's desperation to get away. Fingers to silk, the sleeve ripped, sloughing off of her shoulder. Philip gasped and pulled back, stumbling away from her, fingers locked together as if he had been deeply cut.

Aurora was unfazed. The night air had cooled her skin. All the color had fled from her face.

"She will never leave me, Philip."

She looked at him and through him, as if he were no longer before her, lost in shadow and the silver fractals of light that beamed down through the frost-covered trees. She was so sure she would see those horrible yellow eyes through the brush, hunting her with every quickening of her heart, summoned by her own name. Aurora wrapped her arms around herself. She quickly turned her back and fled. "I have to go."

"Aurora," Philip called after her. His was voice hoarse in his attempt to not wake the entire castle. "Aurora, wait!" He caught up to her quickly. "Will you be back tonight?"

She said nothing. She would not even look at him.

Philip felt his lungs tighten like a vice, cold and painful, his breathing suddenly powdery over the air. She kept her head straight ahead, unhearing. A painful, human magic all her own; an invisible wall between them that left him unbearably cold. He tried again, with all of his will, and repeated his wish: "Will you be back tonight?"

"Aurora!" He called again. He slowed down, a jog, a walk, and then he was still. "Aurora!"

But there was no response. Soon, she was gone.

The only sound left between them was Philip's breathing. The hunter felt purged from him. He turned to watch a blackbird rise from the wood and into the night sky, the only pair of eyes to see their lover's spat. It split the air with every beat of its wings. Philip found himself staring after it, imagining its flight far over the wood, driven away from here by the fear of human voices.

Then, and only then, did Philip feel entirely alone.

Aurora walked silently down the empty hall that split the guest wing from her own private wing. The windows were shut tightly, but the chill from the gardens made Aurora long for the warmth of the fireplace in the dining hall. She did not long for her bedroom nor her bed. To be afraid of the dark was a child's fear. It no longer scared her. The passing outlines of moonlit clouds over the moon did not bother her, either. Rubbing at her arms she came across the ripped cloth of her dress, slick over her fingers, and gave a sigh.
She would at least need to change out of it and into something warmer if she were to sincerely hope to find Adam without catching her death…

…she was soon inside her room but she found herself sitting quite still along her bed. Her wardrobe untouched. Her dress unchanged. Her long hair tangled beneath her fingers, locked against the sides of her head, as a dull headache slithered around her neck. She had trouble finding the will inside of her to move, not with Philip's voice still echoing back to her. It was easy to stand up to Philip in the garden.

It was harder to face herself alone.

…*What am I doing? Did I really scream at Philip?* She leaned back to properly lay across her bed, head buried into her arm. *What if I only made things worse between us?* Her stomach turned cold, twisted in no small terror, and ached at her limbs. *Can I do anything right?* Why did every fight, every thought, always lead her to back to Maleficent?

Philip was right. He had to be. The Dragon was dead. The Dragon was dead and—

A terrible wet sound echoed from the hall.

Aurora held her breath.

Something was moving outside of her door.

Her heart picked up speed. She was no longer cold. Sweat began to drip down her face, crushed to her pillows. Philip's name raced to her lips but she couldn't make a sound. It was as if she had forgotten how to scream. Her curse of sleep made her fear not the dark, but silence. Her curse was made of silence.

Then, the something stopped. With her purse lingering in her ears, Aurora lifted her heard to stare at her bedroom door.

Whatever it was, it had stopped there.

Her body cold. Her ears pricked. She could only listen.

Breathing. It was breathing. The sound was strange. Uneven and hard, as if it had been running. Laborious. It paused for a long time before it lurched into a painful hitch. Slowly, it moved onwards.

The gooseflesh spread across her entire body like a flame.

*Maleficent is dead,* Philip had said.

Aurora sat up. She forced her feet to meet the floor.

*Maleficent. Maleficent.* The name was deep inside her bones, as if the witch had carved it there herself. It whispered with every step. Aurora curled up tighter into herself, feeling foolish and worn. Was this to be the rest of her life? Haunted by a dead woman? Haunted by all foul magic that she could not fight herself? She shut her eyes tightly and hugged herself again.

Finally, she found herself staring into the dark.

A new purpose was calling to her from the back of mind. Furious and untapped. Almost like the spinning wheel had done...

She would find it.
She wished pain upon her fear. If The Dragon had returned, so be it. She would see it done for good. She would break into her father's armory and take his claymore. She would walk the length of the chambers, down the stairs, and into the dining hall. She would stand over The Dragon's skull and align the blade with a marksman's grace. She would rise the weight of the blade high over her head and bring it down into the eye of Maleficent, wanting to see her blood, needing to see her blood.

Adam was right. It only bled if you knew where to stab it. And she would not stop. She would never stop! She would stab it a hundred times, a thousand times, until the name Maleficent disappeared into the pits of the earth forever and ever!

She threw open her door with all her strength, adrenaline heady in her veins, to find nothing.

Aurora blinked. She padded further out into the hall. All around it, the hall was empty. It appeared entirely normal as well. Moonlight pooled through the crustal, icy glass of the windows. All the doors were closed.

Her eyes traced down the dark halls. She moved forward slowly. Nails cutting into the soft flesh of her palms. She moved a few heartbeats away from the safety of her bedroom, circling around and around until her foot touched something wet.

Aurora stiffened. Her skin crawled. Swallowing a sound of surprise, she forced herself to look down.

There, just under her left foot, was a small, inconspicuous droplets of water. In the pale light of the hall, it nearly looked white. Aurora carefully stepped away from it to bend down, to further investigate. She gingerly smoothed her hands over the liquid, pulling away it back towards her face before she realized that the tips of her fingers had gone dark. Red.

Blood.

Aurora bit back a scream, rearing herself tightly to the nearest wall. Her thoughts reeled in all manner of horror. Who was bleeding? Was it her? It didn't smell the way Maleficent's stench had wrought upon the beast's mutilation. A quick inspection told Aurora that she was uninjured. The blood was red. Dark and wet between her fingers. She felt disturbed at how the color seemed to calm her.

Only Maleficent's blood was green.

*The Dragon is dead,* she thought to herself, a weak attempt to slow her anxious breathing, to remain quiet in the hall. She turned to look further away from the blood stain and down the stairs. The blood did not stop at her feet. It trailed onwards. It was so faint, so spread apart, like droplets, like the lightest drizzle of rain, Aurora puzzled to think that she had come to find it at all. Clearly, she had paid more attention to Philip's passionate ramblings of his hunts than she thought. If the blood was still wet, still such a dark shade of red, it could only mean one thing: it was a fresh wound.

Someone was bleeding in her castle. Someone was hurt. Struggling to breathe. Breathe! That breathing she had heard? And what did she do? Nothing! She had cowered for minutes on end like a terrified child! *What sort of princess am I? Beyond hopeless,* Aurora thought to herself, consumed for a moment in her bitterness. *Beyond mad!*

What if they need help? What if they were looking to her for help?

At once, tripping over unsteady feet, Aurora made a mad dash for the stairs, taking them near three at a time. She did not care that her dress was torn or that her breathing had transformed to a heavy pant. She hit the banister hard in her rush but, strangely enough, she did not feel any pain.
Philip had spoken of this often. A soft of palpable reinforcement of the nerves that deadened pain when the mind was decidedly focused. Aurora continued her spring with a new vigor; if only she could feel like this at all moments! It is no wonder Philip chased after his beasts with such desire!

Only, the feeling ended too soon. Her stomach dropped when she spied a shadow dwelling at the very bottom of the stairs. Her feet would not move an inch further. She slid to a halt with little grace.

It was a man. A man, from what little Aurora could see, that was hunched over. A hand was pressed to the wall that descended along the path of the stairs. She quieted, leaned forward to listen. He was breathing. He was breathing in that same Aurora had heard outside of her door. Ragged, shallow… painful. He was still, as well. Paused to lean heavily against the wall. One of his arms was coiled tightly to hold his right side.

Aurora tried not to panic. Her heart hummed in her chest, dread overtaking her nerves. Her body shook in uncertainly. What had happened to him? Did some intruder break in and attack? Was he signaling for help? What happened to him? Should she call out to him? Would that scare him? A few helpful questions with no right answer.

Aurora merely waited a moment more. To watch. To see what he would do next.

The man was not aware of her. He seemed determined to move, reguardless of what his body told him. Another loud cough burst from his mouth, causing the man to stagger forward. His fingers clawed at the wall in a vain attempt to support himself.

It all rapidly clicked for Aurora. The blood. The delicate spray over the floor. She stumbled forward instantly. He was coughing up blood!

"Wait!" Aurora cried out.

At this, the man shuddered. The sound had frozen him in place. Slowly, he craned his neck to look back. A naked flash of surprise was sprawled loosely across his face. Then, fear.

Aurora felt numb.

Those frenzied eyes. The color of ice.

Adam. It had to be him. Even covered in shadows, Aurora could pick out the handful of details she had assigned to him over the dinner mere hours before. His long hair, the gauntness of his body…his eyes. He was here before her. He was…hurt.

"You…?" Adam gasped. He managed a step away from her. His brows tightened at her very image.

The world did not feel real for a horrifying second. The blood on her hand. His blood. His voice. His huddled figure before her, exposed and estranged. Aurora pushed forward.

"Stop," Adam ordered weakly, calling out as he stepped back again. He sounded breathless. "Stop! I said—don't—"

She was too quick. Aurora did not care for the furious glare she was met with as she approached him. It was futile. The injured look of a man with no hope of escape.

"Adam?" Aurora's voice was hushed. They were at arm's length. A distance that Adam kept between them at all cost, stepping back with every other movement she took forward. She swallowed thinly, instantly nervous. Confused. Hardly daring to meet Adam's incredulous stare.
"What are you doing?" Adam asked her. There was blood on his lips. He did not even bother to hide his state or lick the blood away. Did he even know it was there?

She drew closer, hesitant and unsure. Aurora could smell the stale sweat that radiated off of him. His face was soaked in perspiration, the droplets clinging tight to his skin. A red flush bloomed across his face the longer she stared at him without speaking a word. His eyes were fever-bright, alternating between staring at her and, to Aurora's assumption, looking for a way out.

There would be no silence between them now.

Every breath rattled Adam's chest, the sound labored and uneven. He tried to straighten himself but the effort only caused his face to spasm in pain. Pale as he already was, Aurora felt unnerved to be able to count the straining veins along his neck.

"Adam…what happened?" Aurora hurried through her awkward delay. She reached out her hands halheartedly, unsure where to begin, what to do.

Those cold eyes narrowed at her. "How—did you?"

"If you're about to lie to me, I'd think twice." Aurora opened her hand to show off their red hue. "I know you're bleeding."

Adam stared at her palm in disbelief. He only offered her a weak laugh. That, too, sounded raw.

"Do you," he rasped, "not sleep?"

She glared at his spiteful jest. His taciturn nerve to not answer her directly while he looked moments from collapsing. "What happened?"

At this, Adam shouldered away. He turned from her without another word. Aurora blinked. Was he truly going to ignore her?

"Adam," Aurora hissed his name. She threw out a hand to stop him. All at once, he tore himself from her light grasp, the motion swaying him on his feet, but he continued on. "Adam!"

She went to reach out again but he abruptly stopped her. A hand still clutching at his right side, he stared back at Aurora, as if he meant to dare her. "Do. Not. Touch. Me." Each word he emphasized with a potent fury.

Matching his glower, Aurora did as she was told. She lowered her hands but kept pace. It certainly wasn't hard. He stumbled more than actually walked. He kept himself pointedly towards the dining hall. The banquet had been cleaned hours ago, wood polished, chairs exchanged, and yet The Dragon's head remained, entirely untouched.

While Aurora refused to look at her, she repressed a shiver.

Adam paid no heed to anything. If, Aurora wondered with dread, he could register the hall at all. The cold air chilled her through her thin dress, frosted Adam's heated breathing, but he did not react to the cold before them.

"Adam, please, tell me what happened." If she could not touch him, words were all she had left.

He said nothing. He sputtered a wet sounding cough, dragged in a breath, and continued forward.

She tried again. "Can you tell me where you're hurt?"
Adam kept his eyes away from her. "This doesn't concern you."

"I'm not leaving you," Aurora said firmly. "You're my guest. What happened?"

"...weren't supposed to see..." He muttered lowly. Aurora hardly heard him speak.

"You don't want me to touch you and you won't tell me what happened." Aurora pressed. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No."

"Why? What is it with you?" Aurora snapped. "Your pride will be the death of you."

"Good."

They'd reached the door into the back kitchen. Before Adam could reach it, Aurora stole herself in front of it, blocking his entry. She stabled herself and pressed her shoulders back against the door for good measure. "Tell me what happened. Now."

Another shallow breath. "...Move."

She sharped her glare. "Tell me the truth."

"Haven't," he growled. "lied."

"Tell me."

"Move!" Adam thundered, yelling the word straight into her face. It echoed throughout the hall, stirring Aurora's hair at her shoulders. She flinched. Her eyes snapped shut in fright. But she did not budge.

"Or what?" Aurora drawled. She said this easily. The effort it took to scream clearly winded him. He gritted blood stained teeth at her. His eyes flashed with muted anger. Then, without warning, he threw out a hand to shove her aside. Aurora flinched again.

But felt no pain.

Aurora squeezed open one eye.

Adam's face was a breath away from her own.

His palm braced the door, baring his weight over the length of his arm, as she started up at him in shock. Aurora watched the muscles slither to hold himself away from her. She made the choice to hold Adam back from the door, and now, she felt pinned. While the sudden movement had scared her, she found herself reflected back in his eyes in fearful symmetry. She studied the red over his face. The burning of his cheeks, the stain over his teeth, the vessels in his eyes, exploded and bloodied themselves, threatening over with tears—tears—in pain, desperation.

"Aurora," He murmured her named in a single pain-filled breath. "Please. Leave me alone."

There was no contempt in his voice. His last nerve to keep fighting the princess was wearing him down. His eyes drifted closed as he muffled another cough. Aurora's stomach turned to knots to listen to the swallow that followed.

Her eyes widened over his face.
She had never seen a man cry before.

*He's begging me.*

"You saved me from a marriage against my will." Aurora whispered. "I found your blood. Compromise with me. What are you searching for?"

A soft groan left his lips. Another short breath. He cracked open his eyes to watch her, to maintain some dignity. Finally, he gave a defeated sigh.

"…Water." He confessed, matching her whisper.

"Fine. Water it is."

Compromise was what Aurora was expecting but nothing close to what she actually received. With Philip, they would have worked as a team. It would have been easy. Half the struggle and half the exasperation. However, nothing was so simple with Adam.

Adam simply allowed things. He allowed her to slide under his arm to help him walk. He allowed her to show him where basic kitchen utensils were, how a cup might be laid out from a lazy house-keep, the pump handle, a dragged over stool for him to sit. He was adamant about nothing being out of place. He insisted he only use what was not put away. No matter how Aurora might prod him to see that he was welcome to whatever he wanted, he would hear nothing of it. He only gave her longer, more disconcerted stares, before he turned away entirely, leaving Aurora to blink after him.

Philip talked at length and often as much as she did; Adam, when apparently left on his own, had so little say.

Or…maybe, it was something else. Something Aurora was picking up with every passing minute they shared. She was coming to understand his unusual quietness, his slights and ticks to be as rational as possible. It was…bizarre, frankly, for someone that spat up blood and washed it away with utter nonchalance. Aurora fell from a tree once, badly scraped her elbow, and cried for three days about it. She had a right to be loud. It bloody hurt. But here, as she sat in the dark with this strange young man, who, hours before, she could hardly stand…Aurora felt a faint urge to understand. It wasn't that Adam had little to say.

It was that he couldn't.

This was a secret.

She'd…never been trusted with a secret before.

A secret that felt heavy. And dark. And lingering close to an answer that Aurora treded towards with a suspicious, uneasy hand.

*What happened to you?*

What he didn't know, to Aurora's keen ability, was that once she was allowed in, she would not be pushed back out. No rule would stop her questions. No mask or etiquette to halt her cunning. When she was a child, what was denied to her, she only wanted with a deeper hunger.

And, there was no one awake in the entire castle to rid Aurora of this curious moment.

Adam refused the stool. He motioned weakly for her to sit, instead, and slowly lowered himself onto the kitchen's dirty tiles. He didn't seem to care. He braced his back against the back of a baker's pyre,
and drank the water down in one thirsty go, as if he thought it alcohol and not well... water. He shifted cautiously, wincing now and again, a hand still tight over the lower half of his right ribcage. He never removed his hand from the spot. His fingers only tightened, white knuckles popping outwards with force, and then they relaxed, as if the pain ebbed like the ocean's waves.

Aurora peered closer to him, on her knees, pillowed in front of him, her head titled. Adam merely slowed his drinking. It had been nearly four entire cups water before he slowed to normal pace.

"...You aren't going to tell me, are you?" Aurora finally said. She rose a blonde brow at him, testing the very idea and then let it fall.

"No." He said this sternly, but there was a faint tremor to his face, nearing some type of...relief. "Thank you for the water."

"...Of course." Aurora commented minimally.

"Aren't you thirsty?"

Aurora blinked. "You want me to drink?"

He gave a single shrug of his shoulder, as if her own question answered anything. She did not fail to notice that he favored the left side of his body. Something had to be wrong entirely on his right side. A fight? Did a horse kick him? What in the world...

"...If you still had any frets about our marriage, I can tell you with finality that it is off." Adam continued. His tongue was still stained a light red. Aurora watched his mouth with sudden fascination. She wasn't sure why his lips kept bleeding. No amount of water was washing it away.

"...Thank goodness," Aurora murmured, her chest tight. 'Our marriage'. God, to think, I'd actually be married to someone like you. She raised a hand to touch at her bangs, to pull a strain behind her ear. "I...don't know how to thank you. Uh."

She stuttered to a halt. Here, her mother would reprimand her but nothing else came.

Adam watched her calmly, a dull look of discomfort persistent behind his eyes. Still, he said nothing. Here, Aurora broke into a sad smile. "I don't know what to say."

"You already said it." Adam flickered his eyes back to the floor. "You're welcome."

"...What happened to you...does it have to do with, um, our wedding?"

Adam never moved his eyes. His brow furrowed once more. "No."

"You're lying."

He blinked. "Why does this matter so much to you? Haven't I insulted you enough?"

"I...I think you calculated it." Aurora said. She lifted her chin stubbornly. "Philip and I both do."

He gave a sharp grunt. "Ah, well if it's in accord, then it must be true."

Aurora felt her tempter flare. "Fine. Then if you won't tell me, I'll ask your father."

In reflex, Adam's entire body tightened. His nostrils flared outwards, the fingers around his drink curled inwards, and the hand along his right side sank fingers deeper into the fabric of his undershirt.
"You can't."

"Why not?"

"...He won't see you."

Aurora deflated. "You can't be serious."

"He's...already gone." Adam answered, his voice strangely flat. "He left after dinner. After we were separated."

"He left you here?" Aurora couldn't help but to ask.

"I have horses to take me back." Adam replied. He winced again. What little color the water had revived to his face was gone once more. "I can leave now, if you wish."

Aurora could hardly believe all she was hearing. "Your own father just left you here? Knowing you're hurt? How—how could he? If it were my father, he'd tear the entire country-side apart just to know I was safe! How could he just leave you, Adam?"

He swallowed. He looked everywhere but her eyes. "I asked him to leave."

Aurora softened. "You...don't care for your father much, do you?"

A small, bitter sound reached from back of his throat. A laugh? A growl? A choked sob? Aurora couldn't say. "Am I now your prisoner?"

"What?"

"These questions you're asking. I'd like to know for how much longer they'll go on."

Aurora dropped her jaw, her eyes tight in exasperation. "I'm sorry, are you busy right now? Because I'm certainly not. You can hardly walk without me, and I don't plan on letting you go, so—"

"So," Adam cut in. "I am your prisoner?"

Aurora snorted hot air from her nose. His satisfied grin did not earn any favors to win her over to his dark, attempted humor. "I don't understand."

"Wardens of jailers ask prisoners questions. It's called an 'interrogation'. It's what you're doing now."

"You confess to being a criminal?" Aurora mocked, ready to turn his mockery back upon him. "Whatever do you steal? Cups? Dragon eyes? Hearts?"

A weak laugh. He winced at it but kept his tone light. "So doubtful. I woo plenty of women."

Aurora could not have made her stare any more skeptical if she tried. "You disgust me in every way. Even without the blood."

Here, Adam gave a roll of his eyes. "And you, the picture of a princess?" He scanned over her dress with a terribly practiced eye that nearly made Aurora recoil away. Perhaps he knew more of hearts than she dared to know. "That color pink is garish to your complexion. Who picked it for you? Philip, I imagine?" Adam merely shook his head, mindful of his side. "It ruins you."

Aurora scoffed. "Well, I didn't put on this dress for you. You'd be such a lovely friend if your tongue didn't ruin you. What does your mother think of her prized son, rushing all over France to find the
latest virginal girl?"

Another shrug. He seemed unmoved. "She's been dead for over a decade now."

*Oh.* Aurora felt the wind knock from her chest. Her teasing suddenly dropped. Her face paled.

"I'm…sorry." She breathed out. "I...I was just…"

"You needn't be." Adam returned quietly. His teasing façade faded as well. He stared at her solemnly. "What Philip said? It is entirely true."

Aurora forced herself to keep looking him in the eyes, despite her embarrassment. "The plague?"

"Yes. It was the sickness that killed her."

"Then…everything Philip said. He meant?"

"I'd imagine he would. I'd be more concerned if he didn't. I was tearing you apart before his very eyes and he strove to defend you. Isn't that what you've always wanted from your fantasies? Your prince come to your aid? Defend your honor?"

"No," Aurora said quickly, her thoughts flying to make sense of Adam's one decent answer. "What I mean is: Philip *meant* what he said. And you—you didn't."

A low whisper of a breath echoed across the kitchen. Adam exhaled heavily then leaned back. His eyes blinked towards the ceiling. She had caught him. "I convinced you I meant it. That is what matters."

"Then, The Dragon—"

"Is probably real." Adam replied in turn.

"And my demeanor?"

He chuckled hoarsely. "Is adequate. You're... fine. You're perfectly... fine, if that's what you're so desperate to hear?"

"And Philip?"

"Has good intentions. Even if he is selfish." Adam rasped.

Aurora picked at the tear in her sleeve. Her thoughts swirling, connected and disappearing, as she studied all his answers. "...The plague cannot possibly run in your veins."

When Aurora spied his reaction, she found him already rising to meet her eyes. "Exaggeration, perhaps, but not fully a lie."

"You're just full of…"

"Lies?" Adam intoned.

"No. Half-truths."

"Half-truths," Adam considered the word. "Fair."

They were quiet once more. Only Adam's dim breathing filled the spaces, sprawling across the
kitchen. If pain were tangible, if it had feathery tendrils that sought to bind other people, Aurora was certain she could be consumed by all Adam was not showing her. She tried not to imagine what his wounded side might look like beneath his clothes. Dare he even let her get so close.

Now, she understood. She had pushed the answer away all night, like an unconscious fear that drifted too close to her content bubble she had made for herself. His mother gone. His father now miles away. Why he didn't turn to look at her in the hall. Why his person changed so quickly once his father entered the room.

"It didn't need to come to this," Aurora murmured.

"It always needs to come to this," Adam disagreed, his face turned away from her. "You have to understand that we are never alone. Any social engagement between two people of our stature will always lead to someone listening, low borne or high. Always eyes watching, always a staff member somewhere whispering what they've s—"

He winced again, the notion cutting off his words. He resisted a cough. Then, another, until the sound wretched out from between gritted teeth. He pulled in another breath. Aurora could practically hear the agony slandering his words as he went on:

"People have to know; that is the point. They must know. If no one knew, then our words wouldn't matter. We wouldn't matter. Our words are only spoken to be listened to. You're so lost in your new dream that you never noticed how you are never alone. And you shall never be alone again, no matter what you do, where you go, what you wish. Welcome to the royal life, fairy princess. It always needs to come to this."

His eyes were tight to her face. His breathing splintered. He coughed again, his little speech costing him what composure he had left. Now, he could not hide the edge of a moan that lingered on every breath.

Silence again.

Without a word, Aurora pulled herself up and moved over to Adam. Here, she grasped his free hand, giving it a little tug. Adam merely looked up at her in resolve before he understood.

It was only when Aurora helped Adam up the final step of the stairs the she realized what was amiss. She moved through the darkness, steadfast and holding tight to someone that...needed her. And she didn't think of The Dragon's head. Not once. It was as if it didn't matter anymore.

Perhaps her fear would not entirely be over. But it was lesser than it once was.

And for Aurora, that was more than enough.

"I hate the cold," Adam complained. He had not said a word since Aurora had taken him to her bedroom, far to opposite wing of where Adam and his father had been staying. He did not remark upon her frilly, purple bedding, her hand-painted glass dolls, her lavish pillows. Nor her un-buttoning his shirt, and the layer beneath that, in a skillful movement. But Aurora, opening her windowsill to collect a small handful of snow to lay over his skin? That was far too much. The more he attempted to move way, the harder it seemed to numb the pain.

"You're only making this worse," Aurora allowed. She tried not to stare too obviously at Adam's side. It was nearly black from the worst of it, the layers of skin after circling out like the rings of felled tree stump, black to purple to green to yellow...she knew so little of how to heal a fever, let alone a broken bone. But, she was certain that was entirely the cause of his pain.
"I'm making it worse? I'm certain placing anything there is the absolute worst of it, Aurora," Adam guarded, his voice tight. "It cannot get any worse than this."

"I'm sorry to say that you aren't dying. That would be the worst of this."

Another roll of his eyes. "Just find me that knife in your dragon's eye. I'll do it myself."

"You couldn't if you tried." Aurora snapped. She was close to finding some way to hold him down. Perhaps to pin him, as she had with Philip? She meant it entirely to ease his pain, but still, she flushed. She'd yet to have Philip into her private room (yet), on her bed (yet), and still, here Adam lay, twisted and pain-filled with his blue eyes demanding her attention.

Not exactly what she had wanted her first encounter with a man across her bed to be like.

"Bah. I never cared for feats of strength."

Using her free hand, Aurora placed her palm over the center of his chest. Then, she laid the snow over the bruise, tensing up her hand as Adam shuddered under its cold bite. "There."

"Je brûle en enfer," Adam gritted at her. She certainly did not know French, yet, if her mother had anything to say about it, but Aurora bit back a laugh. It most certainly sounded like a swear. He forced his body to be still. For a moment, his breathing stopped. And, much to Aurora's surprise, he heaved a sigh. It almost sounded pleased.

"What do you do then?" Aurora asked softly. She really was quite curious. She had only known time with Philip and those short hours at every ball. What did other princes do for fun?

"...Read, I suppose." His answer came quietly. He had turned to look outside her window. In his eyes, Aurora could swore she could see a reflection of the moon.

"Read?" Aurora wondered at the response. "I've never met a young prince that enjoys reading. No...hunting? No...sailing?"

"Meeting people? Going places?" Adam countered, his voice edging on the dramatic, as if he had to press upon Aurora his further disdain for others. "When I am king, that is the first thing to go."

"You don't like doing anything?"

He wrinkled his nose. "I like when I get to choose who comes to my parties, who I want there, who I wish to see." His narrowed his eyes in thought. "I don't have the patience for strangers, or beggars, or worse, fools."

"What do you like to read?"

His mouth quirked at this. His brow furrowed, as if distraught, their banter halting awkwardly. "I...I meant, rather." He gave a rough clear of his throat. "I enjoy listening to stories, whatever they may be."

"You? Idle gossip? What a captivating pastime. I am not surprised."

He glanced at her in distant amusement. "I forget you've taken me captive. No, no, I demand a chance to ask my questions, too." He smirked at her. "What do you like to read?" A pause. "Tales of sweet, boorish lovers? Poetry, I presume?" His voice took on a tone of peculiarity, speculation, before he came to a promptly negligent answer. "I suppose the forest princess deplores the idea of roughish conspiring."
"You aren't funny." Aurora bit back. "I enjoy a variety of literature, do you think me so pedantic?"

He gave a dry chuckle, the shallowest he could manage, while still remaining sincere. It hurt to breathe, let alone laugh. "You are fun."

"You're still an arse."

He nodded at this. "Yet, I'm in your bed? Have you ever had a man in your bed before?"

"And, apparently, an awful flirt."

"I'd be better if you changed that dreadful color of your dress."

"I will hit you."

"What's to stop you?" Adam returned wittily. His grin turned disastrously charming. "You have before."

She honestly felt herself blush. "I'm taken."

"Yes, but once by my hand, mere hours ago. A pity, really." He turned from her to stare outside the window once more. "Blue is more your color, by the way."

Quiet. His breathing was starting to slow. Aurora felt herself nervously pick at her dress once more. She moved to the window and opened it again, just to feel the chill of the midnight breeze over her face. She added more snow into her hands. She felt a thrill of satisfaction to watch Adam squirm under the new layer of cold.

Then, they both returned to the window.

"You've said that there is no escape. But there is." Aurora said quietly.

"Is that so?"

"For all your jokes, I really did love growing up in the forest. And…I go back to it, sometimes. Philip joins me on occasion. I…" She felt herself tense, the sudden notion of sharing her own secret too overwhelming.

"…Go on?" Adam inquired softly, his voice raspier than usual.

"Don't laugh."

"Fine."

"I mean it, Adam."

A faint chuckle. "Okay. There."

"I call it 'woodswalking'. It's an escape. It's a real, honest escape. I promise that. You just go into the forest and…"

"…You consider not coming back." Adam answered.

Aurora stilled. Her heart felt heavy. She gave a nod, unsure if Adam could see her do so in the dark. She took in a sharp inhale of air. It was now or she might never truly understand him.
"Don't you wish for anything? Anything different than what has happened to you?"

"I can take care of myself." Adam answered.

"No." Aurora argued. "I feel that is the very least at what you are capable of doing. Taking care of one's self is letting me know you do before you do it. Taking care of one's self is so I can help you in your plans and taking care of yourself is not antagonizing your father until he beats you."

"…Yes. Well…" Adam rumbled gently. "My father does take my interference in social occasions rather hard. But, if we're talking about wishes, about stars and praying," here, he gave sneer. "I don't have wishes. Wishes aren't applicable to my life."

"Anyone can wish. Everyone wishes for something, something they want."

"Well. A wish recognizes the impossibility of the idea, the absurdity of the desire. What I want, I always get. Wishes and wants are not the same thing."

"Wanting," Aurora struggled to grasp the word. "What about caring? What about loving someone?"

"I have saved you from myself and our wretched miserable lives together, so please, consider that my parting gift when you and dear Philip are happily married. That is caring enough."

"Why must you say his name that way?" Aurora swung her tone low to give a sharp mockery of Adam's voice, drawling Philip's name out as drearily as she could.

"Because," Adam added with a click of his teeth. He pulled himself slowly from her bed, sitting up to stare at her irreguardless of the pain. "He's such a gallant hero. Heaped with praise until his dying days. As if he would have rescued a stranger. He knew you since childhood, or did I mishear you father's words?"

"You're saying, what, that if I wasn't entangled in your life, you wouldn't have rescued me?"

"Yes." Adam replied coolly. "I can hardly rescue myself."

"You're a fool." Aurora said. "If you were to just tell me what was to happen, this all could have been avoided. And the price you pay…"

"It is easy to play a game when one knows the outcome and how it will or will not change. In a game of chess there are so many pieces and only so many moves to make. I make the indicated moves, I become the pawn, the king, the queen, and this—"he gestured to himself from the bed, to his side with a flourish. "This is checkmate. I get what I want. There is no losing. There is nothing to lose in a game with only two players that matter."

"You are bleeding so badly you can hardly stand! I consider that to be quite lost!"

"Aurora, you see things in such a black and white way. I assure you, this is worth everything it cost."

"Nothing is worth the price of blood." Aurora retorted, her voice close to breaking their quiet, heated whispering. She found herself staring straight into his eyes, no longer humorous or soft, but the edges of his blue eyes frozen and hard. "And do not make light of what magic is or what it has done to my life. It isn't something to be trifled with, Adam."

Suddenly, she found she was close to him again. Very close. She could smell the blood on his skin. The crushed petals for the soap he had used to wash his hair.
He gave her a slow, dark smile. "Have you ever tasted blood, Aurora?"

Aurora held fast into their next moment, where the only sound was of her own heart beating and Adam, his chest, the rise and fall, to hint at his breathing, responding to her. She felt made of stone. His eyes traced the curve of her face, inching closer to her.

Those eyes. They called out to her. Like the spinning wheel. Like he was some dark, forbidding thing she couldn't touch.

"You have the most unusual eyes." He murmured. Aurora felt her skin prickle at how close his lips were to delicate shell of her ear. "It reminds me of words I once heard. Or, perhaps, a place I have once been. I don't know how." He whispered deliberately. "I don't believe I was ever pure."

"I…was going to say the same about yours." Aurora managed. Her cottage. The river. Her childhood. She stilled her breathing. She blinked her eyes closed, then opened them again. He was still here. She wasn't dreaming.

"Et le ciel reflate/Dans la violette/Ses pures couleurs…" He recited slowly. He then studied her warily. "God, how could it be that you're still so excruciatingly innocent?"

She swallowed thinly. She didn't want to pull away. She had no answer to give.

"Have you ever tasted blood before, Aurora?" He whispered close to her throat, a soft repeat of those words that moved like water down her spine. "Don't worry, princess. I will only give you this one exception; once you know blood, it is hard to go back."

He moved gently to close the gap between them. Aurora felt her heart flutter at the base of her throat. A single kiss. His lips, chapped and cold and red.

She shuddered. She was awake. The morning sun. She was alone. Her hair coiled above her, golden and untouched. She was awake. She had fallen asleep still in her dress. The sleeve still torn.

Her first thought was: Maleficent. Somewhere between a nightmare and a dream. She must have fallen asleep just before she went to find…

Aurora paused. She reached up her fingers to find her skin clean and pale. She touched at her face to know the truth. Her sheets were unsoiled, but the smell of Adam's sweat lingered in the room…or was it the heavy scent from the frozen woods? Philip's musk as familiar to her as his arms? The window somehow left open, glass trembling from a cold morning draft…

Where was Adam? Was he still bleeding? What of last night and Maleficent's gouged eye? What was real? Was she still dreaming?

*I know what is real.* Aurora forced her first breath of the morning, smooth and icy, her chest rising with her final conviction. *I know what is... real?*

A check of the castle would tell her soon that Adam's horses were gone. The servants had little to say about the night. Aurora could find no blood over the floors, nothing misplaced in the kitchens. If he hadn't left with his father that evening, Aurora was at a lost to find their hoven prints, perhaps quietly buried under a layer of glistening morning frost.

Upon her lips, she tasted blood.
AN: Hey everyone! Thank you so very much for enjoying and continuing to keep up with this story. I know it has grinded to a halt these past few months and I am so sorry about that. I am currently living that young adult dream of drowning in the stress for my future. My usual allotted writing and working time has drastically changed since August of this year and so my pacing with this story has suffered a lot. I am currently working a part time job that barely pays any of my bills while desperately interviewing for a full time one. Thusly, I’ve been in a very stressed, uncreative, and busy way for a long time now just trying to hold my little life together. There is hope on the horizon: I may finally be in the final process of obtaining said fulltime job that would not only pay all of my worries away, but give me a regular schedule for writing my silly passion that is this story. Thank you all for your patience and understanding. I’ll be trying update more regularly to the best of my ability.

Cheers!

DEAR HER LADYSHIP, MADAME BELLE OF VVUE & HIS GRACE:

I am certain that by the time this letter might arrive to you that you both will be deep in your exasperation that our postage did not occur sooner. I am sorry about this. My name is Ana, right hand and second in line to the throne due to the kingdom of Arendelle, where I serve as my sister’s, Queen Elsa, regent hand. This usually means I take up other pen making duties and an assigned most tasks that do not require Elsa’s immediate attention and I substitute my own. I fear I make for a poor substitute over any royal mail that requests an audience with my sister. You are hearing from me directly as my sister...does not usually write to others often, let alone seek to answer any questions others have within our family. Our parents are a touchy subject to her, if I am to be as honest as I can. To continue my honesty I also regret to inform that I answer your letter with unsatisfactory news: my sister has been unavailable to confirm your inquiry of our parents have any sort of acquaintance with your late husband’s parents. If my sister is aware of any old posts or related documents to prove the rumors of what you have heard, she has not shared such news with me.

In light of what I cannot give you, I offer an attractive alternative for I know her record keeping and lité hand in all royal familial resources to be true: please seek out a request for Queen Aurora of Poperinge. My sister and Aurora are quite close as the queen as offered much guidance for my sister’s new ordinances as a fairly recent queen—although none so nearly as recent as we have heard of yours, Belle. Besides, our kingdoms are very close together, just over the highest mountain top or so our official ice seller tells me. It goes without saying that Aurora is, indeed, a while older than you or I or many of the other princesses that my sister and I have equally heard about. Perhaps it is through her that you might find more genuine information about your husband’s mother. If it is her last letters you are after, I wish you all the best in finding them. The plague was an awful, awful disease that damaged many hearts in its wake. My sister and I have lost our parents when we were younger as well, and so, I feel so awful that it took me this longer to write to you yet. It is due to the emotional nature of this letter that I put it off for so long, for my sister is not one to tell me so directly what she means and I struggle to be a viable translator. On behalf of my sister and I, we very much welcome you both to our kingdom for a more familiar visit at your most recent convenience.

Of deepest apologies and respect,

Princess Ana of Arendelle
DEAR QUEEN AURORA OF POPERINGE AND OF HIS HIGHNESS, KING PHILIP:

Forgive this hasty letter that has arrived in your court for I haven’t much time to explain my dire need for your counsel. I was suggested to write to you under the direction of the Arendelle’s regent hand, Ana, with the utmost reverence. I am currently traveling to Denmark to come to the aid of Prince Eric and his wife over the rumors of a pirate raid along the coast and so this letter must be brief and perhaps too earnest despite our having not formally met: I have come across a worrying question involving a private concern of my husband’s. It has been brought to my attention that my husband’s late parents were of a deep mystery to our surrounding neighbors after the deadly plague some twenty years past closed off our lands from kingdoms such as yours. However, I am in great desperation to procure any information at all about not only my husband’s father but his mother, as well. If you have any previous post, letters, memories, anything at all that might be related back to Adam’s family, I would be eternally grateful. I have been told you are a woman of wisdom and collective intrigue for the royals both near and far in your decade of ruling as queen. I say this not to suggest scandal or conspiracy but of great urgency from a reliable source. Before my husband’s coronation. . .

Forgive me. I feel stupid to continue on expecting you to give away secrets without due cause. I am at my wit’s end in my searching and have only a longer road to travel. I will tell you why I need your attention so and I can only pray you might believe in my words without proof. I am often a woman of proof myself and so I understand if you do not reply but I have so little choice left. I am not only going to Denmark to provide aid but also ask of the other princesses of their knowledge of...darker magicks. My husband’s life is in danger. It was a curse that had been broken once by our own hands but it has return without warning or mercy and he suffers only more by the passing hour. There is a curse, far larger than I could have ever known, and I have theory that it reaches into the past, if not entangled in Adam’s, then perhaps in someone else’s. This cannot be the making of just his sins alone.

I am reaching out to you for any and all information I can get my hands on, even if you know nothing of magic or curses, witches or enchantress’s, anyone that might understand our plight. Please, your grace, I am not afraid of scorn or to beg of you; the only reward I can offer is that you are saving the life of a good man and someone I love very much.

With steady regard and a heavy heart,

BELLE OF VVUE.

The dampened wood of the docks slowly soaked into Belle’s slippers as she stood, still and dazed, watching the golden glow from the shore blink away, one by one, into the darkness.

Lanterns, she assumed. A deep night patrol, or perhaps an early dawn, one that crept along the languid sand and timid surf, their heavy footfall puncturing the quiet as they fought against the wet sand sinking beneath them. Even with a squint of her eyes, Belle could not make out faces, be they her friends or Eric’s personal guards. They might as well be shadows, human-shaped and unflinching, sprawling things, which picked their way up the beach and out of sight. The lanterns they carried hung high above their hands. Strong poles hoisted the king’s flagship colors of blue and purple. With the glass-glow yellow light caring through the darkness, a self-contained fire waltzing its way into the dark wood.

Before Adam, Belle had never once thought the night time woods to be a pleasant place. The warm cobbled bridge as she walked to Vinveulle In the early morning, with birds just waking and the small river purring, kitten-like, just a small hop below her feet? Irreplaceable. However Belle would
undoubtedly be lying to say that the night did not spark a hint of paranoia inside of her. Gaston could bolster many a disturbing tale of man versus animal—much to her utter speculation for any sense of truthfulness that might one day pass through his braggart lips—Belle never conjured growls or burning eyes to follow her home at night. For all of Gaston’s talk of protecting the town (which he did, on occasion, much to Belle’s bitter reminisce), Belle merely felt pity for the bear-skinned rug and her starving cubs. Nature had a right to protect itself.

…It was only on the misty, starless nights, walking alone (for she was always alone, she wanted to be alone, she told herself she liked to be alone) that a small mouthless voice in the back of her head, pulling headache tight to the roots of her scalp, that asked her if she could truly protect herself.

The castle looked so small from the docks. Toy-like. Belle allowed a sliver of affection to lift her spirit for a moment. Her dear Papa could make an exact replicate of Eric’s palace, one that would play music in a jaunty, mechanical hum.

Still, Belle’s heart was heavy to see those lamps stirring the darkness. She could not help but to imagine the large glistening eyes reflected back in a fiery, fermented glow, desperate for escape. The way the castle stared back at her from its graceful distance, windows black and doors barred. Belle fought not to shudder against the quiet, the teeming elegance where the world felt fragile and silken, like black velvet gloves her mother had left her. Old, worn gloves that held onto an infant daughter’s tiny fists, desperate to stay a breath closer, a blink longer. Gazing into the woods always afforded Belle her rationality; where she wondered, imagined, then dashed away hope and fear together, a demon or fairy, dancing together beneath the wet forest leaves, she struggled not to run into the thicket herself. What were they searching for…what was out there?

She thought of Plumette, her confidant and willful companion that stowed away along Belle’s ship before she had reason to dismay her otherwise. She couldn’t risk herself so mortally when she told Plumette she would only be short walk away from alerting anyone to their arrival. And it was not just for Plumette that Belle stopped short of walking into the long dark, but of Adam’s letters, that had stayed fresh in her mind dispute all of her follies. Of Eric’s domain and of his own growing fears. Well, she was here now, and was there a thing to do for him in return? The safety of Mrs. Potts and Cogsworth fell far from her now. She resisted letting another chill get the better of her, wet at the heels, the cold crawling to her knees. She was here now, here after her journeying yet, having survived the underworld, met Meg, found Death’s gold, she had a mission and she would not waver.

But to find Eric. His grounds. His patrol. Belle felt suddenly intrusive to Eric’s unspoken fear. She did not have time to pen her arrival to her travel destination; she merely hoped that her two letters, one to Queen Elsa and the other to Queen Aurora, might reach their destination safely. What could she possibly do now? Haunt the forest until morning? Bang on the castle door in distress? Calmly and rationally climb the trellis to Ariel and Eric’s bedroom? She felt around for the coin in her dress, smoothing its ethereal cold skin against her thudding heart, echoing from the base of her thumb.

She needed to talk to the other women, the princesses (and princes, if she could acquire their time beyond Eric’s collection of them to help build his traps throughout the isle. Adam’s letters made little mention of Eric’s “hunting parties” but Ariel had sighed about them during their visit.) More so, she still needed her friends, their wisdom for the struggle against The Enchantress, her thousands of unanswered questions for Persephone, her promise to Meg…

Her promise to Adam.

That night in Corona, holding his limp body in her arms.

_I will end this._
Belle turned to spy back into the beach, running her dark eyes over smooth rocks and plunging her sight into the wood, dark and unmoving, not a lantern to be seen. Her chest felt tight. It had been far too long since she had seen Adam.

Where was he? She had left long before his last letter had arrived. God, how she missed him! His face, the blue of his eyes—perhaps most of all his voice. It would be mere moments now until she could see him again.

That is, of course, once she made her way beyond the docks and towards Eric’s castle. Belle chewed at the corner of her mouth, resisting biting down, trying to hold onto the warm that he brought into her chest and to push away the idea that, for whatever reason, Adam wouldn’t be safe inside the guest chambers, and waiting for her. Perhaps the same quarters from their first visit, mended from the sour mood of Ariel’s previous plight between them. Hopefully he would be asleep, with the window parted open, so that he could smell the salt-laced breeze.

What private changes the curse had brought once more to Adam’s private world, the most unexpected to Belle had been his Adam’s sense of smell. His “human” world soaked to the bone with a potent, irresistible flooding of scent through his mind. Before his departure alone to Denmark, he had stared at her, eyes bright and fixated on her alone, the heat in his eyes melting through her petticoat and dress, exposing her where she stood, a single look locking their bodies as one; she had merely brushed by him before she was ensnared in his arms. The surprise of his mouth on hers, hands ravenous, clawed to her hipbones—lilac, violet, camellia, lavender, rose—he whispered, the words darkened, broken, dripping from his lips with every kiss. His breathing rising as he spoke, moving along her arm, elbow, up the pressure point at the back of her neck. She had been studying Greek in the gardens. He had been driven mad by the lingering of petals along the heat of her skin.

The memory drove Belle forward. She unfurled her hair down from its braid, picking through the knotting, until it was loose over her shoulders. Her fingers smoothed through her hair in small comfort. It was silly. It was stupid. She had no masterful strength or sharp fangs…but Belle would find him. And she thought, the wonder of it small and fluttery as a wounded bird, if she would pull him back again to her. If Adam knew her scent, knew her body, then he might find her over the wind and sea, to already know she was here just out of reach. Surely, if the curse had returned, to captivate his senses, could he sense her now? The flutter of her footsteps creaking the ancient woods. The flutter of her dress rustled by the cool ocean breeze. The light had long disappeared from Belle’s sight. With it came the ushering unseen.

She could pick a direction, an internal compass rose, through listening alone. The ocean’s lapping behind her, the lazy whisper of leaves coiled together, spying down over her. It was a silly wish, but, perhaps he already did. She would never tell anyone these thoughts. How she closed her eyes and counted her steps with a mantra whispered to herself: come find me, my love. Come to me, then. She stopped.

A heavy snap of branch had forced Belle to quiet, even if just inside her own mind, dare she never to say her call aloud. Something up ahead had moved and it frightened her, breaking her reverie. Belle blinked, stared into the brush, and yet it did not move again. She blushed, embarrassed between fight and her own nerves, shamed and bruised that she could not keep her own clear head, to know she was safe. And, furthermore, she blushed at how she had beckoned between beast and man, Belle blushed at the absurdity of her own yearning. She cleared her throat, and sought to cleanse her own miserable poetic longing with minding her goal.

Eric’s castle.

The colossal body of the castle looming taller and taller ahead of her, Belle embraced just being here
in her ‘world’, her present, to push away the strange, poisonous pressure the Underworld tried to hide inside her bones. Demark could intimidate her all it wanted.

It was nothing like Hades’ lair.

Eric’s forest was alive in every way Meg’s world was not. Belle told herself it was useless now to be afraid when she had touched the lair of the dead.

Alive. Belle pushed away the nervous curiosity of the lanterns. Surely, they meant nothing. There was nothing moving through the kingdom woods, huge and glistening, the mist of the woods dotted to its fur, an oil painting leaping from human hand and into brilliant reality. Of course Belle did not doubt the very real danger that lurked off the coast. So far, none of Adam’s writings had yet to mention the pirates again, but Belle never stopped keeping an eye to the horizon for cruel-looking ships, but none ever arrived.

She glanced behind her only once; the only chance she would allow to let her fear control her body. A sharp inhale to follow it, to prepare to see a lone ghostly ship a handful away from the docks but the ocean was clear and dark.

Another snap. Again, something moved from the corner of her eye. Belle stilled. Belle twisted around. A full circle in the twilight of the silver wood, then, a flash of something huge bounding through it. Her heart pounded in her ears. Belle slowly turned. Not waves, she swore to herself, only one animal. Not small. Not a doe.

Belle willed her poor vision to improve. She pierced the dark, her breathing deadened in her chest. She cursed herself. She had not pulled back on her machined knife. She couldn’t. Not with Plumette sharing such close quarters under her spying eyes.

Then, she saw it.

Giant claws. A huge head. A jutting jaw with teeth the size of cutlery knives. Burning eyes that studied her incredulously. Eyes that showed awareness. Eyes that knew. A hot blast of air lifted the hairs on Belle’s neck. Instantly, her knees locked and she gasped. The massive head of a sharp-toothed creature appeared, barreling towards her. It was all stripes and darkness and two yellow, burning lanterns for eyes. Perhaps it had always been watching her from the shore. Perhaps there was never a passing bulk of guards. And it moved with grace and without sound—and—within a heartbeat—it would be upon her—and Belle, Belle could only stare.

In its eyes, Belle could not look away. She refused to cry out. A single thought rushed to her lips and she swallowed down her fear of it, to scream it. She forced her eyes open. She fought to will what she desperately wanted to be true:

You are not Adam.

“Allah aelah!” A voice cried out.

At once, Aladdin stole into Belle’s shrinking world, suddenly larger than life himself. He reared the animal back, its huge shoulders twice his forearm length. He was a few paces back, unafraid and shocked, tossing himself between the creature’s attack and Belle’s inability to move.

“You?” His voice was loud over the hushed woods. “Belle?”

Belle’s mouth dropped open. Aladdin stood just out of reach. His handsome face was puckered into a silent ‘o’, thunderstruck to see her. Belle felt her world holdfast to her newest view: a massive tiger. Rajah. This Rajah. The very one that Adam had written about. There could be no mistaking Rajah
for anything else, even if he did look more bear in the moonlight than feline. Its large yellow eyes glowed just beyond her reach, unblinking, unmoving. For once in her life, Belle now understood what it might be like to be so closely examined as she often did her own machinery plans…

She blamed herself for her irrationality. Her foolish mood to give into her own fears in the night. This was no time to be afraid. Adam was still on her mind, dragging through every shadow, blotting out each star. And there was hardly any time to greet Aladdin without appearing rude or disinterested (the same snide, upturned remarks she’d overhear walking the streets of her home town, ‘you think you’re so much better than everyone else—’)

Suddenly, Belle was rushed up into the air! Aladdin had picked her up in a fantastic flurry, to fully swing her around. Joy overtook his face, his dark eyes glittering like the jewels in Persephone’s bedroom.

Feeling both weightless and halfway numb to her fingertips, Belle could only offer a weak laugh as the prince of Agrabah spun her.

“Belle! You’re here?! What are you doing here? You’ve nearly scared Rajah and me to death!”

Finally, back on the solid dirt, Belle sought to fix the fearful tears that pricked at her eyes, the fly-away hairs that pushed against the soft skin of her cheek. By all accounts she accomplished very little of the sort.

In her satchel, Belle only had a handful of a month’s worth of old posts, and she resisted the need to hold them close to her chest. That tiger’s eyes were a mysterious, hypnotic wonder, but its claws presented a different story entirely. If he had wanted, Belle was certain Rajah could have ripped her bag to shreds, and with it, any chance of reading the answers that had brought her weeks and weeks of tireless waiting.

“Aladdin!” Belle greeted breathlessly. She felt as Adam might have in his own time, tormented by the quizzical look in Aladdin’s eyes. She dashed for what she hoped to find: Aladdin’s much praised playful nature. Jasmine often wrote of it; even how it tweaked her nerves. “Frightened him? I dare say he tried to kill me!”

“Rajah?” Aladdin’s smile dimmed. “No way! He’s a kitten!”

“I. . .” Belle began briefly, her gazing wavering between tiger and prince.

Aladdin furrowed his dark brows light musing. “Just as mysterious as your husband, I see.”

Belle felt her mouth run dry to see Adam so casually mentioned. It’s more than she would have wanted from a few months prior. To see Adam in the company of others, friendly and light—but there was something tense in Aladdin’s expression, staring at her, his dark eyes hard.

“You’ve spoken to him?”

“In passing.” He bantered easily. While the motion was polite it was easy to see the gleam what the prince meant.

Belle’s shoulders fell. She wanted no responsibly of explaining her husband’s temperament but with the cold gold resting in her pocket, Belle felt herself pinned to her spot. “I’ve come as fast as I could
have managed to see him. I’ve had no time to tell Ariel nor Eric of my sudden arrival.”

At once, Aladdin’s playfulness fled. His face became like a drawing of harsh lines, eye that flashed, his concern boring into her.

“Pirates?” Aladdin ask in a low whisper.

*If only it was to be so simple,* Belle thought.

“I have heard much rumor but have seen none from my voyage.” Belle lowered her own voice, but not for the same reason Aladdin had.

Belle couldn’t shake her encounter with Rajah. Her heart and logic had fled like the flight of deerlings darting under their mother for protection. She now felt colder than ever, winded and dizzy. If the patrol moved on, who were they hunting for?

And why, dear God why did she think of Adam?

Her fear had lurched forward. It had gripped her with icy talons and shredded her bravery clean in two. Enough of Eric and his castle. She had to find Adam. Now.

“I know it is impossibly late but,” Belle tried not to bite her lip in anxiety. She knew it to be a lost cause. Her woe was tight across her face. “Do you know where Adam is? Right now?”

The time it took Aladdin to answer only tightened Belle’s face, pale and sallow in the moonlight. The Prince of Agrabah briefly brushed his fingers along the back of his neck in thought, head tilted back in thought. “I think the last time I saw him was earlier in the day? Eric was with him for quite a long time.” Aladdin then looked down to lock eyes with Rajah, a strange, sharp understanding passing between them. “Ariel saw him last.”

A frustrated breath hissed from Belle’s mouth. “It is far too late to rouse them.”

Aladdin hooked one of his brows upward. “You think Adam stays in the palace?”

Belle blinked at his cool look. “He doesn’t?”

A little laugh escaped his lips. “Uh, no. He doesn’t.” He nodded back the way Belle had walked towards the docks. “He always stays in his ship. Eric joked that Adam doesn’t feel comfortable enough to stay in a castle full of beautiful women.”

Belle resisted Aladdin’s arrogant amusement. She merely allowed a tiny smirk. It was none too far from the truth, she had to lament. It was entirely like Adam to shill her advice.

Something must have happened without her stead.

Her heart squeezed painfully.

*He must have changed.*

Aladdin waved a few fingers in front of her face. A look of horror locked over her narrow features.

“Belle?” He stepped closer. “What’s wrong?”

She clasped his fingers between hers. Stilled for a heartbeat. Her entire body had started to shake beyond her control. It was nice to have a hand to cling to. If only for a moment.
“I cannot explain now, Aladdin. I have to go. Please, be safe.”

Then, Belle let go, slippers pounding against the earth, as she sped through the underbrush.

“Belle?!” He called after her, bewildered, his eyes disappearing into the night. “Belle?! ‘Be safe’? Be safe from what?” He jogged a few steps forward until he had lost sight her entirely, his own chest tight. He called again, cupping his hands to his mouth: “Be safe from what?!”

There was no reply. Not even the ocean, quiet and stern along the beach. Aladdin pushed in a long breath, lingering between the rush of meeting Belle, of all people, in Eric’s dark forests, of all places, and for her to slip between his fingers like a ghost.

Be safe from what, be safe from what, be safe from what...the wind had brought Aladdin’s question back to him. A single question among so many others.

That look on her face.

Aladdin had never seen someone so terrified. Perhaps Jasmine put up a better front against their fight with Jafar but...that look. It was something entirely unknown to him. Somewhere between pain and fear…and understanding.

Understanding…what? Something to do with Adam? Something….disturbing?

Aladdin resisted nervous swallow. Maybe it was the dark getting to him. It would be dawn soon, anyhow. What could Belle’s cryptic message mean, anyway? She had just gotten here. She had arrived...without warning...she did not want to wake Eric and Ariel...she was all alone...

…What if she needed help and couldn’t ask for it?

Aladdin and Rajah met one another’s eyes again.

...And what if she is hiding something? Those yellow eyes seemed to burn back, an impossible whisper that answered Aladdin’s darkest, most unshakable thought.

With a small click of tongue to the roof of his mouth, Aladdin gave one dark nod to the thin shoreline of the beach. Dark eyes to yellow. He gestured again to the docks. Without a sound, the massive tiger turned and talked into the forest, its orange pelt melting into the woods, and was gone.

“Well, Lumiere? How do I...look?”

Adam hooked his final word with an expectant sigh. He was laid out across his cabin’s bed, a simple cot of a thing, a hand tucked neatly to cover the lower half of his face. Fingers were taut over his mouth and chin. He felt the light facial hair he had suddenly sprung and scratched at it in annoyance. It was one thing that he had cracked his skull apart with horns. It was another that he had fangs and terribly long nails and fought not to sniff the air like one of his father’s prized hounds. He could taste the flaky, spoil feathers of gulls gliding over the early morning breeze. A smack of his lips, there was salt, and fresh green-scaled fish writhing in their massive nets, and queerly enough, smoke.

He refused to let his heart quicken. He was so tired from last night’s affairs, of his endless nightmares, and refused to give into his instinctual fear. He could only promise himself to remain stern to his actual reality for as long as he had the strength to try. He dared not to even allow his own fantasies of seeing Belle or conjuring yet another fear to plague the back of his mind. If he smelled
smoke, he would use the logic of the morning. Fire, then. Not of Eric’s boots beating against the hurricane of his morbid nightmares. Fire, then. Not of hunters beating down his castles or the shadows of men shackling his paws. He had not considered how to face the day once more, not since leaving Tiana, counting the fewer and fewer strangers he had attempted to stonewall away from his curse. Fire. The world, still turning. The world, still alive and free.

From where? Eric’s gates piping open to the dawn markets, signaling to all that commerce could carry on? His guards pressing down the mountains and camping out among the backwater lakes and shorelines of Denmark, somewhere close to where Ariel had beaten him with sand?

Lumiere said nothing, crossing his legs, pretending to be engaged in the window that bathed the room in a pinkish, grey morning.

Adam merely curled away from the light, akin not to his usual scheme of making it rather obvious he wanted nothing to do with the nonsense of the day, but more so to stop the light from hurting his eyes. A shallow wince and his head might spin. Certainly, Tiana was a woman of her word. The bandages were thick and his pain had lessened since his last period of sleep. Adam resisted the temptation to pick at the wrapping. Lumiere’s adulterated silence only forced Adam to become more aware of how little he could explain to those outside of their safe, cramped little room.

Fine. Blood and wounds and bandages. Let it be.

Unmanageable facial hair, however, he would not stand for.

He turned to look at himself with little sympathy in the Enchantress’s mirror. He studied himself this way and that, perturbed. It was worse than he thought. He looked as if he might be some commoner that hadn’t the faintest idea of what a barber was, or never dreamed to wonder about his own reflection in the rushing of a river. In the crisp sheen of its hand-crafted surface Adam’s haggard and pale-faced offered no real excuse; he could pretend to be sick once more and simply wait for, he could only imagine, what hair-brained scheme Eugene might suggest next, but Adam railed against it. Eugene had done so much for him without pause. Now, Tiana was within the inner workings of his secrets.

If anyone was to take action now, Adam knew it must be him.

But what to do? Confess? The most noble and emboldened action? To hide away, the urgings of the Enchantress’s mirrors, of Sparrow’s hunting of Ariel pushed aside to save his own pathetic life, just as Dalma had insisted? To stay, as Hades as promised, and wait for Death to take him from this body by the hands of his own friends?

And Belle. What would Belle think of him?

For now, he had put away the warnings of Tia Dalma, as well as Hades.

He remained human, therefore he must think like a human.

Even if no regular human would smell the burning of wood across the grand distance from the fishing villages. Or the far distant chattering of a pub opening its doors to the morning privateers. Human still, but yet, in the darkest pit of his heart, Adam could no longer reach for Belle’s letters. The words had blurred and turned meaningless. He flustered and urged his hands to write upon awakening but they now shook the pen in a chaotic tremble. He had nearly woke Lumiere in his frustration had Adam not pretended to fall from the bed, blaming his wounds and pounding head for his inability to comprehend the most basic of words.
He had theorized his own shortcoming in the few weeks between his first changes in Corona and so it had come true. For all of his studying, Adam knew that he might only learn to drag his weakening mind so far. Everything he had earned, every praise from Mrs. Potts and quick joke from his wife… Eric’s own ability to show him the cryptic markers marks from his most prized blacksmiths from his villages. All of this, now reduced to a yearning, sorrowful emptiness of a mind receding from a world that had once been so full of color only to fade into blindness.

And what was more… For all Adam was forgetting, new parts were emerging. From the moment he opened his eyes within his ship, he remembered distractingly haunting moments of lucidity from the night before with an unflinching, primal clarity: Eugene’s racing heart, fresh blood racing through veins, and his eyes as dark as a frightened doe…all within his reach, so close to his mouth...

_When I get my hands on you_, Hades at threatened, and Adam willed away the fear of it.

_I may lack control of my appearance_, Adam stormed. _But I shall not hurt anyone else in my wake._

He stared straight into the mirror, willing Hades to be there, willing the Enchantress’s beautiful face to appear. _You cannot have the heart of me. Not yet._

From the corner of the mirror, a new set of dark eyes met Adam’s. It was Lumiere once more. His friendly and open face now staring at Adam as if his dearest friend could hear his internal promise and, now he too, sought to aid Adam in such a Herculean feat. Now, the maître’d matched Adam’s calloused response, stirred not to speak, but to sigh himself. Lumiere mirrored him.

He took to ignoring the uncomfortable glances Lumiere paid him from his own spot within the cabin. Having handled the mirror far more often now than he felt he ever had while consumed as a Beast, Lumiere’s dark eyes flickered to make sure the mirror’s intentions stayed mundane and that it did not cull another round of pain for Adam.

Having squarely caught Lumiere’s attention in the mirror’s face, Adam rose a single brow and dared to mimic a look similar to how Lumiere fancied his own reflection in his looking-glass, priming and polishing his mustache, aglow to be a ladies’ man once more.

Adam jutted his chin forward, smirking his mouth, and squinted his eyes into his jest.

“Thoughts, Lumiere? I am thinking of keeping the beard, no? Soon, I shall outmatch your look.”

Lumiere merely squinted harder.

Adam waited. He waited patiently. Lumiere, buoyant and light on his words as his namesake, was quick to words. Quick to wit. Quick to fight, as well. The answer to his question would have taken seconds those short months before. Before the ripened, bitter dread that crawled along his spine as he ducked, shamed and exhausted, into his own ship, a dog with a tail between its legs. He felt eager to elude the watchful eye of his guardian as he had done as a roguish teenager, feeling nothing like the king he was fated to be, but there was little escape between the walls and the single door that led out to the docks.

However, Adam watched promptly as his friend inspected him, feeling akin to the days when it took his entire staff just to bathe his beast-like body. An event Adam often had very little trouble repressing, as it arose to the peak of his freshest memory.

Finally, Lumiere murmured stiffly: “My thoughts are…short, Master.”

Adam continued his japery. He raised his brow further, straining into his stitching, and his jaw ached to remain so dapper. “I am appalled.” Adam drawled on. “My maître’d? At a loss for words?
Whatever did I hire you for if not for you to assault me with your opinions?"

“Your father hired me, Master. And I do believe he did so that his dinners would be the envy of Maldonia. I was never entitled to give my opinions.” Lumiere returned, his expression dim. He turned to look out the window once more. The sunlight refraction disappearing into the depths of his eyes, dulling them. “To take a page from your turn of phrase, sir, I am no mood for this conversation.”

Adam felt himself swallow. He dropped his rouse at once. He stared back down at his sheets. “I… apologize.”

“I thought I once knew why you had come to this land, but now even I am unsure.” Lumiere continued. His tone was low. “For what it has cost you, I think it fueled by a selfishness I thought had left you.”

Adam’s heart slowed inside of his chest. He had not considered Lumiere to be so curt with him.

Adam said nothing. He stole a glance to where Lumiere was staring but found he could not hold out into the sun; the light cut into his eyes with feeling of a blade pressed to throat. “I cannot leave.”

“Yes, we cannot leave,” Lumiere agreed bitterly. “Because you are too wounded to sail. Because you cannot bear to fare outside of these walls and do you know why?” Lumiere countered. With a flourish, Lumiere stood, his hands tight behind his back, as if set to serving an entire ballroom, his black polished boots locked in stance. He took four steps towards Adam and, in a single smooth motion, he grasped Adam’s chin between his fingers, his dark eyes flat and emotionless. “Because you are killing yourself.”

A moment of silence. Adam could only stare into the void of those eyes, searching for a hint of the playful, joyful servant he had brought along with him to Eric’s palace. He found nothing.

“This curse,” Adam allowed, jaw still held tight by Lumiere’s grasp. “…is killing me.” He did not pull away from Lumiere’s hands as it might Tiana’s. Lumiere was moral, a normal man, a good man, as good as any other, and yet, a force the likes of steel connected them. “The curse has always promised that.”

“Ce n'est pas pareil! You desire it! Belle has told me of its growth!” Lumiere roamed his eyes along Adam’s face, pointed to his bandages, and closed his eyes, as if repulsed. As if…ashamed. The hand fell away. “…You were deposited into my care in the middle of the night by a saint of woman and you pretend as if I cannot see what is going on?”

“The curse is the very same! To what do you suggest? Before, I wallowed in it! Is that how I should act now?! Adam felt his anger flare, hot and fast, and the acid of his words burned from his mouth like fire. “We cannot simply leave and pretend it is no more! I have to do this, Lumiere.”

“You are talking like a man possessed! There has to be another way!”

“How could you understand, Lumiere, when you are free?” Before the words had even formed on his lips, Adam wished them back into his mind. But they would not obey. Just as his beast-like body had twisted out to spurn him, the agonizing question emerged, hissing and raw. But there was no pain for Adam.

Lumiere looked as if Adam had struck him.

At once, the maitre-de’s expression crumpled. His knees gave out from under him, and before Adam, Lumiere sunk. His manicured nails dug tightly to the sheets, knuckles tight from the hurt that coursed
through him. Adam could not bring himself to move. He was frozen in place. He had not expected Lumiere to…to…

“You,” Lumiere’s voice quivered through the grey dawn. “You are asking me to allow you to die, if that is what awaits at the end of this curse.”

At once, Lumiere lifted his head to face Adam.

And in that moment, Adam felt his heart fall, hard and fast, into the endless pit of his stomach. It was as if his body were now made of ribbon and silk, and Lumiere had pulled his entire chest apart with a single, wounded look. How foolish of himself, to utter such a terrible question to Lumiere’s face? *How dare I*, Adam thought, wishing teeth to tear his lips once more and a hot piece of iron to pierce his own tongue, *to believe that Lumiere not understand what it is I wish for the most?*

“That, Master, is an order I can never obey.”

Adam opened his mouth. He wanted to speak. He wanted to apologize. He wanted to pull Lumiere from the floor. Beggars sink to the floor. His father should have taken his entire life on his knees. Adam felt *he* should have been the one to grovel before his friend—never this way.

God, he never wanted to see another person grovel before him again.

Still, it was as if his shoulders were connected to the cabin walls by heavy chains. He could not move.

“To injure yourself?” Lumiere continued, his face turned away, his youthful face replaced by a hidden age, and apex of unspoken terror etched into his flesh. “To corner yourself until there is no way out but to confess by sheer speculation?” Lumiere took Adam’s wrists into his hands, encircling them, squeezing as hard as he possibly could. “I thought when Belle graced our lives—not just yours, Adam—*our* lives—that I could breathe for once in my life! But how? *How can I protect you from yourself?* I could hardly—“ Lumiere stopped, his voice choking. “I—I never could—“

Adam cut him off gently. “I am trying to break this curse, Lumiere, *and I do not wish to die.*” Adam urged, his voice low in his chest.

He had said it. Adam could not tolerate Lumiere’s pain for a second longer. He had said it, then, to ease Lumiere’s panic, his pain, his will to not crumble fully to the floor. But it was more than that now.

It was the truth.

Adam blinked. He breathed in the scent of the wood of the room, the salt, the air, Lumiere’s ragging, demanding breathing that—*cared*—Adam felt his chest tighten to think of how much Lumiere dared to care about him—even when he was a terrible, insulting brat—and how dangerous and easy it was to bring someone that loved so deeply to their knees with mere words.

While he was slow to move, unsure of what to do, he needed to prove to Lumiere that his death wish was no longer so selfish. Lumiere had been right, once, long ago, when Adam had given up all reprieve and now watched each petal fall with ravenous, clawed howling at the door of death. “And to do so, I will not leave here. If you are so sure minded, then leave. Take this vessel and be gone. Tell Cogsworth I—“

“You shall explain exactly what has happened to you.” It was not a request.

“…You will think me mad.” Adam confessed. “I…I cannot even explain what I have seen…where I
have been…to myself.”

It was God’s truth. He was mad. Adam was sensible enough to understand this about himself. A mad king. Much like his father, but perhaps, to the end of his days, not a cruel one. Madness and magic and death. Adam saw little difference between their meaning anymore.

But Lumiere looked at Adam with such determination, Adam found himself telling his friend everything. Every tiny detail he could manage. Tia Dalma and the Greek god Hades and even of Eric’s paranoia. Of Ariel’s fear of Eric’s mental health becoming worse. Of his fear of madness. His fear for his people, his family…Belle.

How breathlessly he missed her.

“I will not leave you.” Lumiere urged, his voice tight with passion. “However, before, you asked for my opinion. If you want my opinion, if you respect me at all, then you will listen to what I tell you. I believe you should seek out that Princess of Corona, the healer, and you should ask for your wounds to be healed. Then, and only then, shall I talk of raids and swords and pirates.”

At once, Adam dropped his eyes.

Now, it was Lumiere’s turn to upturn his brow. “Whatever is that look for? You look twice bitten and once shy. Whatever did that little flower ever do to you?”

“Rapunzel refuses an audience with me.” Adam rumbled from his spot along his bed.

“And why is that?”

“…She saw me. As I truly am.”

Silence. The passing of a gull outside of the cabin punctured the quiet with its soft, whimpering cry.

Lumiere eyed him drily. “‘Saw you for as you truly are.’” Lumiere gave a brisk click of his tongue. “Such precise words. As Mm. Ariel, saw you, then?”

Adam resisted a sly smirk. “My beastly side. Not my arrogant side.”

“There is a difference, Master?”

“You wound me ever deeper, Lumiere.”

“With all due respect, Master, I do believe the Lost Princess of Corona has dealt with far worse.” He gave a light toss of his arm as if to convey this, poised in the morning’s glow. “I never wish to know what secret suffering that poor child must have endured at the hand’s of such a fate.”

Adam lowered his gazed. His vision felt spotted again, pricked with a thorn of pain, but he was unsure why. Something had tugged at his memory. Hadn’t he heard Rapunzel be referred to as a lost princess before?

“The lost princess…” Then, it occurred to Adam, a shock of guilt to churn his stomach. “…Rapunzel is the girl, from decades ago…she was found?”

Lumiere nodded shortly. “Why, of course Master. Did you not ever hear of the great celebration of her return?”

At this, Adam felt his chest tighten. “I was…still a beast.” He closed his eyes. “What did I care for any joy left in the world?”
“I sense there is more.”

Adam arose from his bed, affixed his day clothes, and moved steady about the cabin. It was all ruse to not look Lumiere in the eyes. “When I was…in mixed company, I do believe I declared her dead.”

“What, we have all said things we have regretting. Out of fear, or even anger. You know this.”

“If only I felt an ounce of humility back then, Lumiere, then I would find more comfort in your words.”

“Shall I go and see if all your excuses are true?” Lumiere cut-in wittily the cunning sparkle behind his eyes renewed, even if his eyes appeared the slightest bit red.

“No, not at all!” Adam replied, horrified. “Really, Lumiere, you and Cogsworth are becoming of the same mind with all your mother-henning.” Lumiere merely handed Adam his blue coat, shrugging it on carefully, before he opened the door. It is morning in Denmark and there hasn’t been a pirate in sight? What could possibly—“

Adam stopped. Then, without warning, he toppled backwards. At once, Lumiere rushed to his side, but not before he caught sight of just who had caused his king to faint at the mere sight of them.

Belle.

Belle, captured in the morning dawn. The dew of the leaves clung to her long hair, collected about her shoulders. Her cheeks were a lovely pink, flushed from her running along the docks. The edges of her skirts speckled with dark flecks of mud and sand.

Belle blinked. She, too, appeared to be in shock.

Delighted, surprised, elated, confused, fascinated, endlessly joyous, Lumiere could not pick a feeling to describe such a perfect timing of events.

“Belle!” Lumiere intoned, astonished. “I’m delighted to see you here! And so is the Master. Not to worry; he is only weak of heart for you.”

DEAR QUEEN BELLE OF VVUE AND OF HIS HIGHNESS, KING ADAM:

Yours is not the first letter to come to me of troublesome tidings, nor I fear, the last. What with pirates to the north, famine to the south, and the dark shadow of disease lurking at all of our doors, the world is much in turmoil as it ever has been. It seems to me, your grace, that you may have had your first taste of all the darkness this great world has to offer. For that, I must offer you my most sincere condolences.

You flatter me with your kind words, and you would find yourself correct. Throughout my regency I have collected many tales, many whispers… I am no stranger to curses and dark magicks. Wherever one may look, one will certainly find secrets wished to be kept shrouded in mystery. I have found that many in this world come to their greatness at a terrible, terrible cost.

Before the plague divided us, I did indeed make the acquaintance of the late Royals of VVUE, and unfortunately, your husband. I will further search my records of any artifacts that may aid you in your endeavors, but first, I may warn your grace. If what you say is true, I fear the answers that you may find in your husband’s past will not ease your dread. The late royal family was not what one would call a mystery, at least to mine. Our separation was one of diplomatic necessity. For some the darkness lies not in unfamiliar magicks, but within the deepest parts of one’s own soul.
I urge your grace, please do send further detail of your husband's ailment. If it is indeed paranormal in nature, you will find I am truly a wealth of knowledge. If not, I pride myself on being a gentle ear as well.

May this reach your hands and heart without delay, and yours to mine.

May you grasp both my seal and subject in due time.

QUEEN AURORA OF BELGIUM
If Adam allowed himself to be held, it would only be now. Limp, in Belle’s arms, with the cabin of his ship spinning slowly around them. He remembered being a prickly toddler, running from his mother’s arms in a game of cat and mouse where physical affection seemed a bore, a punishment — truly an ironic turn when his father’s standards of affection finally caught up to him. By then, to be touched at all — hurt, comfort — none of it mattered. It was all the same.

Until Belle. Until he could feel his entire being quivering to be close to her again. It was more than the need to be in her arms, bigger somehow, as if he were half a person without her lingering somewhere near. How long had it been? Had he forgotten how elated her skin felt on his? Adam felt his own lungs unravel inside of his chest.

“Belle,” He breathed out her name.

Belle said not a word. She merely held her husband ever tighter. The terrible weight of the Underworld was akin to dust over her shoulders now. Adam was here, not yet a beast, and Belle allowed the warmth of her own tears to fall, stinging, to the cabin’s floor.

This embrace could have lasted forever more, should have lasted beyond even that, but even in his muddled state, Adam could feel Belle’s body unnaturally cold. Like an iced carving made by Quasimodo himself; she was perfect and complete and frozen. However long he wished to hold her near, he felt dread seep into his stomach.

Belle had returned him. But at what cost?

“Belle,” Adam murmured softly. “You are so cold. Why?”

Belle held his gaze firmly and it surprised him, the intensity of it, for he felt now he had spent so long in the company of Eric’s guests, dodging and carefully engaging in the fencing of eyes, he had forgotten the knowingness of her stare, and knew her look undressing him at once.

“First, let’s discuss your bandages.” She reached up slowly, carefully, to touch at the side of his brow. “What in heaven's happened to you? Did you change?” Her voice lowered a touch, remorseful and unsure. “And how did you change back? Did Rapunzel?” She stopped there and prompted no further.

Adam reached up to take her small cold hand within his. In a single movement, he was complete.

“No, no, pace your racing thoughts. It isn’t so...straightforward. Belle, I...once more, you’ve caught me at a moment of...complete absurdity. Do know, I’m alright now. No more blood.”
Her beautiful face struggled to keep its composure as she considered his omission. “Absurdity? So, you were just injured in general?” She rose a dark brow. “Is that supposed to make me feel better after weeks of wondering?”

“Not at all. It is...hard to describe to you, so suddenly here, seated before me.” Adam resisted a hopeless grin to have his wife so very near again. “Dare you disappear if I question this, but, however did you get here? And why?”

Again, her eyes seemed to alight in a dry fire. Their depths were dark and haunting, about as cold the rest of her. Adam swallowed to see his wife so determined. And it was so. The very phrase. Belle had made up her mind about something — whatever had driven her here, no doubt. His wife would not take a boat and trek on the moor of a pirate’s cache on mere speculation alone. Belle was immovable and direct, more stubborn than Adam felt he had been at his very worst...and now...was now the time to confess of his dream? His...waking? Of the witch-goddess, Tia Dalma? God. He was mad. He believed in his hallucinations, he truly did. He lacked choice to resist them now, a plaything to Hades, perhaps a pawn to Calypso, but to explain them to his logical wife...and, there was the very cryptic matter of Dalma’s warning: to tell no one once he had changed so he could properly escape Hades.

Did that mean he could not even tell his wife?

Their small moment called for no further deliberation.

Belle could feel it. She wanted to shriek of Hades. She wanted to convince Adam of Megara and her fragile, impossible suffering. And, dared she truly speak her ills, her inability to cast herself back into Hades’ lair. The books and magic of their castle...locked to her. As if a new curse for her alone.

As if it was a warning that there was no solution to save her husband.

But a mere look at Adam told her everything. He had bled. He had suffered. He looked, clearly, exhausted and in a pathetic sort of wanting that she used to happily comfort, or so sulkily Adam would tell her, ‘coddle him’, but there wasn’t time.

God. They were running out of time, weren’t they?

If Adam would ask her this now before anything else was to be cleared, so be it.

“I’ve come to aid you, as you’ve known about in my books and letters, but furthermore, I’ve found I need help. The other princesses. My friends. I must speak with them. And, of course, to hold off Eric, if I can.” She dashed her eyes away, as if a part of a plan inside of her head...and not in fear of her own inability to be truthful with Adam. Again. “I see Rapunzel’s ship is docked. I’d say my moment is opportune to attempt to fix things between us.”

“Before,” Adam began lowly. “You asked about Rapunzel. She refuses to see me. But I’ve met Tiana. She is the one that aided me. She, I dare to think, saved my life.”

Belle’s hand twisted tightly to his fingers. She closed her eyes. She looked as if she couldn’t bare to hear the rest of it. “Saved your life from what?”

“My horns.” Adam replied at once. It felt so queer to say aloud to her. “I don’t have a way to say this any less than what I know. The curse...it’s coming back...it has to come back. It’s as we feared, my
dear.” He waited until she had re-opened her eyes before he finished. “It is killing me.”

“It has to come back?” Belle repeated, picking at his words. Her hand held his own, a squeezing fear that slowly dripped into a gentle hold, their fingers interlocked. “Adam...I…”

So close; she was so closed to confessing of the book, of magic and knowing Hades...but yet...she knew what would be said next. Adam, telling her that it is over. Adam, giving up. Adam, wanting his peace to be at his own terms. His request would be reasonable. She couldn’t hate him for it. But it was nothing to how she felt inside. Despite all of her plans and her will to solve the mystery of the curse no matter how long, no matter what it asked of her —

“All of their words, their letters, and wishful thoughts to hear her husband’s voice again and this be the very thing he says next to her. Belle felt her stomach filling with a saccharine amount of butterflies. Her fear and courage willed those words into stone between them. Her sobbing in Cogsward’s arms, the warm wishes of their family back in France. She did not travel so far to expect this large of change in Adam. What had happened to give him a glimmer of hope for his human life to stay?

And what would it take for him to understand that she would never leave him, even as a Beast, even if they failed?

“Good, because I won’t let you.” She let go of his hand to warmed her arms around his chest, pulling herself into his warmth. “Never again. You can’t leave me ever again.”

A hoarse chuckle rattled in his lungs. “Of course. Of course.”

He kissed her.

He kissed the tips of her ears, her cheeks, her nose, her mouth, her chin, down her neck...he would have kissed her forever, and fallen asleep with her in a cozy heap upon the floor, if for the strange inability for his wife to stay warm.

“Belle...you cannot keep warm. What is this?” He curled himself around his wife and forced a low breath of warm air onto her neck. “I thought I had noticed this back at the castle but now I’m not sure. Are you the one becoming ill now? Is it all these weeks worrying about your hapless lover?”

Belle remained quiet for a heartbeat, safe in Adam’s arms. She turned to take in his face. She carefully ran a single finger over the bridge of his nose, the curved cupid’s bow of his lips.

There was no time to avoid it now. They were running out of time.

He had given her hope when she had thought he would have none at all.

She could give him this.

“A dull roar flooded in his ears all at once, much like that horrible sound the ocean had moaned during his time on the beach with Ariel..”
“Has he come for you?” Adam felt his heart seize inside his chest. Was he too late? All of his attempts, of all the mercy, why? Why her? Why did she suffer all the world, while he was to merely die? What of his bargain with the witch Tia Dalma? What of losing his name? What of the Beast?

“No,” Belle answered slowly. A dark passionate glow inside of her eyes. “I’m coming for him.”

“Do you think,” Naveen whispered doggedly to Aladdin, “that Eric could have possibly imagined the pirates?”

The two men were seated in a dinghy, although “seated” was a rather forgiving word for what Aladdin felt. They were facing one another and shared only in their mutual dislike and discomfort of being there. With little leg space and even less breathing room, Aladdin resisted raising his voice over the sound of his own rowing, the rhythmic pocketing of movement that helped keep them on task. Instead, he wrinkled his nose in annoyance.

“Will you stop at nothing to weasel out of this dawn patrol?”

Naveen frowned at him.”All I am saying is that I have heard much talk of a pirate raid and very little raiding. As in, we could be doing much of anything else, like — ”

“Don’t bring up that damn ball again.”

“We are having a party, Aladdin! There isn’t liking to be argued! I throw the best balls out of all of the kingdoms.”

“No way!”

“Absolutely. And, another thing, I could be — ”

“And all I’m saying is that you can’t get out of this.” Aladdin continued bluntly. He reached over the wooden side of the tiny boat, dipped his palm into the cool skin of the sea, and then wrenched his hand forward. He caught Naveen across the face with a spray of water. “That ought’a wake you up!”

“Ashdoza, you brat! This water contains salt! Do you have any idea how bad salt is for the delicate skin of the face?”

“D’you think a pirate will say that to you once he greets you with the pointy end of his sword?”

Naveen curled a hand unhappily to his dampened face and rumbled a thick, indistinguishable reply while Aladdin went back to his rowing.

To Naveen’s allowance, he had kept his comments well to himself for the better part of an hour, back when the sky was still bruised with the fading stars and the wind groaned in sleepy disdain. Aladdin hadn’t been surprised in the slightest to find Eric rapping his chamber door in the middle of the night. Over the prince’s shoulder was Naveen, half-awake, his usually styled hair a nest made for a desert vulture. A dawn patrol was being assembled without much planning. Thusly, the boats. The oars. The uncountable complaints from Naveen.
The ocean was vast and calm but Aladdin felt had little choice as to where he could rest his gaze. He was facing away from the horizon with his back pushing the vessel forward while Naveen, dark eyes irritated and red, did nothing else. A short distance away, another schooner followed close behind. The rattling of the ocean’s waves trembled the lanterns as they hung; their heavy yellow eyes blinked dimly inside the chambers of their tight poles.

In the glint of the faint golden light, Aladdin strained to find the eyes he wanted most. And, occasionally, he found them. Jasmine had aided the small crew as well. Her sheer silk veil wrapped tightly over her face and neck. She was an adamant shadow just out of Aladdin’s reach. The schooner equally kept pace near Aladdin’s. Its only other passenger like a rolling shadow, shoulder muscles powerfully keeping time. These eyes hardly ever looked over one shoulder, but Aladdin always knew when they stared back at him.

It was uncomfortable at best, creepy at worst. He needed no light to see Adam’s blue eyes narrowed and unyielding, slinting back through the fading dark. Those eyes had a hunting all their own.

He couldn’t understand why, but it made Aladdin’s skin prickle in discomfort...as if his nerves had been desperate to flee...as if that was the reasoning his boat stayed ahead and not Aladdin’s good-natured competitive side seeping out at the first light of day.

Yet he couldn’t shake it. Crazy thinking or not, he was, indeed, being watched. Aladdin couldn’t help but keep glancing back towards his wife, determined to share her thoughts, etched onto her face, a sign, any sign, that she understood the uneasy feeling, too. Perhaps she felt worse being so close Adam. Aladdin could only strain and wonder. And with the dawn slipping slowly by, he felt like he had all the time in the world to do so.

What Naveen lacked in practical skill, he made up for out of the sheer infallibility of being a healthy young man with two perfectly working eyes. He would at least stop Aladdin from smashing them into the pointed jaws of the cliff rocks. At least they wouldn’t die at sea. Or by boredom, if Eric had a say in how the day went. His annoying play at explaining his sudden call to action to no one else. Or so Aladdin hoped. If anyone else knew, it would be his wife’s companion, none other than the roguish king himself. That, Aladdin found, had stunned him. At the foraye, six human shadows had arrived. Eric, his confident steward Grimsby, Naveen, Jasmine, Aladdin himself...and Adam.

Back then Aladdin had glanced another the gathered royals expectantly. If Adam was to come, where was Belle? And why stop at just them—why not Eugene and Rapunzel? Why not make the patrol so obviously crowded and loud that their mere footsteps taken together would wake the whole isle? Eric wouldn’t say. He only pulled his own boat and launched away from the shore with a kick of his boots.

What are you thinking? Aladdin demanded darkly, perturbed, his eyes pointedly to the back of Eric’s head. Aladdin couldn’t seem to pin the man’s process down. Eric had once been Aladdin’s company to enjoy alone, to hunt and fish, scouts the island, their shared sense of discovery balanced between them like a well made blade, felt dismissed. And what for? What had caused such a crack in his friend’s ungodable nature? Aladdin believed in Eric. He believed in his need for summons but found the source lacking. Days before the shilled arrival of Adam, Aladdin had only cornered Eric once to hash out a plan of attack, however, Eric merely offered a stiff shrug.
“Has there been a threat made to your ports?” Aladdin had urged, his dark eyes flashing in worry. “Have your people come to you?” Eric’s blue eyes only abstained. Where had his close friend gone? Where was Eric’s knowing smirk and plan of action? “Is it Ariel?” When would Eric confine in him? “Eric, I mean it. Is it Ariel?”

“Aladdin,” Eric reached out to hold him at the shoulders. His fingers felt tight. “Please. I’m sorry—I just need you to know a storm is coming and I would like you here.” At once, Eric met Aladdin’s eyes, unflinchingly. “Is this you declaring your grievance? If I can give you no reputable answer? Will you leave on the ‘marrow’?”

Aladdin blinked at his friend. He had seen Eric scale the sheer face of a cliff on knife-blades, narrowly avoid a shipwreck of unnatural design in rearing his ships into caverns unexplored and deceptively shallow in their depths. But this look of sudden, passionate accusation across Eric’s face—Aladdin was left speechless.

Did Eric think his questions were an attack? Couldn’t Eric see that all Aladdin wanted was his old friend’s trust?

Aladdin softened his stance. “No. Of course not.” He said this slowly. He felt winded. A long unspoken draw had been won in a matter of heartbeats. “I was the first to arrive, wasn’t I?”

Gradually, Eric relaxed. His jaw had unclenched itself. “Then...you’ll stay?”

“I never said I was leaving,” Aladdin added gently. “I’m just concerned.”

“Don’t be.” Eric replied easily. “It will be just like our adventures, just we won’t be the ones bloodied this time.”

Aladdin gave a firm nod but said nothing more. If Eric could to see the estranged uncertainly ember in his friend’s eyes, his face revealed nothing. And so Aladdin tried his best to presume nothing.

Until now. Until finding Belle in the woods.

Belle. His hand clenched over the oars. He had been glaring into the memory, but now found himself falling into the contemptuous stare of his wife. He had daydreamed back to stare past Naveen’s shoulder. She had stayed up late into the night, a fire in her belly to tell Aladdin exactly what she felt to awake in a cold bed, alone, with Rajah not even able to come to her calling.

Jasmine’s fear often attached itself under a thick sheath of anger. Aladdin had attempted his best discretion but Jasmine could peel his poker face back like the skin of a fig. It was a wonder he even tried to hide his encounter with Belle at all. So sudden and surreal, Aladdin could hardly convince himself he had seen her at all. Did he fall asleep whilst wandering in Eric’s woods? Was it all a trick of the light over the gloom of the trees and their whispering?

“You saw Belle?” Jasmine was at once to his side, coiled tight, nails to his back, then way, like the tide, her own comprehension tossing her away, as amazed as Aladdin had felt to see the usually confident queen stumble through the shadows, frail as a doe, and cold as ice.

“Yes? I think so?” Aladdin wondered aloud. His voice was adrift through the floor-length windows that encompassed their guest chambers. Eric had given them a second floor wing with a matching hide-away servants’ corridor for Rajah to pass through as he pleased without human assistance. The chamber bounced the couple’s voices back and forth, an echo of hushed conversation. All around Aladdin, their palace possessions laid. Large, body length pillows, plush mats for prayer, incenses...
from their home bazaar, even some of Jasmine’s more personal trinkets laid about: yarn, a few glass menagerie animals from her father’s collection, a necklace of emeralds, the strange small golden cold with a skull-like face from The Cave of Wonders. Its cruel grin sparkled in the moonlight, revealing its grim new shine. Aladdin realized that Jasmine must have kept at her cleaning, sitting here in the dark, fuming in her waiting for him to return.

“Adam made no mention of her coming here.” Aladdin began, his brows tightly knitted.

“Is that a furrow of concern or suspicion, my love?” Jasmine asked. Her voice low and throaty in her tease. Behind her tone, her eyes were as hard as black diamonds. Oh, Aladdin knew that look.

“I think it is odd, yes,” Aladdin declared, as a matter of factly as he could. “You weren’t there. She looked upset and was desperate to see Adam. Why shouldn’t I find that concerning?”

“As of late, everything about you concerns me.” Jasmine said, her tone clipped. “You, coming in late. You, acting as if you are so easily offended, you, forgetting that I wanted you with me tonight. But fine. Think as you will. I’m tired and tired of this conversation. Come to bed, then.”

Then, she turned, per their usual routine of making for bed. Her perfume a light mist of sandalwood. Aladdin sustained for a minute longer, watching her, watching him, before he sat along their bed, a hand reaching out to stroke along Jasmine’s curves, a playful and calming pastime, but still, Aladdin did not lie down. His heart still felt disturbed.

For a while yet, Jasmine curled beside her husband, listening to his distant mumbling, until, at once, she jerked up, her hand to grasp Aladdin’s, sharp and lithe as a starving alley cat after a dim bird.

“Where is Rajah?” Jasmine asked. Her breathing was no longer loose and slow, the sleep that had once dropping over her mind ripped away with a vocal fire, even now, she was still sharp enough to find one lingering hole in Aladdin’s guard, somewhere between her unconsciousness.

His skin flushed. It felt like a shameful burn that continued into his lungs. “Hunting?”

In the dark, Jasmine felt no need to open her eyes. But she moved as fast as a predator to plant her teeth warningly to the side of Aladdin’s neck. “Tell me where my tiger is, on this island, right now, or I’ll hunt you.” She purred. Aladdin burned brighter. Her voice was maddening in the best way in moments like this...except for the very real feeling of her teeth against his fragile skin.

“...Waiting...by their ship.”

Aladdin had good reason to keep Rajah there, and, for once, the beast agreed with him.

But he couldn’t dare to say the reason why now. Not with Jasmine here, safe and logical.

Jasmine withdrew her bite. She simply let go of Aladdin all at once. A new thought of frustration had rolled over her body, and she was washed away from him again. They did not need to clarify which ‘their’ Aladdin had meant.

All at once, Aladdin felt wrong. What was he doing, grasping at straws to make sense of his time on the island. To force Eric to crack with conspiracy of his own? Sending Rajah to stalk Belle and her husband wasn’t any fair way to justify his own disappointment in Eric. His pathetic feelings of being cast aside, out of favor, as if he was....worthless...all of his new life of title and respect...was he worthless again?
No. Aladdin pushed it all away. His unshakeable dis-ease around Adam was not meant to punish Belle. But it didn’t mean the pair weren’t hiding something odd. And, of course, there was what Rajah could smell from their ship...

Jasmine gave a tross of her hair. “I’m just trying to understand where your mind is at; why shouldn’t Belle’s first wish to be with her husband after so long?”

“What is she doing wondering the woods at night? I was with Rajah monitoring the shore. Why not go straight to the castle? Why all the secrecy?” (Why was she so cold to his touch? A sickness? ...The plague? His thoughts restless, moving, always restless...)

Jasmine dark eyes glittered clandestinely. “Secrets again? I wonder if we are still talking about the same person.”

“Enough with comforting me about Eric. I get it. I know I’m sulking. I know it’s unbecoming. Believe me. You should hear Naveen’s snark.”

Jasmine eased her hand into Aladdin’s. She could feel his pulse flickering through the base of his thumbs. “Eric will come around. We don’t even know if— ”

“Jasmine, we’re not talking about Eric right now! Belle! I meant Belle!” Aladdin snapped. Then, he grimaced. Jasmine remained unmoving, having been suddenly interrupted and then yelled at, Aladdin kept her hand in his. He raised the back of her hand to his forehead and leaned into her skin. “Sorry.”

“...I’ll give you his. Adam had told me that Belle couldn’t come. So, what her being here now, it is notable. “Jasmine brushed his fringe gently across his forehead. Then, she sighed. “But that doesn’t mean they are plotting a coupe.”

“...Sure, even if I’ve never met the man once until now nor properly dealt with his improper inability to talk to me, or Naveen, or — ”

“Adam is not obligated to persuade you of his graces. He’s here for Eric. Whom I know you are very concerned over. And I can understand that. But this, this skulking around behind Belle’s back? That I cannot tolerate. Think of Eric, if anyone else. Adam is here for that purpose alone. And that’s all that matters now.”

Aladdin could not help himself. He did not even bother to swallow his tongue. “Is he?”

“Aladdin,” Jasmine looked insulted. “What did that man do to you that you cannot stand?”

“Surely it can’t be just me! Naveen thinks the same!”

“Stop over exaggerating! Everyone? Ariel and Tiana seem to fine with him!” Jasmine’s face darkened. When she spoke next, her voice sounded careful and tight. “Only Rapunzel refuses to see him.”

Aladdin gave a contented grunt. “Well, that bodes well. Eugene isn’t exactly the best at picking friends.”

Jasmine glared. “Do you see what I’m talking about? Since when did you get so judgemental?”
“Because I’m not here to play these stupid games of politics! I just want to know what the hell is going on!” Aladdin confessed, the words near struck in his throat. “Eric won’t talk to me! Adam is a non-starter, and Naveen! Allah help me, he’s Naveen, perhaps the worst out of them all. He disagrees with me just for sport!”

“Enough,” Jasmine demand. She sat up further in their bed and promptly turned his back to him. She crossed her arms tightly over her chest. “We solve nothing to talk ’round in these circles.”

“Fine.” Aladdin huffed. He, too stalked for a moment, before he planted himself opposite of his wife. For a heated moment, they said nothing.

Until, gradually, their backs touched.

“I’m being stubborn, I know,” Aladdin said at last.

The moon had drifted lower in the sky, as their silence had statemated onwards.

“Me too,” Jasmine murmured back.

Aladdin ducked his head, just a little. “Do you still love me?”

“I suppose you’ll have to be a replacement for my lost tiger.”

Aladdin smirked. “He isn’t lost. I’ll go get him.”

Jasmine gave a small laugh. “No, no. He isn’t stupid. He’ll find his way back, I’m sure.” Jasmine turned back and wrapped her arms around Aladdin’s neck, tight to his back. “Besides. You’re mine now. Just as long as you don’t make a sound. Including tomorrow. Let us not speak of this for an entire day. Then, we shall try again.”

Aladdin moved her hand over his lips and said nothing more. His heart felt a little lighter, to get the words out of him, to have someone else finally know of all of his misgivings, but it changed nothing for the future.

Something was slowly spiraling out of his understanding….and it had to be bad.

Rajah confirmed it with his huge, yellow eyes, alert and glinting through the woods.

Jasmine blinked and in that blinked, she melted back into the darkness of the lanturn. It brought Aladdin back to the present, the rowing and smooth sea and, with a sigh, Aladdin allowed her to disappear. The dawn was slowly unfurling itself like a sail; grey cool blanketed clouds hung low in the sky. A childish part of Aladdin wished to reach up and pocket a handful of the sky for himself. All of the magic he had ever known, of his father and his band of thieves, and the mysterious Gin he had set free upon the world, what Aladdin wouldn’t give for a chance to explore the sky.

Except for, perhaps, today. The faint golden rays that had once promised clarity new looked infected, swollen and low; the fragile closed eyelids of a growing storm. Naveen seemed to break his aimless watching to match Aladdin's gaze as he turned to look behind him.
“He looks ill.” Naveen declared.

His dark brows were transfixed to the center of his forehead. Aladdin hesitated.

He had thought the same thing in Eric’s landing, when Rapunzel nor Eugene had appeared, it was safe to assume that Adam would steal away to be with his own wife in turn, but yet, the man had appeared. While his strange affinime hair styling did well to distance his fears from the rest of Eric’s party, Adam’s unconscious, permissive request for himself at least an arm’s length distance between him and any living being was granted. It was clear bandages had been hidden behind his long locks of hair, tied at the base of a sapphire ribbon; the man looked sallower, a muted look of pain in those cold eyes. The exact opposite of Aladdin’s understanding of Eric, who in the misty, idle morning, was animated and determined to leave. Aladdin didn’t ask about Belle. Where would that leave him to explain his night in the woods if not to justify Adam’s contempt?

“Well, at least he isn’t complaining, Aladdin acknowledged bluntly. “He has bandages on and he’s rowing his boat.” Aladdin dared to continue the compliment forward.

“Eric asked him too.”

“Eric is rowing his own boat!”

“But of course! Do you expect an old man like Grimsby to do it for him?”

Aladdin sighed.

He had long since dropped his gaze from reaching over for Jasmine. He needed to stop vacillating over Adam. Naveen was enough to deal with in a single morning.

Naveen, however, was unmoved.

“Should we dare to ask him what is wrong? Did he go drinking with Eugene and then fall down some stairs? Speaking from past experience, there are a lot of stairs here.”

We?” Aladdin irked at the word. “Naveen, don’t. He won’t tell us. You know he won’t tell us.”

Naveen turned back. His expression was serious. A softened, rare thought look over his usually unserious face.

There were many similar personality quirks Aladdin would lump together between Naveen and Eugene, but this look most often fractured the illusion of Naveen’s airheaded nature. The two men partied, drank, indulged in their pranks and schemes, but Eugene’s face was far too readable for his known good. So much so that Aladdin often wondered how Eugene hadn't been caught more often in his thieving days. When the moment of serious matter revealed itself, Eugene looked emotionally helpless — his intrinsic morality gleaming off of him the way a arabic saber pierced the sun. But Naveen, for all his uncannily charm, looked positively ripe with mystery.

It was no look of a card dealer. No turn away humor, but genuine, shrouded intensity alive and intelligent behind Naveen’s eyes, but with no discernable end-game that Aladdin could grasp.

And, for a heartbeat, it scared him.

“What’s that look for?” Aladdin asked easily. He had swallowed his nerves. He scrambled away from whatever this new, unknowable plan was that Naveen was concocting, and the strange, out-of-
this-princely-league- of social mastery that Eric and Naveen had been borned and raised into. Aladdin just got lucky. He was no match for whatever this change in Naveen was. But he dared not to shy away.

Eric wasn’t the only good fisherman around here.

Naveen blinked. His eyes leapt back over Aladdin. His mouth had quirkled itself into a readily applied smirk. Whatever Naveen had thought, it had dimmed into that one smooth bink.

“I don’t want a sick guest at my ball.” Naveen concluded bluntly.

“Ugh,” Aladdin bit, unsure of how to ask what Naveen was truly thinking. “You and that stupid ball. He’ll heal up. It’ll be, fine, I guess.”

“I do not mean the bandages. I mean him. Why remain in pain when you have every opportunity not to be?”

“You asking Rapunzel to cure you of a hangover doesn’t hold as much philosophical weight as you want it to, Naveen.”

“But why?” Naven pressed. He had dropped his voice low, naturally conspiratorial. Aladdin felt uncomfortable realization shift in the bottom of his stomach. Something Jasmine had told him. “I wonder...is it because Rapunzel refuses to help him?”

Aladdin, for a moment, was stunned at how quickly Naveen had put the thought together. He at once admired, and hated him, good-naturally, just for a second more, before he gave a shrug. He had spent all night gossiping with his wife. Would pointing his random, paranoid slights out to Naveen of all people really add much to the mystery before him?

When Aladdin did not respond, Naveen tried again.

“And, why would Rapunzel feel that way about him? Rapunzel is perhaps the most giving out of any of us.” Naveen returned, thoughtful, his dark eyes careful to glance at the boat behind them. Aladdin resisted to add his thoughts. He had barbed Naveen for nearly two days about Adam, and only now does he think to indulge him? Aladdin attempted silence, even as Naveen continued: “Yet, Ariel adores him. Did you see the way she hugged him? The fiend!” Naveen continued luxuriously, sarcasm rippling through his tone. “I wonder if—”

“Everything is a joke to you!” Aladdin suddenly burst. He stopped rowing and angrily spat the words at Naveen.

“Do you hear me laughing?” Naveen asked pointedly.

A splash halted Aladdin’s sharp reply. The ocean’s brisk waves recoiled into chaos as Eric, his position as straight as a well-aimed harpoon, cast himself into the water without a moment's notice. Grimsby, his elderly face scrunched in indignation, had his back turned to the rest of the small boat party. Whatever new endeavor that had caused Eric to throw himself into the sea was clearly no idea of the castle’s majordomo.

With no prior warning, Aladdin adjusted his oars and glanced back at Naveen. Whatever harsh bubble of resistance that was building between them, it cleared over into impulsive concern. Naveen,
par for the course, looked as if he hadn’t a clue. And Aladdin had no choice but to move his searching forward, towards the final boat, and meet the cool eyes of Adam, collected forward, attempting to see where Eric had gone. Between the two men, neither face revealed any further understanding. Adam appeared just as anxious, his brows knitted and mouth scowling harder than before. After a heartbeat of indecision, Adam turned away. Jasmine, her purple outline bobbing over the waves, only made it clear that she was speaking to Adam as well. However, Naveen and Aladdin were too far away to hear her words.

“Pardon?” Naveen piped up. His eyes flickered all over the surface of the ocean. “Did he drown?”

Aladdin snickered. Then, he felt a tad sad.

Surely, Naveen had been joking…

But still Eric did not resurface.

Aladdin pushed down another shameful rush of irritation. Was this just another unprediscented scheme that Eric thought rational? What Aladdin wouldn’t give to have the Genie transform him into a mind-reader. For his wife’s sake, too. All he wished to do was help, was to believe in his call to arms that so clearly disturbed his old friend. But Aladdin felt held in place, as if underwater himself.

“I thought we were heading towards some hidden alcove. You know, beautiful dampened views of minerals and my romantic reflection appearing along gem encrusted walls.” Naveen explained upon his confusion, without any need for proper answer, as always.

“Me too.” Aladdin put simply.

Eric still had no resurfaced.

“Is he setting up traps along the ocean’s floor?” Naveen puzzled. “I’ve never heard once of pirates that could walk along the bottom of the water.”

Now Aladdin frowned. It had been a full minute and still no Eric. He gave a long sigh, intermixed with shrugging off his wave, kicked off his sandals. He tossed an oar hard at Naveen as he straddled the side of the boat. Why did Eric never explain his end game? Was he trying to drive him mad?

“I guess we’ll follow him.”

Naveen reeled in earnest horror. “We have to get wet?”

Aladdin gave his friend a sharp glare. “Fine. I’ll follow him.” His words were all but a growl. “You stay here and keep an eye on Jasmine.”

Naveen twisted the oar hand over hand, nervously, as if suddenly regretting his complaint. “I hardly think Jasmine needs a chaperon. She’ll be fine.”

“He won’t follow Eric.” Aladdin cut him off at once, his voice somehow lower, like a vainly within threat. “Look at him. He’s sick.”

Naveen swiftly craned his neck in Jasmine’s direction before he whipped back around questioningly to stare at Aladdin.

“I’m not going to follow Eric.” In his sudden passion, Naveen’s accent was ever more distinct,
causing Aladdin to miss a few words; an event that had not happened to the pair in quite a few years now. His tone, however, spoke volumes: Naveen’s entire phrase was measured in suspicion: “Why is it so wrong for Adam to stay?”

Aladdin gritted his teeth. He was this close to confounding in Naveen about last night, beyond his selfishness, but of the mysterious return of Belle, who looked so fragile, as if close to death! And of Eric, his moods and his assumptions ever heightening. And of Rajah, who stood close to Adam’s ship, and growled, the unmistakable look of an animal that was smelling an ancient calling….that of blood.

Blood, Adam’s behavior, and Belle’s fear...could it be as horrible as to think Adam’s intention to everyone, even his own wife, might be...deadly? He had no proof. He had no proof. The thoughts of reasoning rung through his head like a mantra. He was a fool who had gotten mixed with this new life of royalty beyond his own imagining...and he would do anything in his power to protect it. Was it so wrong for him to make such harrowing leaps? None any more to say than of Eric’s unquellable fear of disaster? Then, this was Aladdin’s disaster. He had seen on the streets of Agrabah since he was just a little boy….weaker men with smaller dreams….men that wanted to kill, and wanted to take, and wanted to hurt. Aladdin wanted so badly to tell this all to Naveen, dare Naveen to try and understand his point of view, but there wasn’t enough time!

“The difference, Naveen, is that I know why you won’t follow me.” And with that, Aladdin leaped off the side of the boat, crashed into the waves, and pulled himself back to surface in a hurried flourish. “But I don’t know his.”

“I would like to think he’d not like to go as much as any!” Naveen defended hotly. “Up at the crack of dawn, exhausted, confused as to why we are even here!”

“Then why did Eric even invite him?!”

While Aladdin had expected Naveen to squirm out of that assault, the prince’s answer surprised him.

“I dare to say he has his reasons! Out of all the nonsensical things you and I have bothered to say to him, if this is the one thing you are so desperate to know, have you thought to ask him?!” Naveen stated pointedly. It was far more cutting, flaring Aladdin’s defenses further.

“Really? Is it oh-so-simple, Naveen? He’d just tell us—justlikethat?” Aladdin snapped his fingers, flicking the water up at Naveen a he treaded water. You don’t get it--none of you could ever understand—have you sweated in the ruts? Had swords scrape your skin? Do you think men like that have straight answers and benevolent intentions? You and Eric, you’d never understand what I’ve seen! Aladdin dared not to scream any further. They were loud enough and Eric still wasn’t here. This was stupid. Naveen was stupid.

“NAVEEN, THERE ISN’T TIME FOR THIS! Fine! Just, stay here, be useless, see if I care.” I’m stupid, Aladdin scolded himself hotly. The words were true and loud and not at all what he really wanted to say to Naveen, but there they were.

“I’m going to help you, then,” Naveen retorted coldly. He did not miss a single beat, his voice thinning out. He dropped his eyes from Aladdin’s. “I’ll make myself useful for once. I’ll befriend Adam. I’ll figure out what he wants.”

Between panic and disbelief, Aladdin only managed a furserating sneer. “How generous of you.” His eyes flashed towards the boat lagging even closer behind them. “Just watch her, okay?”
“Fine.” Naveen called, loudly.

“FINE!” Aladdin called back, even louder.

“I SAID IT IS FINE, BE GONE WITH YOU, GO, UNDER THE WATER—” Naveen snarled all at once, actually snarled—perhaps his only one in his easy-going-life and before Aladdin’s eyes, he watched Naveen actually stand to match his voice level, his hands high over his head and then he...tumbled out of the boat. With a dull splash, Naveen hit the water. Then, he popped up, gagging at the taste of salt.

“F-FINE!” Aladdin concluded, shutting his eyes tightly. He then sank under the waves and chased blindingly after Eric, through the sinking darkness of the sea.

From the distance, Jasmine blinked. She tilted her head and curiously watched her husband and Naveen yelling at once another, a single word only occasionally catching her ear: mainly, the word “fine”. At a glance, Adam concerned her more immediately. Neck tight, eyes drawn to the scene, Jasmine swore that if human ears could prick like Rajah’s, Adam was over hearing the fight with astute clarity.

With no Eric in sight, no word from Grimsby to turn back, and no Aladdin to pull the boat back, Jasmine and Adam could only stare at Naveen’s failed attempts to crawl back into the boat. Around the fourth try, Jasmine decided it was only fair to grab the boat and head to shore. She trusted Aladdin in getting Eric’s head back on his shoulders. If Grimsby wasn’t panicking, she assumed that their usefulness was over.

Jasmine turned to Adam and spoke the first and truest thought that had come to her mind since she had woken up that same morning: “Well, whatever that was. I’m sure it was stupid.”

Chapter End Notes

Q&A:

Q: YOU WERE GONE FOR SO LONG AND NOW I HATE YOU.

A:...Okay, I’ll give you that one.

Q: Do you have social media to ask you more questions?

A: I do now! Try slyslipofpaper on Tumblr.

Q: So, what happens now? Another 10 months for one chapter?

A: I am going to finish this novel. I have each chapter planned out and I know what happens next. I just need the time to write it out, edit, and (attempt) to make it to my liking. But it will be finished.
It will.

Thank you for all of the messages, reviews, kudos, comments, and support! It means so much that folks are enjoying this story so as it is a blast to write!
Jasmine did not mean to cross her arms as if to guard herself but there really wasn’t much more she could add to the discussion.

The four princesses were seated in Ariel’s private parlor; it was a little circle of a room that piled up and over the palace’s water-cascading gardens and cherry trees, facing the western shoreline of the ocean and always in view of the sea. The walls were a light periwinkle, with minute starfish and bits of coral lingering in intricate designs. It was a cute, quaint little place—freshly cleaned, lush with lounging pillows and couches for nearly all of the women to try.

Their body language looked much the opposite; restless, uncomfortable, and a bit annoyed to be sitting, once more, doing little of anything. Besides the uneventful conversation at hand—made only worse between Jasmine and Tiana. It wasn’t that they were arguing, so to speak, as much as offering the bittersweet idea that their husbands wouldn’t share whatever had happened this morning over the docks. Jasmine having been the one to go with the men, she had now found herself choice suspect to fill them in.

“No, I really don’t know what Aladdin and Naveen fought about. And I doubt Adam could tell you, either.” Jasmine recounted once more.

“I’ve just never seen Naveen come back to me so upset.” Tiana replied. She made sure to keep her tone light. She wasn’t sure what was said or if there was a fault at all, but Naveen had always made a point to never let words hurt him so. However, this day would be one missed in his mantra. Naveen had appeared at the door of their bedroom wing with his jaw clenched so tightly, looking so furious, that it was Tiana who appeared all the absurd in her own confusion.

Jasmine raised a brow. “Did he tell you about it?”

“No,” Tiana sighed. She glanced back towards Jasmine. She looked positively ripe in self-contempt. “Believe me, I tried.”

“Maybe he’s just tired of being thrown out to sea,” Rapunzel suggested lightly. She was seated close to Ariel, her small hands working mindlessly through Ariel’s fine red hair, weaving it into complicated braids. Ariel certainly didn’t object to being doted on, if she objected too much of anything as of late. The other princesses’ found it odd that her youthful energy seemed to diminish with every passing day. Particularly finding her this morning, withdrawn, tight, hardly a word to say to any of them. At once, they knew was it was the result of yet another fight with Eric. Or so Tiana, Jasmine, and Rapunzel reasoned. Odd as it was that she looked more...afraid...than concerned.

“I know Eugene is.” Rapunzel continued. She sounded a little down herself but refused to enlighten
why. “It’s why he refused to go this morning.”

Jasmine gave a short shrug of her shoulders. “Aladdin has been lacking any of tact lately. It’s probably something he said.”

“No, no,” Tiana defused. “Naveen never knows when to stop. He probably cast the stone, picked it up from off the ground, chewed it up, then swallowed it.”

“Maybe it’s the both of them,” Jasmine purred wisely. She up-turned her usual resting-pout-face, as Aladdin so endearingly called it, to make sure Tiana knew that she didn’t really want to find out who said what or what was this or that. If Aladdin was so easily curt with her, she could only imagine the tongue lashing he must have given Naveen, deserving or not.

Jasmine had always found Naveen quite the delight. He was talented in many instruments, romantic to a doe-eyed fault, always moving in single-mindedly domestic way that never mattered to her own husband. Naveen reminded her often of a brother she wished she had growing up— and the bored fantasies of adventure and the inevitable trouble they would have gotten into together, slipping around in deer-lined slippers through her father’s overly expansive palace, harrowingly avoiding guards, indulging in the tedious pretension of their lives. Naveen thought royalty to be quite a thrill ride, and oftentimes, quite the joke to be laughed at. She loved that he loved to mock it. So did she.

Jasmine carefully memorized the strict look over Tiana’s face and wondered, with some stretches of elaboration, if Naveen was truly capable of anger. It didn’t seem possible to Jasmine’s idea of him. Everything was his plaything and his prank and could only be thoroughly unserious. So...what did Aladdin say to move Naveen to...feel?

Tiana shifted from her seat on the sofa. She collected the bottom of her shirt, a light blue color, dotted with tiny crystal up that rose and fell in the pattern of a wave-- a gift from Ariel--but never quite loosened her grip to let go of it. The cloth blanched between her fist.

She opened her mouth for a moment more, before deciding against it. She cut her eyes to Ariel’s before flickering them back to Jasmine, equally matched. Her heart sank. It just never felt like the right time to bring the question between her friends. How to bring up Adam and that night? Not to tell them of the curse, no, never, but to speak frankly about how Adam was clearly breaking down-- bandages or not, pirates or not, she was uncomfortable at how easily Jasmine had taken to a patrol with him and not mentioned it once.

None of them, really. Jasmine had stood so close to him but didn’t mind a word. Rapunzel seemed almost dismissive of any attempt at conversation regarding the king. And Ariel was perhaps the worst of all. When Tiana had mentioned the oddity of his injury, she looked, for a moment, too shocked to speak, before she spoke quietly and without her normal bubbly tone, that for all their penmanship, Adam had yet to confined in her anything strange.

Just that he missed Belle.

And God, didn’t they all miss Belle.

Eugene was right, in what he said that in the bathhouse.

Everything felt a non-starter. Not their husbands or a plan for the pirates or anything of value.

Ariel, despite being in her parlor, in her company, in light of her husband’s course, still had not
spoken. She looked more distraught than she had been in days but nothing the other princesses suggested seemed to be the right question. She didn’t want to talk about Eric. She didn’t want to discuss her own ideas of the pirates. She only drifted her eyes about the room, somehow larger and more worried, blue cast back out into the sea.

The sound of a heavy weight hitting the floor made the four women jump. All eyes rushed to the doorway. To the person standing there, her blue dress and dark hair muted, and her eyes dominant over the room.

*Belle.*

Belle, quickly untying her coat from about her shoulders.

Belle, with a large book held tightly in her arms, and two others leaning out of the satchel at her feet. The full light from the morning sun sparkled the intricate patterns of walls into a strange, glossy film, like Belle’s arrival was tinted with an air of unreality. And, even stranger still, Tiana stared on, slightly more convinced, at the women jerked back, stunned, at what Belle said next.

“I need your help,” was all Belle said.

Belle wasted no time on greetings, pleasantries, or hugs. She stole into Ariel’s chambers with eight other pairs of eyes to watch on in surprise and a bit of disbelief.

“Belle?” Ariel sprang up at once, her frame light and obviously happy to see the face of her friend. “You are here? When did you arrive, and how did you—” Ariel sped to a stop.

Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong. Different, somehow, and for a moment, Ariel could not help but to see an inkling of Eric within Belle. Her paleness, her wild, alarmed eyes, even her hair was a state of untying. Her arms shook. Ariel took in Belle’s form with a shocked, worried look and tried to push away the impulsive thought that reared its ugly, unfeeling nightmare into her heart: was Eric’s condition contagious? Did she bring her friends here to not just die by the hands of pirates— but by Eric’s illness alone?

And what of Adam? His horrible horns and his curse? Was Belle finally here because of what had happened?

Did she have any idea how absolutely horrifying that night was for them both?

Ariel shook her head to rid herself of the thought. Adam seemed to be stable for now, even if she couldn’t get close enough to ask or see much of his wound for herself. She had made the choice to stay away— not just out of respect for what he had said— but that her panic allowed revealed the worst of her: she couldn’t say rational enough to control her own body. How could she go back to Adam to hope to convince him of the same?

She was just endlessly grateful that her friend had come back to the castle...relatively okay.

“What is it? Are you alright?” The others stood, all but Rapunzel, who somehow seemed to shrink into the floor, hands clasped over her knees drawn into her chest.

“You….” Belle faltered. “Am I alright?” She had come so far. So close. She would only pray this might work. “I know that I haven’t been the most open with you.” She met each pair of eyes with earnest remorse. “I just never knew how to express what I needed. But now, I need your help.
Eric...Eric is right. There is danger coming but I think it is far bigger than this castle, Ariel.”

Here, Belle swallowed drily. She struggled to move on from this moment. But she had to.

“I have searched for answers for a long time.” Belle explained stiffly. She looked forlorn as she slowly pulled open the three books she had brought. “I hardly feel like I’ve found an answer. But I need your help.”

“It involves,” she bit her lip. “Magic.” Her brown eyes looked to each face, noting every expression from anxiety to intrigue. “Are you okay with this?”

“Belle…” Jasmine murmured. She, too, looked unsure. “What are you asking us to do? Right now? In Ariel’s parlor...would it work? Whatever it is?”

“I have something I need to do, somewhere I need to go. And this tome— it used to help me accomplish that but I’ve…I’ve ruined it. I don’t know how. I don’t know why. But it refuses me now. And I can’t help but think that maybe...maybe it wouldn’t refuse you all. I know that sounds insane but it is all I have to use.”

A tome. Tiana studied the book with a suspicious, heated look. “I don’t know, Belle. Messing with magic. It never leaves you the same.”

A look of grief passed over Belle’s features, tragic and pain filled. Tiana eased the book back down. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what else I can do to…”

“Where does it go?” Ariel began. She had dissolved into the background of the questions but now she had arose bit louder. “Why do you need to go there?”

“There’s someone I need to save.” She closed her eyes. In her mind’s eye, she pictured Meg. But in heart, she only yearned for Adam. But she couldn’t say this now. “She’s real. But she’s...inside the book. I think it’s like...a history.”

“It takes you into the past?”

“Something like that.” Belle added, bit embarrassed. “I’ve explored it as best I could but it’s...somehow, almost impossible to explain.”

Rapunzel glance at Belle and back down at the floor. Her words felt almost too fragile to respond. She knew exactly what she meant.

“I know I’ve come suddenly and without warning and there are so many other things to be done. But please. Please help me at least try. I’ve...I’ve brought this.” At once, she tore into her dress’s pockets and found what she had harbored.

Cool and deadly, its weight heavy inside of her hand. It almost hurt to hold. “It’s a coin. A coin from that place. I think I can use it to help us.” Belle closed her eyes tight. “I know I sound mad. But please. Please. You are all I have left to try. It’s real. What I am talking about is real. I promise.”

Someone you need to save. Ariel’s heart hurt from skipping. Perhaps there was a way she, too, could help with magic. The sea witch had tricked her and taken her innocence. What else was she here to see that others could not? She turned her gaze to Belle’s hand. That... coin.
Hadn’t she seen such a thing before? A faint memory dripped into the back of her mind...Flounder always told me that there was something wrong about this coin. How, even in my collection of treasures from the human world, it felt wrong. Could it matter now? A skull’s head...my father’s reaction....a horrible place he forbid me to go...his fear of humans...was it connected somehow to what he was? What I was?

After seeing Adam’s bloody transformation, Ariel could not help but to wonder if a small piece of the world’s magic was ending.

The magic that held him in human flesh, like chains...the blessing of magic that allowed Ariel to move between two beautiful worlds: her people of the land and her people of the sea. Perhaps it was all ending soon. She had been twisted before at the edge of a hot knife, time threatening to doom her. Belle’s sudden appearance only added to Ariel’s evidence. Before, Adam had made assumptions about Ariel, but while she was younger than the rest, Ariel was not a fool.

Perhaps their waiting for pirates was coming to an unknown end. Belle, a message, a sign, a likeness of grow or raven or calling bird across Eric’s forest. Ariel had sat and listened to the dry misunderstandings of her friends for what had felt like hours.

Perhaps the time was here and now and Ariel was the only one not going to fight it.

A battle had not once begun, and she was already so tired of the fight for it all.

Eric. Adam. Her friends’ safety. It only mattered now.

She had to act.

After all, she knew of magic, too.

“Perhaps it is locked out because it doesn’t belong here.” Ariel suddenly spoke. All heads at once to her. She gave a small, nervous laugh. What are you doing? She wanted to scream at herself. Carefully now. Carefully. “I know what that is like to not belong, to feel locked out, away from someone you love. But maybe the book or whatever this is— it needs something else. Something like it. Not human.”

“Okay.” Jasmine’s voice was a burst of hope. “I’m willing. What do you want us to do?”

Belle couldn’t wait a moment longer. Weeks at sea and an opening so soon? No, nothing could wait now. She pulled open the great tome and held it aloft to her friends. “It’s blank, right?”

“Yes,” Tiana returned tentatively. “Belle, wait. Wait, we can’t just leave now. Are you crazy?” Of course, Tiana’s natural instinct to prepare was stomping over the instinct to jump. It made sense. And they weren’t prepared— never when Belle had prepared she had not been prepared— but there wasn’t a moment more to lose. Tiana collected the eyes, all wide and uncertain. “Dear Lord, am I talking to myself? We can’t leave now!”

Ariel, the second smallest and shortest, pushed her away through the command. She moved with a startling pace to a small chamber outside of the parlor, and then dashed back inside, breathing less and strong. She offered her hand out to the book. “Yes. We are.”

Her small hand opened. Inside, a golden coin. Its tiny skull and eyeless smile watched Belle with the patience of eternity. “It’s the same. The very same that you showed us before. I got mine from the
grotto...um, along the beach. I sometimes collect things that wash up from the sea.”

If anyone noticed the shaking of her little lie, no one pointed it out.

Next, Jasmine moved, her dark eyes aglow with something swimming beneath its cool depths. “No...way...” Her own hand moved into a sewn pocket of her silk gown, cut through with patches of nettle cloth, rough and layered. “You have one, too?”

Ariel looked taken back. “Where did you get yours?”

Here, even Jasmine seemed to blush, her façade suddenly shy. “I like ghost stories.” She replied tentatively. She glanced to Tiana, Rapunzel, Belle. “I know it’s foolish. But with the night coming, I thought I’d tell you all a scary story and use the coin as...” She blushed, the true color now appearing through her kohl’d makeup and onto the apples of her cheeks. “I...thought it would be fun but...if you have to know, I buy curios at the markets that make me...” She paused. “Shiver.”

Jasmine thusly stopped speaking. She would never bring up the true source of her coin, the Cave of Wonders and Aladdin’s near death within it.

“Wow. And I just thought I was a sucker for shiny things.” Ariel said, her voice kind.

“Same,” Jasmine agreed with a small smile.

Rapunzel, her voice hoarse, asked: “So...we’ve got to bring it back?”

Belle barely shook her head. She wasn’t sure of anything now. “Or...maybe bring them together...” “Whatever it is, I can’t do it.” Belle declared at once. “I’ve tried. Over and over. I need...I need one of you to try now.”

At once, Belle took the three coins from her friends. She held them for a moment more, a physical choice within her palm. She had battled for so long to not let others in...Quasi, her papa, Mrs. Potts, Cogsworth...even Adam...to let go of what she so desperately wanted to do alone...but she couldn’t. Not anymore. What was once a cold, near-painful weight in her pocket, together the coins almost felt...warm. She dropped them into Ariel’s palm.

“Are you ready?” Belle breathed, hardly feeling the air fill her lungs. Her grip on the tome tightened with an anger so pure, she felt invulnerable. Ariel carefully laid her hand over the page, coin beneath her palm. She glanced to Belle. Then, she nodded.

“What next?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard of The Underworld, yes? Like in the Greek legends.”

Ariel’s face paled. A hesitation in her eyes. “Yes. I’m familiar with the stories.”

“Then picture **exactly** that.” Belle replied, her voice firm and direct.

“Belle,” Tiana said at once, her voice a rough edge of panic. “Belle!”

Tiana grasped Belle’s arm and in that same moment, the rest of the girls reached out as well.
And at once, without warning— the parlor was gone.

At once, Ariel opened her eyes and knew exactly where she was. On a beach, back towards the forest and edges of the eastern shoreline. Nearly four miles from her private sandbar. And she wasn’t alone. Tiana was tangled alongside her, face first in the greying sand. She sat up and wiped her face with a single, clean movement, clearly well practiced from her serving days.

“What on the Good Lord’s green earth just happened?”

“Is everyone alright?” Belle called at once. She was the first up and collected.

“Shhhhh!” Ariel squeaked. Her blue eyes held her friends ransom. *Not a sound*, she nearly screamed inside of her mind, *don’t make a sound!*

For just beyond the high rocks, there was the sound of loud talking.

The women froze; coiled together in a mess of limps and bright, blinking eyes, owled through the cracks of the raw sand-stone.

Two tall figures stood just a few meters down the shore. One was rather large, his body sharp and his voice loud. The other, shorter and thinner, was nodding along with every word.

Ariel felt as if her chest had burst through their magical free-fall from parlor to shore. Here, the threat was finally, finally real. Pirates! At once, Eric flashed in her mind, how tired and willful and scared he looked. How badly he wanted to kill every last pirate that threatened them. How much he needed to feel in control.

They were finally here. He was right all along. Even in his mania.

The group looked. And Belle...Belle stared with perhaps the hottest of hatred and pain she had ever felt in her entire life. For the tall figure was burning through the dwindling twilight. The entire shore pulled away, waves unwilling to come closer to his person. He moved his large arms sporadically, exaggeratedly, and his hair flickered with the unearthly pulse of blue flame.

For He was there, living and breathing before her mortal eyes. The beast. The God. The immortal.

Death.

*Hades.*

*What do you want with my husband?*

For a heartbeat, Belle nearly shrieked. She imagined flying out from behind the rocks and hurling herself at his form, desperate and hungry and willing to die if it meant he’d never appear to Adam again. Until the thought changed. Until she envisioned the sky opening up in darkness, swallowing the world whole, and Hades yellow eyes being the last form of light her friends might ever see...

Belle let the want go.

She let the heartbeat pass.
From her left, she felt a soft prodding of fingertips. Ariel. She waved her hand quickly towards a space in the rock that allowed her to see the men talking. Slowly, pressed tight against the cold hard skin of the rock, Belle peered through.

At once, she understood Ariel’s confusion.

Megara stood with her hands bound tightly behind her back. Her head was hung low. Her purplesque eyes narrowed at the ground around her, how Hades very presence seemed to spoil the light of day. The sand turned hard and grey. The sea pulled out in low tide, as if afraid of Him. Belle felt her throat run dry.

It was almost too perfect. Hades had brought Meg with him! A new plan unfolded within Belle’s mind, almost too fast to understand, but the answer was clear: what she had promised to save was ever closer, and now, her friends could see Meg as clearly as Belle had. Bit by bit, Ariel brought the others over to peer through the cracks so they could see.

“Who’s the girl?” The stranger motioned to Megara, not far beyond the men. Her back was pushed hard against the dark obsidian stone, rising high and wide over the beach, as if the ocean spat back out the terrible taste of a piece of Hades’ dark world.

“No one of importance,” Hades replied. “But you know what is of great importance? You. You’ve found the girl. The one I’ve searched for oh so long. A daughter of the sea.”

“Yes,” the man agreed but his tone sounded dismissive. “This ‘mermaid’ you’ve talked about. How’n you think I’m meant to capture her without a tail? If she had legs, how can I tell her apart from any other?”

At this, Hades gave a shallow little laugh. His yellow eyes flickered, as if pained he had to explain himself over again, or perhaps it was a more humanly gesture, like a blink of his eyelids. “This. Your compass. It will point only to what you want most; We are extremely close to finding it, Sparrow.”

“Captain.” The ragged stranger corrected at once.

Hades’ eyes flickered in with red sparks before he settled on exhaling. He turned to the man, calm once more. “Captain Sparrow.” He drawled lavishly. “My mistake.”

“We talked of the lass, ‘course, but you know what it is that I want. What I’ve always wanted.”

“Yes, your precious ship, at the bottom of the ocean. Yes. We are working on that. But how do rise the sea? We need the right tool...Poseidon's scepter.”

“How d’you so much about this impossible sounding dream o’ yours?”

“Because I lost it, just once. A long, long time ago. He escaped me and drowned himself and his people at the bottom of the sea. We need to get his attention. You, my dear stupid boy, are that plan.”

The ocean was ominous and still. “It feels like he’s already mad.”

Hades’ sharp teeth slithered out knowingly. “I have a way with my brother.”
“N’ be needin’ me to lift the sea, O lord of Terror? With a rinky bit of metal?”

“See?” Hades asked, his voice dripping with vindication. He snapped his long bone-like fingers and collected the compass in between them. The dial spun quickly, almost supernaturally, in tight circles without any beginning or end, an infinity of want pulled in a thousand directions. “I can’t do a thing for myself. It’s not my magic.”

“N’ whose is it then?” Jack asked lowly. He was still staring at his empty palm, as if a bit bothered that what was once safe in his hands had now been so effortlessly taken from him.

“An old friend.” Hades smiled slowly. The compass had materialized back into the pirate’s hand, and again, it spun wildly, before deciding on a final direction.

Until, slowly, the dial turned. Backwards. Pointing back towards the large rocks behind the pair.

Towards where Belle and her friends watched, breathing muffled and eyes staring into the dark.

Ariel turned, smaller and smaller, as if she wanted to disappear. The compass did not move. It merely stared straight, its arrow pointing to her, and her alone. Her heart shriveled inside of her chest. Her lungs burned as if rejecting air. She held herself tightly. She would not change. She would not be so useless as she couldn’t help her friends if they needed to run.

The pain of watching Adam, helpless and weak, his form wisping into shadow as she had swam away from him...it was a blessing that human tears and the ocean both tasted like salt.

*It’s me he wants. *Ariel thought. *It’s because he wants my father.*

“She’s here, just like we wanted. She’s on this island. Your search for her is over. No tail required. Just follow to where it points, take the right girl, and bring her back to me. Alive, obviously.”

“Obviously.” Sparrow returned, his tone short but clear in the night air. He stretched laboriously, clearly done with the wheel of conversation. They had their goal. They had their plan. And Jack Sparrow was never good at waiting for anything. “When do we make our move?”

Hades turned to the sea. His arms seemed to still for a moment, then another, as if he had suddenly turned to stone.

Belle stole the moment. She peeked over her side of the stone, her dark eyes boring into Meg’s. She shifted just a bit of sand with her fingers, just enough, anything to get Meg’s attention to her.

And…Meg looked. She raised her head so suddenly, as if frightened, and found Belle. But her face did not look happy. There was a look of unspeakable fear, her lips tightening and hardly prying open, as if she had wanted to speak but couldn’t. She didn’t even bother to struggle. She just looked at Belle, watching Belle watching her back. Then, Belle saw Meg’s eyes move to spy those of the women behind Belle…and her expression changed. At once, her face turned empty.

Belle struggled not to call out.

Her eyes said all she could have hoped to tell Meg: *I’m coming for you.*

But Meg only looked down again.
A low sound forced Belle to hide once more. Then, Hades’ face finally twitched. His teeth sharpened into an icy smirk. “How would you mortals say it? Soon?” His face curled with dark anticipation. “Soon.”

A short sound, like the snapping of a branch. Hades had moved so fast that none of the watching pairs of eyes could have possibly seen it. Half a human blink, the figures there, and then, the men had disappeared. In their place, the ocean at once rushed back, joyous over the sand.

Belle had been holding her breath. She dared to peek back through the hole that had shown her Meg. She had been so, so close. But it was already too late. Meg had seen her. Meg knew what was going to happen. Meg had watched Belle do nothing...powerless...and now…

Belle glanced through the hole once more.

Meg was gone and the ocean, sand, and the sudden return of night-gulls rejoiced for it.

They stayed still and quiet for what felt like hours. Breathing seemed to be the only necessary movement they each could make.

“Belle.” It was Tiana’s careful, indistinct whisper that captured the night air and made it feel safe. “Take us back. Please.”

Panic was clear and wild in her eyes as they stared back through the setting sunlight. Belle’s own voice felt frail. “I don’t know if I can.”

A look of disbelief traveled across Tiana’s face, leaving her entirely lost for logic. “What?! What did you do before to get back?”

“Meg usually threw me out!”

“And who is that?!”

“The woman I’m trying to save! She—she usually helps me leave. I go alone and she throws me back out.”

“Well isn’t she so helpful,” Jasmine snapped.

“We have legs,” Ariel said slowly. “We can walk.”

“I really don’t think I can right now,” was all Rapunzel added. She sounded close to tears. Jasmine reached over to rub at her arm. Another movement to remind them that, regardless of what madness they had each seen, heard, witnessed, they were still together.

“No. Ridiculous. I’ve seen enough magic. We can use it. We can go back to Ariel’s room. I don’t want to walk through the forest so close nighttime. I’ll do it.”

Jasmine opened the tome, placed her hand, and offered the coin. At once, it dissolved in from solid metal to crisp, wet earth...and then disappeared into the book.

The collective moan from each of the princesses, having been dumped back onto the plush flooring
of Ariel’s home, was enough to make them lightheaded out of sheer relief.

However, Jasmine was the one at once to take the situation in her own hands.

“Belle,” Jasmine was careful in collecting the attention of the others. “Can this tome, this portal, can they see in? Could they see us?”

“I...I don’t think so.” Belle murmured but she appeared doubtful. “I don’t know.”

The weak look of dread across Tiana’s face spoke volumes. “Then we have no choice but to assume they saw us. We know that woman saw us.”

Ariel looked as ghostly as painted glass. Her blue eyes were soft and breakable.

Jasmine looked guarded. “How do we know what we saw was real? I’ve seen the illusions of magistrate. And that’s all it ever was, really.” She said this with a small twitch of her lips, as if remembering a terrible memory. “An illusion. It wasn’t real. Right?”

“Megara is real.” Belle said at once. She now collected the storming eyes of her friends but she refused to be afraid. “That I know for certain. I’ve felt her hand. I’ve heard her voice. I’ve—”

The coin! “I’ve taken it back with me. From her, uh, world. From her time. And you each had one, too! They’re from the same mineral, the same gold. I think that’s how the tome worked again. It’s like a connection.”

“A coin?” Rapunzel’s small voice seemed loud in the wayward silence. “That stupid coin is proof that she’s real?”

“I don’t care if you don’t believe me,” Belle bristled, and although she meant to cast this into the room, she locked eyes with Rapunzel with a hard, unflinching look. At once Rapunzel dropped her gaze, clearly upset to have voiced her mind. In that same instant, Belle felt her heart sink. “Meg is my friend. And she’s in danger. And now Ariel is in danger. And Hades is coming for us.”

“You’ve come here at the risk of everything my husband fears not being true.” Ariel suddenly began. It was if the mentioning of her own name had spurred her back to life. She looked pale and small. The blue of her eyes somehow deeper and sadder than ever before, even after her worst fights with Eric, like the one of the night before. “You’ve wasted time, resources, your own husbands, wanting or no, have spent countless hours waiting for an attack.” She took a small breath, met Belle’s gaze, and steeled herself. “To me, seeing that woman, and the coin, and the pirate, Hades, it is all the same. We’ve known a threat was coming; Belle has simply shown us that it has finally arrived.”

Belle slowly exhaled. She blinked respectfully at Ariel, a small gesture to convey how hard and fast she had been internally free-falling just moments before. Jasmine was nonplussed, Tiana distant and thoughtful, and Rapunzel, meaning to or no, had said her peace to wish yet another danger into impossibility. But what Ariel believed was true. Her faith in Belle felt ever stronger.

She wasn’t alone anymore in this fight.

Jasmine considered this with her usual grace and tact. One of her dark brows skittered down, clearly thinking hard. “And how precisely are we to stop our husbands from ruining our new found plan? I don’t know about you ladies, but I certainly do not wish to explain to Aladdin that I’m going against an ancient god while he’s chasing Eric about.”
Rapunzel swallowed thinly. Then, she nodded. “I’ve been thinking.” She turned her gaze towards Ariel, soft but determined. “Ariel, you’ve been distant about what you really think is going on...with Eric. I just want you to know that I’m here for you, and if I can do anything to help how he’s feeling, I am willing to try.”

Ariel rose up. She almost looked dazed to Rapunzel’s suggestion. “I...I don’t know what to even ask, Rapunzel. I’m sorry. He just gets in this hyper mood and it doesn’t stop until...” She trailed away gently, clearly uncomfortable with finishing. “I’m sorry. It’s not that I don’t want to talk about it, in light of clearly more dangerous things, but I don’t know how. I don’t think it’s…fixable.”

“Fixable?” Tiana prompted. She crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you tellin’ me something is wrong with Eric? Ariel, honey, why didn’t you come to me? Listen, I know I’m not a real doctor but...”

“It’s not that!” Ariel blurted at once. She looked at the resigned eyes of both women and flushed. “It’s...so hard to describe. I don’t even know if I’m imagining it. Maybe I’m pushing my own needs on to him. I know I can be...clingy.” She gave a sad giggle. “I don’t want any of you to ever think differently about him. He’s the best part of my life.”

Jasmine softened. “No one is saying anything like that. It’s just... I mean, did you hear me just bitch about Aladdin? I love him, but he’s a lot right now, and I’m super done with it. And I don’t want you to think that you have to put on some show for us. Issues are issues. It happens.”

Ariel shook her head again. Her red hair tangled at her shoulders. She looked even smaller than Belle could remember seeing her. She brought the palms of her hands to her cheeks and sighed. “Eric has a kind of mental illness. Or bad humors or whatever terrible thing some quack doctor wants to call it. It’s like a mania that possesses him for a time and then leaves him. I don’t know. It seems to be danger driven. He’s unshakable when he’s like this. He won’t listen to any reason I say or stand still just to be with me. It’s like he thinks he’s invincible. It...” She closed her eyes. “It scares me so much.”

“Aladdin often seems restless,” Jasmine offered hopefully. “And he’s been concerned, too. It’s not just you, Ariel. Aladdin has talked endlessly about how Eric seems...different.” There was a familiar look in her eyes, a look that spoke of conclusion and understanding, like she had been vastly anticipating this outcome. A game only Jasmine could see and conquer. “I could ask Aladdin if—”

“No. Please. I don’t want to...I don’t want him to know I told...anyone else. He doesn’t believe he’s...different.” Ariel shifted her hand to rub at her shoulders, clearly vulnerable to even be having the conversation aloud.

“What about...me?”

Their eyes turned to the small figure, seated on a plush stool. Rapunzel once more took the stage. Her green eyes looked as stormy as the night she and Belle had fought. Belle raised her chin up just a nod, as curious as she was cautious to what plan Rapunzel might be tempted to play. Her short brown hair hung loose to the sides of her face and she brushed it away carefully to make sure she couldn’t hide. “I want to help. I know how I can help.”

Tiana chewed on her bottom lip. “Without talking to him about it directly? How?”

Slowly, Rapunzel stood. She took a deep breath and looked at Belle, not Ariel, and said her words
with great conviction: “I helped Adam when he was very sick during his visit in Corona. I’m sure you know, Ariel, that Adam gets a travel sickness.” Here, Rapunzel’s eyes jumped to meet Ariel’s and then moved back to decidedly to Belle. “And I don’t regret having made him better. I want to do the same for Eric.”

While Jasmine and Tiana took note of exactly who Rapunzel was speaking towards, it was who Ariel peered at Rapunzel in no small wonder, if a bit skeptical. “You mean…through magic?”

Jasmine’s dark gaze widened. “Wait, wait, wait. You’re telling us—there’s more magic? That you’re magical?”

Rapunzel flinched, her pixie-like face scrunched as if caught red-handed. “...Yes...I mean...” At once, Rapunzel’s tiny lips filtered quickly, almost without pause for air. “It’s from a flower but my mom drank the flower and the flower is also a physical part of me, like my hair, but it’s also in my hands, I think it’s me but it’s like a gift and a power and sometimes I have to sing but mostly I cry and...” She mumbled most of these words, and hardly much of her reasoning was made clear at all.

Tiana stopped her. A calm, compassionate gesture as time was wasting and, unless she heard the plan at hand, it didn’t much matter to Tiana the ‘how’ of it all. It was the most Rapunzel had seem to be of herself since arriving and Tiana welcomed it. It also meant, Tiana hoped against hope that if Rapunzel was willing to help Eric, maybe she could help Adam in spite of her limited abilities to heal. “Relax, hun. We get it. And it sounds like you’re pretty convinced you can do...” She moved her hands in a small wave as if she could pantomime all Rapunzel was struggling to say. “I heard you want to help Eric. That’s all I care about. Ariel, I’m sure, feels the same.”

Ariel nodded, enthusiastic at first, but then she slowed, her animation waning. “That is so kind of you, Rapunzel, but...what Eric has...I don’t think it’s just a passing sickness. Can your healing magic...heal...minds?”

Rapunzel blinked mindfully. Her small mouth opened and then closed. She was still staring deep into Belle’s dark eyes. She had hoped that saying what she couldn’t, would never reveal to the others was made clear to Belle. She didn’t want to be selfish anymore. She could show she could share her gift and help those in need...indiscriminately. She sharpened her gaze into Belle’s and tried to appear...brave. Just as brave as Belle was that night, while she could barely leave her parents’ bedroom. Belle was just a kind, amazing, powerful person. And she didn’t even have powers or the protection of healing.

Belle didn’t need them.

She had brought her entire plan to them, without fear, without hesitation, and they had traveled through time, or maybe distance, Rapunzel couldn’t be sure, but...Belle was willing to risk anything for a chance to make things right.

And Rapunzel...what did she have to show for it? She was just...herself. Just like Rapunzel had seen that night, and what did she do?

She decided to hurt. She needed to stay safe. She needed them out of her life, like Gothel, like her nightmares and her attacks and her desperate need to not be alone. She had healed Adam at the cost her friendship with Belle and then had condemned Adam for a crime he couldn’t even remember.

She knew she was in the wrong. She wasn’t so cruel, so poisonous that she couldn’t see the reflection of her fear echoed in Adam’s face. She knew it long before Eugene had told her of...
Adam’s abuse. She could see it, she could feel it through her hands, the way the magic felt...haunted. He’s been hurt by someone long, long before the curse and he would be forever changed because of it. Just as Gothel had changed her. They would never be the two perfect people they might have been when they were just babies. She had been stolen and lost…and Adam, just the same. Changed. Irreversible. She could see it in the pale, tear filled fear as Adam stared at her through the dark of that prisoner’s cot, both saved and damned by her magic. People were so vulnerable through her power. Easily manipulated into secrets and truth by her will alone.

Gothel wasn’t insane to think she could live forever with Rapunzel’s gift. But what she lacked was the foresight of a ruler. Rapunzel’s magic couldn’t just save the body—she could perhaps, in some limited way, unravel the mind….

No. Rapunzel pushed that lone thought away. She had no business toying with the mental energy of others. No, I can’t help Eric’s mind. That was the very sad answer to Ariel’s very important question. Her magic couldn’t heal those sick of the mind. It was hard to accept all at once, like the rising of the sun too painful and huge and necessary to grasp once its light had poured glossily over the surface of the ocean. She didn’t want to consider the alternative to what she couldn’t save. She could heal the sick and the dying and the wounded.

But nothing, Rapunzel was slowly learning to accept, would heal her from the past.

And in that, there might be nothing that would stop Eric, nothing so preciously holistic or masterful that she, pathetic and selfish and terrible as she felt she was, that would cure Eric of such a fate.

Just like she couldn’t save Adam.

…..Could she?

Her gaze was for Belle and Belle alone. But, regardless of her body language, her obvious plea for Belle’s forgiveness in a meaningful look, Belle was unreadable. Perhaps, it was too late.

When would she finally be allowed to understand and not be too late to learn from her own mistakes? When? When?

“My magic...it doesn’t work in that way. It’s far more about the body than the spirit.” Rapunzel had thought herself to wise and brave to voice herself as openly as she could when it was clear there was little other choice. The pirates and the demon Hades and...the curse...dare she count Adam as well...was coming all too soon. Adam was dying, regardless of what Eugene said, and she still felt too scared to move. But she knew what she had to do.

And she could only guess how little time he had left as well. But she had to try.

She couldn’t just give up. Not again.

Not in front of Belle.

“However,” Rapunzel continued without a moment to give pause to doubt. “I wish to try. I want to try.” She then nodded respectfully towards Ariel. “If you’ll allow me. I have a small plan; really, it isn’t much of a plan. But I won’t alert him that anything is different. And...if it works…maybe we can keep him safe while we work with Belle’s tome to...save Meg. To stop the pirates from taking your...home.”
“Atlantica?” Belle asked quietly. Now it was her turn to appear nervous. “I...I didn’t want to presume but...the compass...it very clearly is pointing to you. And all Hades could do was talk of a city under the sea.”

“Yes...” Ariel turned away from their faces. “I’m human. Now. I am human. I...didn’t used to be.” She raised her eyes to meet Rapunzel’s, a shared look of vulnerable relief between them. “There. Now you aren’t the only one with secrets.”

Rapunzel only offered her a small smile back.

“Well then,” Jasmine began at once, although the wide, clear look in her eyes said a lot for how much she had absorbed in all the confessing in the room. “Half of my stuff is made of fake fur. And by half, I mean, like, all of it.”

All the eyes turned to her at once. She blushed, just a little, and her lips smirked upwards, clearly amused to take the mood out of the room. “What? Everyone has such juicy secrets and it’s so sweet and I just felt like I should confess something too. I own a pet tiger. I don’t like killing animals even if their pelts make skirts to die for.”

At this, Belle gave a tiny laugh, which trickled into a chuckle, and finally Jasmine joined in a well, followed but Ariel and the rest. Eventually, Tiana said, “Naveen and I got turned into frogs!” And while the room continued on in laughter, there was a short moment where Tiana laughed and then made a disgusted face, a clear sign that her confession was a story she wasn’t quite ready to share. Belle was the first to speak, the laughter bringing much needed color back to her face.

“Ariel. Rapunzel. Tiana. Jasmine.” She looked at each princess in turn. Her throat felt tight. For a moment, she thought to tell them of the curse, Rapunzel excluded, but she couldn’t form the words. Instead, she merely opened her hand to reveal the coin. “It’s decided, then. We will work together and hopefully aid our husbands in the oncoming attack. But for us alone, I will need your help to move against Hades--both for Ariel and Eric’s sake. And.”

Belle had turned towards Rapunzel. Her insides felt tight but she knew she had to move forward from her wounded pride. She needed Rapunzel. And if Rapunzel was so determined to help Eric, to save Ariel, and she kept her promise to not reveal Adam...then Belle did not need to say a single word.

For Rapunzel was already hugging her.

“M’ sorry. M’ so, so sorry, Belle.” Rapunzel half whispered, half mumbled, her face pressed hard into Belle’s neck.

Wrapped tightly in the slender arms of Rapunzel, Belle couldn’t help but to hug her back. She still felt cross. She still felt the hurt of months before. But now, for a moment, she had to push her feelings aside. Clearly, Rapunzel was trying to be forward and open, trying to use her power for something other than herself and her people. Rapunzel looked up at Belle and smiled, her freckles more apparently up close, her cheeks pink with uncertainty. Belle smiled back. She reached up and pushed Rapunzel’s hair just a bit behind her ear.

How, for a single heartbeat, how much that small, desperate-to-please smile upon her face reminded her so very much of Adam.
“Thank you,” they both said at once.

“You’re looking for Eric, aren’t you?” Aladdin asked all too quickly. He was leaning against the doorway, last light from the setting sun dotted tightly behind him. His face looked wind-burned. Grainy, beach-like sand slowly shifted out of his hair, from the insides of his sandals, and the pockets of his pants. Rapunzel approached him casually, trying to appear most surprised than she felt. It was all too obvious, both from his stance and the annoyed look on the prince’s face that Eric was on his mind as well.

Rapunzel gave him a shy, guilty smile. “He isn’t with you?”

Aladdin gave a rough scoff. “Nope. Not anymore. We just spent three hours setting traps along the bottom of the southern cove.” He paused here to give a long, tired sigh. Rapunzel couldn’t help but feel for him. When the boat party returned from its morning lull, Aladdin and Eric were the only ones not accounted for. “But now he’s off somewhere, doing something, I’m sure.”

Rapunzel knitted her brows sympathetically. “You’re a much stronger person than me to spend that much time underwater.”

At this, Aladdin’s irritated scowl slowly lightened. He studied her with his dark, direct gaze and then gave a half-hearted shrug.

“Nah. Not even a little. I’m exhausted. I just wish I had any idea why we had to set traps under the water. Honestly, if you think I’m beat, you should see Eric. A few days ago I thought he was just impassioned; now I think he’s just crazy from lack of sleep. Or maybe it’s me, and I’m just too stupid to understand the bigger picture than traps under the water,” Aladdin rolled his eyes quite dramatically. “But I’m hoping it’s all going to plan. Whatever crazy plan it is. I mean, we haven’t even seen a single ship. Not one! I just—” He stopped, clearly catching himself mid-ramble. “I just spent three hours being beaten up by the ocean and I’m really, really pissed off at Eric right now.” He took a short breath. “Sorry. Not that you care about that.”

Rapunzel nodded. “Believe me, I very much care about the possibility of pirates attacking.” She leaned in a little to catch Aladdin’s ear. “Honestly: picture Eugene with a sword. Who do you think is really going to do the fighting around here?”

Aladdin flatted his smirk. He wasn’t in the mood to laugh but Rapunzel was pretty cute. She was just so tiny. The image was far funnier to imagine her taking a pirate down. Even if she could definitely do it better than Fitzherbert.

“So, sorry to chat and run but...I really do need to see Eric.”

Aladdin held up a hand in resignation. “Sure.” He then directed his hand smoothly down the opposite hall. “Follow the sound of sand and incoherent muttering.”

Rapunzel gave a little flounce of a certainty before she bid Eric goodbye and moved down the hall.

Sure enough, Aladdin was right. Eric was just a few meters down the hall, his back straight and his fists strangely clenching and unclenching at his sides. She slowed down and thought carefully about how she wanted this to pan out. She didn’t want to alert Eric to any kind of misdirection or scheming; honestly, was attempting to ease someone’s pain truly any plan of real attack? She chewed
faintly on the side of her cheek as she edged nearer. If this went wrong…would Eric react poorly as Ariel said he might? And, to be certain, Rapunzel had never seen Eric in this state so close before. Mentioned, sure, gossiped, of course, but in person…

She tightened her nerves. She crushed her fear deep into the pit of her stomach. This was Eric they were all talking about! Eric, who was sweet and kind and charming and, above all, courteous. *It’s not like you’re facing Adam*, she thought, a bit rudely, but it was the honest truth. She could trip and fall and make the biggest idiot out of herself and Eric would be the first to help her and jokingly pretend he never saw a thing.

“Excuse me!” Rapunzel called lightly. She sped up her footsteps, bare and soft over the smooth wood of the hall. “Eric, Eric, thank goodness, I’ve found you!”

Eric froze mid-step, his shoulders giving a little hunch as if he had been startled. Although Rapunzel could not see his face, she instantly felt sorry that she didn’t approach him more normally, like from the front of the hall, instead of skirting around behind him like a tiny shadow.

“Rapunzel?” Eric turned on his heel in a soldier’s stance to face the princess. It was rather impressive to see an about-face so smoothly. His hands dropped their movement, as if the change in direction was what allowed his body to focus on something else. At first, Rapunzel could only smile to see her friend’s face after what felt like so many long days of coming to visit in his home and never once see him. But then, her smile faded, and the man that slowly walked back to her looked for all the world the most unlike Eric she had ever seen.

Eric was a mess. Even his fine dark hair seemed dull. His skin looked ever paler, popping the blue of his eyes into an unavoidable harsh focus. Gone was Eric’s usual demeanor of grace. He looked just as exhausted as Aladdin but there was something about his eyes that seemed...redder, bloodshot and strikingly alarmed, although it was only Rapunzel, clad in her purple dress without shoes, per usual, and still, Eric looked as if he had prepared for someone far worse. Surely, Aladdin was just exaggerating Eric’s lack of sleep but, staring at him eye to eye, Rapunzel couldn’t help but feel miserable just looking at him.

She paused for just a second more than she should have before she spoke. “Eric...um. I’m sorry, I know you’re so busy but I just wanted a quick moment of your time.”

He blinked at her. Her words felt a blur.

“What do you want?” He said bluntly. He tilted his head, just a little, as if he couldn’t understand her. There was a monotone to his words that made Rapunzel feel all the more distance between them. *Is this how Ariel feels all the time when he’s like this?*

Rapunzel hesitated for a moment. Conversation between them usually felt so comfortable before. “Um. To talk to you?”

Then, his eyes widened. He blinked only to close himself off. He rubbed at his face in a rather boyish way, clearly taking a moment to compose himself. “I’m sorry, Rapunzel. I can’t keep my head on straight.” A tight grin over took his mouth, but it didn’t change that strange look in his eyes. “Yes, what can I do for you?”

Okay. Okay. Rapunzel felt her breathing quicken but she held on. Polite. Friendly. *Eric totally isn’t acting weird. And neither are you.* “Well,” she glanced at the floor, his boots, and finally at his face,
attempting to gather intrigue. Eric’s expression seemed to be stuck. It wasn’t an attractive look. “I
know you’re sick to death of pirates, right? So, Naveen, he’s been talking to all the girls about a ball, and I was thinking…”

Here, Eric seemed to lose a bit of his rigidness. He dropped his eyes to the floor. It was such a
strange scene to Rapunzel. Eric always was positive and headstrong and determined. Now, he was
staring at the floor as if he couldn’t bear to look at her, to see the doubt lurking behind one more pair
of eyes. Did she think he was humoring him? That all of his friends were? That was so sad. Of
course the castle believed in him; even Ariel believed something was coming. Hell, Rapunzel
adjusted that thought quickly: Belle had brought proof and far more than any of that.

Eric wasn’t wrong.

But he looked so tired of being right.

“I know that the entire castle thinks I’m acting insane for all the talk of pirates and not having seen
one, but they are coming.” He pressed the final word with a soft, sincere plea. Without thinking of it, Rapunzel and him had taken to whispering, even with no one else around.

This caught her off task. Slowly, Rapunzel softened her tone, less formal and more...concerned. She
hoped it didn’t sound as obvious to him as it did to her own ears. It reminded her of the soothing tone Eugene would use with her whenever her anxiety attempted to take her. The connection, how much she wanted to comfort him when the plan was much simpler. She felt a bit sick to think Eugene saw her as Eric looked all the time. “That’s what I mean. We know they’re coming but...well, we could
use a break, right?”

Eric said nothing. He rolled one of his shoulders, a look of pain flickering briefly over his face. Rapunzel could only pretend she didn’t see it. “I hadn’t even considered the possibility.”

“Well, I think that break should be the ball. Naveen keeps talking about it and, well, at first I thought he was just, you know, being Naveen, but I’ve got to thinking and wondering, if you weren’t already asked, if you would partner with me for the Danse des Fleurs Fanées? It’s my favourite dance and I really would love to dance it with you. I don’t believe we’ve danced together before. You know how Naveen delights in switching all the couples around. Something about ‘visual sycophantic rhythm’.” She had moved her tone to attempt to be funny. It was an odd term. But Eric looked on listlessly. He blinked at her again, giving nothing away. Cringing internally, she continued on: “Uh. It’s an artist thing, I think? Anyway. Any thoughts?”

Long seconds seemed to crawl by before Eric finally continued,

“Oh. The ball. Of course, right, right.” Eric replied slowly. He looked a bit lost for a moment, standing in the hall of his own castle, bewildered at Rapunzel’s casual request of an event that they frequently far too often. “To be honest, I don’t think we’ll have the time to throw one. I don’t think it will work out.”

Oh no. Rapunzel leaped to her back up at once. “Well, think of it—as just in case. Just in case the ball happens, will you be my partner for the fanée? You know, the dance where the two exchange partners’ mid-way through? I would be delighted to have you.”

His dark brows twitched bit. Clearly, a new thought had entered his mind. “Ah…” He then laughed softly. “I’m sorry, I can’t keep up. Run that by me again?”
“Danse des fleurs fanées.” Rapunzel began again, this carefully laying her emphasis over her ending question. “Would you dance it with me?”

He mumbled the French term sluggishly between his lips.

“The fanées is a French dance, right? Wouldn’t Adam be more suited?”

“If you don’t mind, I prefer just you.” Rapunzel answered tersely. If her directness to dance only with Eric and not with Adam embered up any feelings of insult, Eric did not let on.

“That would be fine with me, then.” Eric agreed. It wasn’t the big event Rapunzel had imagined but the moment was soon at hand. She just wished she didn’t feel so scummy in doing what he clearly needed. What Ariel needed.

“Wait, wait. Shall we shake on it?” Rapunzel moved her hand outwards, ready to take his own.

“A handshake?” At this, a little of the old Eric seemed to come alive within the body of the young man before her. He perked up, as if suddenly realizing where he was and to whom he finally talking. “Now who is being coy?” He opened his arms for a hug. “As if we’d be so formal for a handshake, Rapunzel.” Here, he offered her a tired wink.

Okay. Her heart skipped. Hugs work too, Rapunzel thought, and she wrapped her arms around Eric’s shoulders. Without waiting, too scared he’d pull away too soon, Rapunzel snaked her hand to rest gently over the back of his neck, perhaps too intimate for the causality she was going for, but she literally couldn’t back out now. Under her breath, she began the healing spell, a quick, short verse of just a few words. The tips of her fingers sparkled that glossy, golden glow, and she forced her arms to tighten over Eric.

A moment. Another moment. She refused to panic. Nothing seemed to have changed. Did it work at all? Her thoughts flew together and apart like the movement of a hunted birds. Was she again too late?

Until…Eric sighed. It was a simple, gentle sound to her ear, but it was unmistakably his own. All at once, his body relaxed against her. To check, Rapunzel’s arms moved them apart carefully. Nervously, Rapunzel studied her friend’s face. Here, she expected the worst of it: his scowl, his anger, his keen ability to know what she had done, to manipulate a vulnerable person against his will? Rapunzel felt her knees start to shake. But...it wasn’t so.

Eric looked rapidly better. The paleness and tenseness of his shoulders loosened. The startled, anxious look in his eyes was suddenly calmed. She couldn’t help but break into a wide smile. Eric didn’t seem to mind her. With the heavy blink, he looked as if he had just been shaken out of sleep.

“Eric?” Rapunzel tested carefully. She had to grasp his arms a bit more to balance him. He had suddenly swayed on his feet, and Rapunzel had to be careful that he didn’t drag her down with him.

He blinked heavily again. This time, when his head sagged down a bit towards her shoulder, Rapunzel gave his arms a tighter squeeze. “Eric?”

“Sorry…” Eric said thickly, his voice a weak murmur. He looked remarkably dazed. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” He gave another laugh, but it sounded for once, genuine and open. He was laughing at himself. “I’ve just realized that I’m… so tired.”
“Yes,” Rapunzel agreed softly. “I can see that.” She couldn’t help but feel a bit proud of her own handiwork. Maybe, she could still help her friends. Maybe she didn’t have to hide her gifts at fear of what might become of her. “Should I get Ariel?”

Eric gave a weak shake of his head. “Um...no, it’s fine. Tell her I’ll come and see her soon. Thank you, Rapunzel.”

While the instruction sounded vague, Rapunzel nodded along. She watched Eric carefully, both curious to see if she didn’t use a bit too much magic and to make sure he wouldn’t just curl into a ball on the flooring to sleep, before Eric continued moving down the hall, and out of sight.

Rapunzel glowed. If that was all it might take to keep Eric out of their way, then everything was going perfectly to plan.

Chapter End Notes

AN: RIP Eric next chapter, it was super fun and exciting writing your wild god-damn ride. No one is prepared for what hell Rapunzel hath brought upon us all.

Also, thank YOU for everyone that continues to read, comment, and leave kudos! The next chapter is already half-way written and shall arrive very soon!~ As always, I would love to know thoughts, theories, what you like and don't like, and feel free to throw rotten fruit for taking half a century to deliver on this novel of a fic.

Thank you all again for enjoying and reading!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!